

Challenges faced by graduate business education in Southern Africa

Perceptions of MBA participants

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Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this paper is to examine the degree of satisfaction and perceived relevance of the Graduate Business Education (GBE) programme at the University of Botswana.

Design/methodology/approach – A self-administered questionnaire and face to face interviews were used to collect data from Master of Business Administration (MBA) participants on their reason for studying MBA, level of satisfaction, and the extent to which the skills and experiences obtained correlate with those required by the corporate world. The data were analyzed using simple descriptive statistics.

Findings – The majority of the respondents are male adults attending part time MBA classes and working full time in administrative positions in the public and private sectors. The study found that improved managerial skills, career development and broader business insights are major reasons for joining the MBA programme, while employability and economic gains were ranked low as driving forces. Even though the overall satisfaction with the programme is mixed and inconclusive, the MBA programme has assisted participants to develop basic management and administration skills. However, the programme puts greater emphasis on conceptual, technical and analytical skills than on problem solving, innovation, communication and entrepreneurial skills which are perceived to be most needed by employers, implying a relevance gap. What the MBA participants learnt does not correlate with what they perceived to be most needed by employers.

Research limitations/implications – Since the findings are based on perceptions of MBA participants, the conclusions drawn from these findings must be considered tentative and interpreted with care. Future research must include representative sample of all MBA stakeholders such as faculty, students, graduates, employers and administrators to get rich information about quality of inputs, processes and products of MBA programme.

Practical implications – There is strong need for the MBA programme to integrate traditional management and administrative skills with experiences and skills relevant for today's world of work. Bridging the growing theory-practice gap requires attracting professors with practical business experience, revising staff recruitment policies and procedures, establishing formal partnership with external organization, and develop long-term strategies to reduce teaching load and staff turnover.

Originality/value – Most of the studies on the relevance and quality of GBE programmes are conducted in western higher education institutions, very little has been done in African universities. This is the first of its kind in the context of Botswana, an important contribution to existing literature and foundation for further advanced studies in the area.

Keywords Botswana, Business studies, Master of business administration, Business schools, Quality, Higher education

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

It is well recognized that business education is purely a western discipline, originated and developed first in the US and then crossed the Atlantic and flourished in European institutions. Recently, business education is being adopted by many African educational institutions, at both undergraduate and graduate levels. The demand for graduate business education (GBE), in the form of Master of Business Administration (MBA) has been growing steadily in the past few decades, owing to its importance in developing future corporate leaders and executives. A GBE programme is explicitly aimed to add value to graduate students giving them business-related knowledge and managerial skills. Empirical studies seem to lend support for this contention. Studies in the USA (Neelankavil, 1994; Boyatzis and Renio, 1989), in Japan (Kagano, 1996; Ishida, 1997), in Canada (Sturges *et al.*, 2003), in the UK (Baruch and Leeming, 2001; Nabi and Bagley, 1999); in South Africa (Louw *et al.*, 2001), in Malaysia (Tay, 2001), in Indonesia (Pesulima, 1990), in Greece (Mihail and Elefterie, 2006), in Vietnam (Duoc, 2007), have showed that GBE had a significant positive effect not only on graduates' managerial competencies, but also on the performance of the corporate world in general.

Though GBE programmes have in the past played an important role in developing corporate leaders, they are currently accused of producing people who cannot effectively understand and act accordingly in a fast changing and turbulent business environment. Bruce and Schoenfeld (2006) argue that business schools have remained the same over several years and failed to constantly and continuously respond to the changing needs and practice of modern businesses. A study by Schatz (1997) concluded that GBE programmes are facing formidable crisis in the leadership quality of their products. According to many corporate leaders and academics, the graduates in most cases fall short of expectations. Many business schools are unable to keep abreast of changes in industry and business. They focus on technical and analytical skills to the exclusion of skills in communication, leadership and entrepreneurship (Mintzberg, 2004; Schatz, 1997; Pfeffer and Fong, 2002; Nabi and Bagley, 1999).

The rising demand for GBE

Several factors have contributed to the growing demand for GBE (Jagadeesh, 2000; Emiliani, 2004; Pfeffer and Fong, 2002). Rapid economic growth, global competition, downsizing, deregulation, mergers, privatization and other changes placed an increasing premium on management skills and management careers leading to a surge in demand for GBE in the form of MBA degrees. It has become the most prestigious managerial qualification for current and potential managers as it prepares them to take on new challenges and multiple management tasks. Global competition and the growth of international business led many organizations to remove layer after layer of middle management, to centralize operations into strategic business units. Subcontracting and consulting grew as organizations focused on identifying and retaining their core businesses and staff. With job opportunities not being expanded in similar proportion, the majority of university graduates turn toward postgraduate education, and GBE is popular among these graduates. Many multinational companies are setting up their branches and offices in different parts of the world, and have shown a preference for candidates with GBE degrees. Several companies have also raised the entry-level qualification itself to post-graduation with specialization in management. Finally, many students feel that a postgraduate qualification, particularly in management, will provide them with special

skills and exposure to current trends in business, thus enhancing their employability. For these reasons, GBE in management appears to be a popular choice for a majority of graduates (Neelankavil, 1994; Paton, 2001; Tay, 2001; Brown, 2006; Jagadeesh, 2000; Kretovics, 1999)

