

The Effectiveness of an Online MBA Program in Meeting Mid-Career Student Expectations

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Abstract

Advances in teaching technologies have made online MBA programs more accessible to mid-career learners; precisely those who many suggest should be targeted. Previous research on the value of the MBA has focused on various student motivations, but not specifically on the experiences of North American mid-career learners. This study reports the results of a survey which asked online MBA students about expected career outcomes, why they had chosen the online format, and what skills they expected to acquire. A better understanding of the expectations of mid-career learners enrolled in online MBA studies may assist program designers in developing meaningful curriculum, and lead to improved pedagogies.

Acknowledgment: The authors would like to acknowledge Joy McPherson whose assistance with questionnaire design, data collection and project management was invaluable.

Keywords: MBA, online education, mid-career learners, motivations, expectations,

Introduction

As MBA programs have increased in number, so have their critiques. Even before the expansion to web-based programs, graduate business education represented a significant sector within post-secondary education, conferring almost 25% of all Master's degrees by the late 1990's (Boyd & Halfond, 2001). From 2001 to 2003, the number of online graduate degree programs had increased from 48 to 246, with 41 programs accredited by the Association to Advance Collegiate Schools of Business International (Kyle & Festervand, 2005). Concurrently, criticism of management education has also increased as leaders in the field questioned the value of teaching functional skills to MBA students who have little work experience (Mintzberg, 2004). Management educators have been urged to target practicing managers with sufficient work experience and admit them on the basis of work performance (Gosling & Mintzberg, 2004). In line with such criticisms, there has been a call for a complete rethinking of the MBA (Bubna-Litc & Benn, 2003).

While critics call for targeting more experienced managers as MBA candidates, it is interesting to note that certain types of MBA programs tend to attract these types of students. For example executive MBA students tend to be experienced managers with a good sense of 'real world' needs (Lorange, 2005). Yet much of the research we describe below has focused on more traditional MBA programs or on the perceptions of more experienced MBA students in executive MBA programs outside North America. In our description of the exploratory research reported in this paper, we discuss the perceptions, expectations, and motivations of several cohorts of online MBA students, enrolled in a program specifically targeted to mid-career, work-experienced adult learners. We argue the position that web-based MBA programs may have the capacity to effectively meet the needs and expectations of mid-career students by facilitating the integration of work and life experience with curriculum content, in keeping with the most compelling criticisms of MBA education.

We begin this paper with a review of the literature, focusing on key themes and trends in MBA education, particularly emphasizing online programs. We follow this analysis with a presentation of our methodology and findings, concluding with a discussion of the implications of our exploratory research for MBA curriculum and program design.

Literature Review

In our review of the literature, we focus first on the value graduates derive from holding the