Although this development has effectively satisfied the market demand for GBE, it is also accompanied by a rise in the expectations and requirements of employing organizations. Today's business environment demands graduates who are great thinkers, bold visionaries, entrepreneurs, good communicators, excellent planners, effective leaders, good negotiators and skilful diplomats (Kretovics, 1999). The ideal graduate would be creative, well-organized, socially responsible, ethically oriented, flexible and able to understand the functional interplay among finance, human resources, marketing and operations management, and tackle the myriad of problems faced by businesses (Neelankavil, 1994). Modern businesses are looking for skills that would allow MBAs to handle international businesses, develop new businesses and manage flatter organizations with speed, flexibility and agility (Brown, 2006; Paton, 2001; Pfeffer and Fong, 2002). Few business schools have put great efforts to improve their programmes by constantly updating their curriculum and instruction to meet the changing needs of industry. However, the large majority are left behind with their rigid curriculum, teaching approaches and programme design.

The declining quality of GBE

Despite the brisk demand for graduates of GBE during the past many decades and the distinctive standing of the degree in the marketplace, voices challenging this high estimate of the value of GBE are increasingly heard. Most of the criticisms on the quality of GBE programmes confirm lack of responsiveness to market needs and inability to adapt to the changing business environment (Neelankavil, 1994; Yucelt, 1998). Pesulima (1990) argues that lecturers at business schools lack the necessary business experience, and are often involved in research for its own sake rather than for improvements in application to business practices. Brown (2006) noted that GBE programmes are putting much emphasis on quantitative subject disciplines, at the expense of the development of people skills. Neelankavil (1994) believes that the growing gap between theory and practice has made the knowledge and skills delivered by GBE programs relate poorly to practitioners' needs. Pfeffer and Fong (2002), suggest the gap is due to irrelevant curriculum structure, where according to Jagadeesh (2000) and Brown (2006) analytical techniques received too much emphasis at the expense of leadership and interpersonal skills. While very little innovation has taken place in classroom delivery in many business schools, the degree of partnership between business schools and industry is inadequate (Gates and Cooksey, 1998).

In most graduate business schools placement and outreach coordinators have close contact with industry, but these contacts do not translate into a communication link between corporate needs and academic programmes. Faculty have to be more involved with corporate executives in order to understand their needs and to make necessary changes in curriculum and instruction. GBE programmes should intensify their contacts with corporate executives to evaluate the experience of their graduates, and to align their programme contents and processes with current industry needs, practices and expectation. Although GBE programmes may be guilty of ignoring the dynamic changes in the corporate world, the corporate world is equally guilty of not actively

involving in the design, development and delivery of GBE programmes (Boyatzis and Renio, 1989; Louw *et al.*, 2001; Mintzberg, 2004; Neelankavil, 1994; Kretovics, 1999).

Service quality in higher education

Driven by increasing global competition and rising customer expectations about quality, several manufacturing and service organizations undertook quality assurance and customer satisfaction initiatives (Mizikaci, 2006; Gapp and Fisher, 2006; Koslowski, 2006). In today's competitive markets, rendering quality service is a key for success, and is becoming the most powerful competitive trend shaping business strategy. As a result, many organizations are shifting their focus from traditional quality control toward a more comprehensive quality management process such as total quality management (TQM) in order to cope with the changes in marketplace (Mehralizadeh and Massoud, 2010; Mele and Colucio, 2006). A similar situation is being faced by higher education institutions due to rapidly changing technology, growing international competition for students, faculty, research achievements, accountability by accrediting associations and the public (Firdaus, 2006; Smith *et al.*, 2007). Higher education institutions are under pressure to provide unique learning experiences to students so as to capture the market share (Gapp and Fisher, 2006; O'Neill and Palmer, 2004). They had to be concerned with what the market values in the skills and abilities of their graduates, and also with how their students feel about their educational experience (Raban, 2007). Higher education institutions are encouraged to adopt an integrated and a disciplined approach (e.g. TQM) to meet these challenges (Srikanthan and Dalrymple, 2004; Mehralizadeh and Massoud, 2010). In the services context, quality is a measure of how well the service level delivered matches the customer's expectations (Smith *et al.*, 2007; Harvey, 2005), and as service providers, higher education institutions should exhibit all the features of services required and expected by their customers (Hodgkinson and Kelly, 2007). What is promised to customers must be delivered (Smith *et al.*, 2007). However, there is a considerable debate about the best way to define service quality in higher education (Lomas, 2004; Becket and Brookes, 2006). Although quality has generally been defined as the extent to which the product meets customer expectations, its application in higher education institutions has been difficult as higher education institutions have variety of customers including students, faculty, professional bodies, employers, government, sponsors and society in general. Prioritizing and balancing the needs of these diversified customers with different sometimes conflicting expectations and interpretations of quality has long been a challenge for defining and measuring quality in a consistent and comprehensive manner (Raban, 2007). This shows the need for developing alternative perspectives for quality assurance in higher education (Srikanthan and Dalrymple, 2003). The UK Quality Assurance Agency (QAA) for Higher Education defines academic quality as "a way of describing how well the learning opportunities available to students help them to achieve their award. It is about making sure that appropriate and effective teaching, support, assessment and learning opportunities are provided for them (QAA, 2004, p. 1). This definition puts students' learning experience central to academic quality, implying the need for continuous review of curriculum and instruction to meet the changing needs of students. Although this definition is too general to be readily operationalized, higher education institutions can adopt various strategies for its implementation (Srikanthan and Dalrymple, 2003, p. 127).

Li and Kaye (1998) suggest that to improve input, process and output quality, educational systems should put high emphasis on continuous improvement – a systematic way of evaluating inputs, processes and outcomes, learning from mistakes as well as exceeding expectations. Smith *et al.* (2007) argue that quality assurance requires a constant negotiation of deep-rooted values as a result of the changing needs and expectations of customers. In principle, all higher education institutions should have clear criteria, standards, methods and measures for determining the level of knowledge, skills and abilities required of both lecturers and students. Voss *et al.* (2005) argues that rather than concentrating on quality assurance mechanisms, the main aim in programme level quality assurance is the product quality and the inputs and processes involved therewith.

GBE in Botswana

GBE, namely Master of Business Administration (MBA), in Botswana is a recent phenomenon. The MBA programme at the University of Botswana was initiated in 1991 with an aim to provide a strong global presence for accounting, finance, management, marketing and information systems education, to ensure continuous faculty improvement and to promote interaction with business and professional communities (University of Botswana, 2003). The establishment of the programme was justified by the increasing market demand for graduates in business education. The 1978 Training Plan for the Department of Public Service Management has identified critical shortages of skilled manpower in such areas as accountancy, management and public administration. A survey by the School of Accounting and Management Studies in 1989 also revealed strong interest in the proposed MBA programme by potential students and employers.

The MBA degree was designed to carefully balance theory and practice and produce graduates who are rigorously prepared for broadly-based general management careers. The programme is generalist in nature as it focuses on general management careers rather than specialization in a specific business field. Although the programme requires students to take 48 credit hours, students are not required a thesis or dissertation to graduate. As a result, most students complete the programme with course work only. The main admission requirements are undergraduate CGPA of 2.75/4.00 or its equivalent and two years of post graduate work experience. Admission tests and interviews are not used to screen candidates. The programme has dedicated facilities, smart classrooms and computers. The programme has indeed proven to be extremely popular, with number of applications for admission growing from 26 in 1995 to 220 in 2007. On average only about 25-30 per cent of these applicants were admitted. Since its establishment in 1991, the programme has produced over 250 students who are currently serving in different capacities in various organizations within and outside Botswana. As a quality improvement activity, the MBA programme was revised in 2001 and 2007 and many measures and changes have been made. For example, credit hours reduced from 54 to 48, redundant course were removed and replaced by more contemporary ones, and more optional courses were introduced. However, the MBA programme is suffering from shortage and high turnover of senior faculty at professorial level. There were only two professors and two associate professors teaching at the programme at the time of the study.

Research objectives

The business environment is changing rapidly and so are the needs of employers for graduates who can understand and operate effectively in the rapidly changing business environments. The MBA programme has been operational since 1991 and produced over 250 graduates. Although the MBA programme has increased its intake significantly over the years, the demand for post graduate qualification in management in Botswana and the region is growing steadily. This trend has prompted the university to establish a new Graduate School of Business. At the same time, a new business school is proposed by government to be established outside the university. Moreover, a second national university with its own GBE programme will be operational at the beginning of 2011. This trend coupled with the overwhelming criticisms of quality and relevance of the existing MBA programme, motivated the study to evaluate its strengths and weaknesses, gain some lessons and improve the quality and relevance of existing and future GBE programmes in Botswana. In addition, since this study is the first of its kind in the higher education context of Botswana, it is expected to serve as important addition to existing literature and knowledge, and a stepping stone for further study on the topic. The study examines the reasons to study MBA and whether these needs have been achieved and to what extent. It also explores the perceived gaps in skills most needed by stakeholders, skills covered by the MBA programme, and skills possessed by graduates and students. The study also explores the various factors contributing to the growing relevance gap. Finally, the study provides some suggestions and implications for research and GBE programmes.

Research methodology

The study aims at evaluating the reasons for studying MBA, the perceived quality and relevance of GBE. A survey was conducted based on semi-structured questionnaire, face to face interview, as well as availability and accessibility sampling technique. The sample of respondents was drawn from the population of MBA graduates and students of the University of Botswana. Although the MBA programme, being the only programme in the country, has produced over 250 graduates since its establishment in 1991, only 93 graduates (38 per cent) were accessed through the School of Graduate Studies and personal networking. However, only 84 questionnaires were completed and returned on time. Nine questionnaires were found unusable due to missing values and incompleteness. Similarly, 23 out of a total of 28 final year students completed the questionnaire, making the total sample 107 MBA participants. Face-to-face interviews were conducted with nine graduates holding managerial positions in various public and private firms to get their views on quality and relevance of the MBA programme.

The questionnaire was designed to gather relevant data on four dimensions of GBE. Part I deals with personal data of the respondents in terms of their age, gender, previous experience, sponsorship, level of education, employment status, etc. Part II asks the reasons for joining the MBA program and whether their needs are fulfilled or not using a five point scale ranging from one (strongly disagree) to five (strong agree). Part III identifies eight groups of skills and compares the need for these skills in the work place, the competency of respondents in these skills and the contributions made by the MBA program to develop these skills. The last section evaluates perceptions of respondents on selected indicators to evaluate quality of instruction, curriculum, teaching staff and program design. Respondents were also given the opportunity to evaluate the strengths and weaknesses of the MBA programme, and to give suggestions for improvement.

Findings of the study

Profile of MBA participants

The majority of the sample (78 per cent) were MBA graduates from the University of Botswana while the remaining 21 per cent were final year students at the time of the study. Most of them attend or were attending the part time MBA program and only 32 per cent were from the full-time program. This implies that the majority of the respondents were engaged in some management activities. Over 70 per cent of the respondents have experience in middle and top level management positions (Table I).

Only five respondents were found to have no managerial experience at the time of study. Regarding their work place, they are evenly distributed between government (32 per cent) and private employers (33 per cent). It is interesting to report that about 18 per cent are self employed. Regarding the financing sources for their education, almost half of the respondents are sponsored by government of Botswana, while 15 per cent are sponsored by their private employers and about 29 per cent are self sponsored. This implies that employers, from public and private sectors invest in the education of their employees. The Government of Botswana is the major employer. As discussed in the literature review, MBA programmes should involve employers in the development of curriculum and instruction if the programme is to be relevant and meet the expectation

Descriptions	No.	%
<i>Current position</i>		
Top management	35	32
Middle management	47	44
Lower management	20	19
Non-managerial position	5	5
<i>Employer</i>		
Government	35	32
Private	36	33
Self employed	19	18
Other	17	16
<i>Sponsor</i>		
Self sponsored	31	29
Private employer	16	15
Government	53	49
<i>Current status</i>		
Student	24	21
Graduate	84	78
<i>Programme</i>		
Full time	35	32
Part time	72	67
<i>Gender</i>		
Male	73	68
Female	34	31
<i>Age</i>		
25-35	14	13
36-45	44	41
46-55	49	45
Total	107	100

Table I.
The profile of MBA
participants

of employers. Regarding gender distribution, one-third of the respondents were women with over 80 per cent of them aging above 35 years.

Why study MBA?

As has been discussed in the review of related literature, the major reasons for studying MBA programmes include need to develop managerial skills economic gains, career development, employability, desire to live a fulfilling life and to gain broadened business insight. The respondents rated six reasons for joining the MBA programme, selected largely from the literature. As shown in Table II, the need to develop managerial skills and knowledge has received the highest mean value (mean = 4.38) and lowest standard deviation (SD = 0.65), indicating that managerial skill is the driving force for increased enrolment in the MBA programme. Over 90 per cent of the students have agreed on the prime importance of having managerial skills while none of them disagreed on this reason. Career development (mean = 4.37) and broadening of business insight (mean = 4.25) are ranked second and third reasons for MBA study, respectively.

The above findings are in line with findings of other studies in the western business schools (Baruch and Leeming, 2001; Gates and Cooksey, 1998; Kretovics, 1999). The last three rated reasons include economic gains (mean = 4.08), employability (mean = 3.87) and fulfilling life (mean = 3.56). Thus, economic gains and employability are not considered the driving forces to study MBA by many respondents. It will be very interesting to analyze the reasons by full-time and part-time students separately. As discussed before, most of the respondents are part time working adults sponsored by their employers. For them, economic gains and employability are not critical reasons for studying MBA. Although many of them have at least agreed on the role of MBA for a fulfilling life, over 13 per cent disagreed on this reason, and over 22 per cent are not sure whether having MBA will lead to a fulfilling life. It is also interesting to note that out of the students who rated economic gains and employability as a major justification for MBA study, the majority are full-time unemployed students who are expecting that their MBA will help them find a job after graduation. To sum up, the study found that, managerial skills, career development and broadening business insight are the top three reasons for MBA study.

Overall, satisfaction

Regardless of the reasons for MBA study, the respondents were asked to rate the degree to which their objectives have been fulfilled and whether they are generally satisfied with MBA programme or not. Although some of the respondents have not yet completed the programmes to make informed judgment, the authors combined the responses due to

Major reasons	SA		A		NS		D		SD		MN	SD
	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%		
Managerial skills	51	47	46	43	10	9	0	0	0	0	4.4	0.7
Career development	48	44	53	49	5	5	0	0	1	1	4.4	0.7
Business insight	47	44	47	44	8	7	3	3	2	2	4.3	0.6
Economic benefits	31	29	55	51	19	18	0	0	1	1	4.1	0.7
Employability	16	15	63	58	26	24	2	2	0	0	3.9	0.7
Fulfilling life	11	10	56	52	24	22	11	10	4	4	3.6	1

Table II.
Major justifications for
MBA study

two reasons. First, only the current graduating class students were included in the sample. These students have sufficient information on whether the MBA programme is helping them to achieve their goals or not. Second, over one-half of current MBA students are working full time in industry and attending their MBA on part time basis, and hence can evaluate the relevance of the programme on day by day basis.

As shown in Table III, only one-third of ($N = 12 + 21 = 33$) of the respondents agreed that their objectives have been fulfilled. It is interesting to note that almost one-half ($N = 44 + 7 = 51$) of them indicated that the MBA programme did not help them achieve their objectives. Over 21 per cent of the respondents were not sure whether their goals have been achieved. This could be attributed to the subjective evaluations made by current full-time students who are unemployed and have not yet tested the MBA learning in the world of work.

The finding on overall satisfaction of respondents with the MBA programme is mixed and inconclusive, because over two-third of the respondents are either not satisfied or not sure whether they are satisfied or not, whereas only one-third indicated that they are generally satisfied with the MBA programme. The respondents were also asked whether they prefer specialist programme over that of generalist. The majority believe that today's markets need specialists and not generalists. The literature on this issue is mixed, leaving the decision to either business schools or students. Although the MBA participants believe that the programme does allow them to concentrate on areas of their interest through optional courses, they complained that the degree awarded is a general MBA. Some participants noted that a generalist MBA is advantageous as it gives graduates the flexibility to work in different managerial positions. However, as noted by some other respondents, employers may perceive graduates with a generalist MBA as moderately competent in many areas but best in none.

Perceived relevance

The review of related literature has resulted in identification of eight sets of skills that make up an ideal MBA curriculum (Louw *et al.*, 2001; Ishida, 1997; Jagadeesh, 2000; Emiliani, 2005; Neelankavil, 1994; Duoc, 2007). These are interpersonal, informational, behavioural, analytical, entrepreneurial, managerial, communication and conceptual skills. To avoid overlaps and confusions, each set of skill was defined and detailed out. The respondents were then asked to rate them on three dimensions-the extent to which the skill is needed by industry/employers, the degree of coverage of the skill in the MBA curriculum and the degree of competency of participants in the skill. The purpose of this

Table III.
Perceived overall
satisfaction of MBA
participants

Evaluation Items	SA		A		NS		D		SD		MN	SD
	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%		
Objectives fulfilled	12	11	21	19	23	21	44	41	7	6	2.88	1.2
Overall satisfaction	9	8	21	19	36	33	40	37	0	0	2.01	1.2
MBA worth its cost	7	6	23	21	30	28	21	19	25	23	2.68	1.2
Recommend to others	9	8	19	18	9	8	39	36	30	28	2.42	1.3
Fulfilled expectations	1	1	18	17	36	33	35	32	15	14	2.61	1.1
Improved mgmt ability	10	9	32	30	33	31	24	22	8	7	2.54	0.9
Improved work status	4	4	16	15	40	37	34	31	13	12	2.66	1
Improved career devt	0	0	17	16	34	31	39	36	15	14	2.51	0.9
Improved practical skill	9	8	8	7	29	27	29	27	29	27	2.41	1.2

section is to see the relationships among the three dimensions as perceived by MBA participants, and to see the extent to which the MBA curriculum and instruction focuses on skills that are most needed by the world of work. Although the findings are based on only perceptions of MBA participants, it is expected to shed some light on the gap and relationships among industry needs, MBA contribution and graduates' competencies.

Skills most needed

There is no fixed list or number of skills that employers need from graduates. They vary from time to time, industry to industry and depending on the size and nature of the business, managerial positions and levels, the characteristics of internal and external environment under which the firm is operating and many other organizational issues. However, these eight sets of skills are believed to cover most areas of skills needed by industry. As shown in Table IV, the perceived need of industry for all the eight sets of skills has been rated high on average with the highest three skills needed by industry being managerial (mean = 4.58), interpersonal (mean = 4.54) and entrepreneurial skills (mean = 4.53). Conceptual (mean = 4.21) and analytical (mean = 4.36) skills have been rated relatively lowest. The low standard deviations across the eight sets of skills shows that there is an acceptable level of consensus in the perceptions of MBA participants on their evaluation of the extent to which these skills are needed by employers. Since it is unrealistic to expect an MBA programme to develop all these sets of skills in a short period of time, business schools are expected to identify the most needed sets of skills, update and incorporate them in their curriculum. This study found that managerial, interpersonal and entrepreneurial skills are more needed by industry than analytical and conceptual ones.

Skills most covered

The respondents rated the extent to which the MBA programme adequately covered the selected sets of skills. They believe that the MBA curriculum and instruction has not effectively incorporated the selected sets of skills. The MBA programme is perceived to have focused more on analytical (mean = 4.01), conceptual (mean = 3.13), and managerial (mean = 3.10) skills than on other skills such as information (mean = 2.40), interpersonal (mean = 2.41), behavioural (mean = 2.98) and communication (mean = 2.99) skills. Analysis of the distribution of standard deviations across the skills shows that there are significant differences in the perceptions of MBA participants. Despite the high perceptual variations, there are important gaps between the skills

Skills	Valid	Needed		Covered		Developed		ANOVA	
		MN	SD	MN	SD	MN	SD	F	P
Interpersonal	107	4.54	0.50	2.41	0.80	2.46	1.00	14.8	0.043**
Informational	107	4.39	0.70	2.40	0.90	2.52	0.90	67.1	0.001*
Behavioural	107	4.47	0.60	2.98	0.90	2.91	0.90	42.7	0.018**
Analytical	106	4.36	0.80	4.01	1.10	3.93	1.00	18.7	0.134
Entrepreneurial	105	4.53	0.70	2.53	1.30	2.52	1.20	58.8	0.000*
Managerial	106	4.58	0.60	3.10	1.20	3.21	1.00	17.4	0.261
Communication	105	4.39	0.70	2.99	1.20	2.58	1.00	44.7	0.019**
Conceptual	106	4.21	0.80	3.13	1.10	2.95	0.80	10.1	0.342

Note: Significant at: * $p > 0.01$ level of significance and ** $p > 0.05$ level of confidence

Table IV.
Mean values and
variances among skills
needed, covered and
developed

perceived to be most needed by industry and the skills covered by the MBA programme. The MBA programme, therefore, puts greater emphasis on skills that are not most needed by employers (e.g. interpersonal, entrepreneurial and communication skills). The MBA programme appears to be more analytical and theoretical than client oriented. Little emphasis has been placed on the development of skills that are perceived to be relevant to industry. Although this problem is not unique to the University of Botswana, these gaps should not be left to continue.

Skills well developed

The respondents also rated the extent to which the MBA programme helped them possess or develop each of the selected sets of skills. As shown in Table IV, MBA participants perceived that the MBA programme has assisted them only moderately to develop the skills most needed by employers. MBA participants seem to believe that they are more strong in analytical skills (mean = 3.93), managerial skills (mean = 3.21) and conceptual skills (mean = 2.95) than skills most needed by employers such as interpersonal (mean = 2.46) and entrepreneurial skills (mean = 2.52). Analysis of variance (ANOVA) was also conducted to evaluate perceived differences among skills needed, covered and possessed. As shown in the last column of Table IV, there are statistically significant differences (at $p < 0.05$) in the three dimensions (needed, covered and possessed) of informational skills ($F = 67.1; p = 0.001$) and entrepreneurial ($F = 58.8; p = 0.000$) skills at $p < 0.01$ level of significance. Statistically significant differences are also observed in the three dimensions of behavioural skills ($F = 42.7; p = 0.018$) and communication skills ($F = 44.7; p = 0.019$) at $p < 0.05$ level of significance. Since all these skills are perceived to be relevant for employers, the observed significant difference implies the existence of important gaps between what has been covered by the programme, possessed by students and needed by industry. As the MBA programme tends to be theoretical in nature, there are no statistically significant differences at $p < 0.05$ level of significance in the three dimensions of analytical ($F = 18.7; p = 0.134$), managerial ($F = 17.4; p = 0.261$), and conceptual ($F = 10.1; p = 0.324$) skills. This confirms that MBA participants believe that analytical, management and conceptual skills are adequately covered by the MBA programme, sufficiently possessed by the participants and needed by employers. From this, we can infer that the MBA programme has achieved its traditional goal of developing basic management and administrative skills that are always needed by all employers as basic requirement for all managerial positions. These skills are not only most needed by industry (mean = 4.58) and covered by the existing MBA programme (mean = 3.10), but also moderately possessed (mean = 3.21) by MBA participants. However, the programme is facing the challenge of meeting the changing needs of the corporate world through identifying and incorporating contemporary business practices into the teaching-learning processes. The development of basic management skills should serve as a foundation for building critical skills that are most needed by modern business organizations.

Discussions on major challenges

The study identified important quality and relevance gaps. This section presents the possible causes of these gaps from data collected through open ended questions in the survey instrument and through face to face interview with nine MBA graduates holding managerial positions in different organizations. Although the causes are

numerous and complex, the responses are summarized under programme design, delivery and partnership with industry.

Programme design

Regarding the benefits obtained from studying MBA, most graduates feel that they have developed basic management and administrative skills. Those graduates with non-business undergraduate background have appreciated the knowledge and skills acquired and have benefited from them greatly. They believe that they are better managers now than before; those who are self employed believe that it has greatly enhanced their understanding of the business environment. Although many believe that the current MBA programme, judged from its design, covers important and contemporary areas of skills and knowledge, their delivery lacks vertical and horizontal integration of subject areas. It is observed that lower and higher level courses are not coordinated, especially when they are taught by different lecturers. As a result, unnecessary redundancies and omissions are experienced. A respondent commented that "what has been covered in research method course in year two, for example, should be built upon skills acquired in quantitative analysis course in year one". There is also lack of systematic linkage among related courses at the same level. A respondent also said that "marketing strategy and strategic management courses are not synchronized. As a result, student learning experiences are fragmented without cross functional integration". A respondent commented that "accounting, management, finance and marketing courses are thought by different lecturers as separate managerial functions without showing their critical interdependence". Some attributed this problem to lack of coordination across subjects and lecturers, and lack of a system or mechanism to facilitate integration and reduce fragmentation. It was suggested that lecturers must know what courses are already taken by the class and build upon them. They should also know which other courses are being currently taken, and relate their teaching to them so that students see the big picture of business administration beyond fragmented courses.

Regarding course content, only few courses focus on developing problem solving, presentation and communication skills. Since it is difficult to introduce these skills as standalone courses, some efforts must be made to include them in every possible course so that students become adept at them. Some respondents felt that the admission criteria should also be revised. Currently, the programme admits students with undergraduate degree in business and non-business areas of study as long as they meet the required GPA without any aptitude test or interview. Those with business related undergraduate degree are faster to grasp and understand the courses than do those with non-business background. This makes it difficult to accommodate the different needs and learning pace of students. The absence of admission tests and interview resulted in admitting people who are not ready for managerial positions or who need special support, like provision of preparatory or foundation courses. The problem is further exacerbated by large class size. Fruitful discussions and individualized support is impossible with a class size of over 40 MBA students with different background in one classroom. Record shows that the average class size ranges from 40 to 45 students at year one level. Moreover, the absence of specialization and the generalist nature of the MBA programme have affected the depth of the teaching learning processes. Although the programme does allow students to concentrate on areas of their interest through optional courses, they feel that they are good in different basic business management

issues but best in none of them. Employers need highly competent graduates in a specific field. Specialization promotes creativity and innovativeness as students and faculty concentrate in the field of study. The absence of MBA thesis or dissertation writing as compulsory requirement encouraged almost all students to complete their degree with only course work. Record shows that only few students engage in MBA thesis or dissertation writing. Some participants observed that the use of case studies, internships, project proposal and term paper writing are limited to few courses. As a result, many students graduate without adequate writing, communication and presentation skills.

Delivery

The major problems affecting the teaching-learning experience are shortages and high turnover of senior faculty at professorial level. Most of the teaching staff in the MBA programme are lecturers and senior lecturers with a PhD degree and years of teaching experience, without limited research and publication experience. There are only two professors and two associate professors teaching in the MBA programme at the time of the study. It has been difficult to attract professors. Record shows that some departments have been advertising for professorial positions for several years. Since the recruitment of senior academic staff is critical for bringing about changes, the university must develop alternative ways of attracting professorial staff. Despite the fact that the high turnover of senior faculty has been in the agenda of university management for long time, there seems to be less attention paid to the retention of faculty and reducing the growing staff turnover. Lack or absence of practical business experience by faculty has also contributed to the predominantly theoretical nature of the teaching learning experience. It is interesting to note that only very few staff have industry experience. Academic institutions should look not only for PhDs, but also for sufficient business experience to make teaching more relevant. This type of staff recruitment and selection will send a clear message to doctoral programmes to change their emphasis in selecting candidates. Many PhD programmes where our junior faculty studied rarely provide training in advanced teaching methodologies and philosophies, as well as curriculum design. This could be attributed to the assumption that many graduate programmes in business are preparing managers rather than teachers. The large class size and high teaching load of staff have also significantly affected quality of teaching and learning.

Industry partnership

The lack of industry experience among new and existing faculty can be addressed if the university has established working relationship with industry. However, it is observed that the link between the MBA programme and the corporate world is very weak, informal and sporadic. Although the Faculty of Business has long established an advisory council consisting of representatives from different sectors of the economy, it has never been instrumental for accessing, communicating and collaborating with industry. In order to accomplish strategic changes, faculty must understand what is happening in the world of work and then make necessary changes in the curricula. Forging this communication link is critical for enriching the teaching-learning processes in the programme (Gapp and Fisher, 2006; Koslowski, 2006). Rather than being passive, the university should intensify its contacts with the world of business to evaluate how

the graduates are performing, to learn which of the current business problems might benefit from faculty research, and also to determine the specific functional demand for MBA graduates. It is, therefore, essential to establish clear structures, reward systems and mechanisms to encourage faculty to undertake internships with companies. Staff development and recruitment processes should require faculty to have some industry experience. Along with scholarly research, faculty should be given credit for business experience. The corporate community could be of great help by providing inputs for course development and internships for both students and faculty (Harvey, 2005).

Conclusions, limitations and implications

Conclusions

The study investigated perceived quality, relevance and challenges in the MBA programme of University of Botswana through questionnaire and face to face interview with MBA students, graduates and corporate leaders. The major conclusions are threefold.

First, the study found that the need for basic management skills, career development and broadening business insight are the top three reasons for studying MBA. This is in line with the findings of other studies (Neelankavil, 1994; Brown, 2006; Duoc, 2006). However, unlike many other similar studies, economic gains and employability are not major driving forces in Botswana for studying MBA. This can be attributed to the fact that since most of the respondents are working full time in different capacities while attending the programme on part-time basis, immediate employment and economic gains are not considered to be major driving forces. Many participants possess master's degree (some hold a PhD degree) in non-business fields and are more interested in developing basic management skills and broadening their business insights than immediate employment and economic gains. Although the MBA programme has made reasonable contribution to the fulfilment of these objectives – the development of basic management skills and broadening their business insights and understanding – the programme puts greater emphasis on analytical, conceptual and technical skills than communication, problem solving, entrepreneurship and leadership skills. The teaching learning experience in the MBA programme tends to be predominantly theoretical and analytical with little emphasis on practical application of business theories and principles. Thus, the challenge for MBA is to systematically combine traditional management skills with more contemporary business applications.

Second, the study found an important perceived gap between the skills and knowledge most needed by industry, those covered by the programme and students' competency in these skills. It seems that most skills that are perceived by MBAs to be more relevant to employers are not adequately covered by the MBA curriculum and instruction. Similarly, differences are observed between skills covered by the MBA programme and the level of competency of MBA participants in these skills. This is not unique to the MBA programme at the University of Botswana as there are always differences in people's perceptions and expectations of a given programme. It is unrealistic or impractical to expect any GBE programme to meet all the expectations and requirements of students, faculty, society and employers at the same time. Faculty may tend to emphasize more in the overall intellectual development of students than functional skills, while employers may prefer the opposite. There are also differences in expectations even among employers depending on their strategic orientation toward human resource development. However, efforts must be made to narrow the gap through

continuous programme assessment and improvement. From delivery perspective, faculty can make the learning experience of students relevant to the needs of industry through creative teaching and use of case studies, field works, action research projects and scenario or situational analysis.

Third, although the study found many factors contributing to this gap, increasing shortage and turnover of senior faculty, limited industry knowledge and experience of existing faculty, failure to require industry experience in the recruitment and selection of faculty, lack of incentives to encourage staff to engage in internships in industry, lack of strategic partnership with industry, lack of in-depth training in pedagogy and innovative teaching strategies for prospective faculty in PhD programmes, and high teaching load (which affected engagement in action research, case development, etc.) of faculty, the generalist nature of the MBA programme, unacceptably large-class size, lack of admission tests and interviews, the absence of thesis writing as compulsory requirement, are identified as the possible factors affecting the quality and relevance of the programme. It is, therefore, essential for the University of Botswana, and the MBA programme to design long and short-term strategies to address these problems and meet the needs and expectations of their key stakeholders.

Limitations of the study

A comprehensive study of the quality and relevance of GBE programme requires, among other things, examination of the curriculum, selection and recruitment of both students and faculty, teaching and learning processes, methodologies, links between academia and industry and many other issues. Effective examination of these issues needs the involvement of not only students, faculty and administrators, but also other key stakeholders. Programme quality can be effectively assessed by comparing the experiences of graduates and their employers. Since this study is based only on perceptions of small sample of MBA participants, any conclusion drawn from the findings must be considered tentative and interpreted carefully. Perceptions should be complimented and supported by practical experience and observations in order to make concrete conclusions and generalizations. To increase the reliability and validity of the findings, the perceptions and experiences of other possible sources, such as administrators, deans, department heads, employers and professional bodies should be included. Moreover, future studies should compare MBAs with other managers who have similar status but do not have an MBA. Future research should take a comprehensive approach to the study of service quality in higher education institutions. The search for defining the customer, service quality dimensions, quality measurement tools must be intensified, as there is strong need for alternative ways of improving quality in an evolving and cost effective manner, particularly in the context of African business schools.

Implications for business schools

Although there is no one best way of addressing the multi-faceted challenges facing MBA programmes, GBE programmes should be able to examine at least whether the programme has achieved the anticipated results from time to time through an ongoing change management programme. Responsiveness to market changes entails suitable allocation of resources and a dedicated senior staff to manage the business of GBE programmes. Lomas (2004) argues that embedding quality into the higher education

system needs transformational rather than transactional leaders, who should employ the more subtle approach of informing and involving rather than using command and control. They should possess personal qualities of passion, integrity, curiosity, daring, innovativeness, originality, focus on people rather than systems and play an active role in raising expectations. Deans and directors must be pragmatic, market-driven, business-minded leaders who understand the necessity of matching the needs and aspirations of gifted researchers, teachers, academicians and students with the needs of the marketplace. From an organizational management perspectives in higher education, business schools need to be learning organizations, where continuous improvement, service quality and customer satisfaction are perceived to be cornerstones (Trivellas and Dargenidou, 2009; Temponi, 2005). From customer perspectives, business schools must identify their key customers and design their systems and processes to offer high quality services and meet their requirements and expectations (Brochado, 2009; Chung and Law, 2010).

The needs of students, as key customers, are fundamental in the design and delivery of programmes. It is no longer good enough to deliver a standard lecture to large numbers of people. At graduate levels, learning must be learner focused, since their accumulated work experience is a vital resource (Hodgkinson and Kelly, 2007). Business schools should not merely be academic institutions, but also service providers determined to meet or exceed customer expectations. Their emphasis should be less on programmes and more on partnerships with their stakeholders. The focus should shift from concern only with individuals on a particular programme to concern both for lifelong learning and management development partnerships conceived within a changing global framework. Faculty should spend less of their time engaged in traditional teaching methods and more as mentors, developers and facilitators of learning and change (Lomas, 2004; Osseo-Asare *et al.*, 2005). The focus of learning should be on application in the world of work; delivery systems should become yet more multi-media in terms of technology and should be designed to achieve active learning and should be developed and deployed flexibly. In a world of change, business schools must change their curricula, their delivery systems and their learning processes to prepare graduates to face challenges of the changing economy and business environment while fulfilling the demands of corporate world, which in turn, must take its role in executive development more seriously (Emiliani, 2004; Chung and Law, 2010).

Thus, business schools should initiate changes to improve the quality of their inputs, processes and outputs. First, some basic changes need to be made in the selection of applicants to the programme. Factors such as extensive business experience, the testing of applicants for business aptitude and personal interviews to determine applicants' leadership potential should be part of admission requirement (Yucelt, 1998; Boyatzis and Renio, 1989). Faculty are critical inputs for improving quality. Business schools need to craft effective strategies to attract, recruit and retain high calibre academic staff. Second, business schools should introduce from time to time some additional coursework either by eliminating or supplementing some of the functional courses. Topics needing more attention seem to be: ethics, entrepreneurship, global business, communication, creativity and innovation, team work, leadership, quality management, problem identification and solving, thinking and thought processes (Gates and Cooksey, 1998). Moreover, contemporary issues that are important in the day-to-day work of a manager should be incorporated into regular coursework (Ng, 2008; Nabi and Bagley, 1999).

Business school should also determine the optimal class size and teaching load of staff to make every learning experience meaningful. Third, business schools should develop programmes and incentive mechanisms to increase the business experience of faculty. In addition to scholarly research, faculty should be encouraged to engage in action research aiming at solving practical business problems. Faculty and administrators should regularly meet with employers to learn about the strengths and weaknesses of their graduates and about the latest issues in business and to filter this information into the programme (Paton, 2001; Smith *et al.*, 2007). Finally, the corporate world should take initiatives to cooperate with business schools. Employers should view the MBA graduates' education as a starting point and build on this to develop the potential of these graduates to handle more responsible assignments as they progress in the organization. Employers should consider MBA education as a sound beginning for managers, but not as a substitute for further training and development. Developing a strong, flexible and relevant MBA seems difficult. But, it can be achieved with a concerted co-operative effort between academia and industry (Neelankavil, 1994; O'Neill and Palmer, 2004; Smith *et al.*, 2007; Tan and Kek, 2004; Voss *et al.*, 2005).

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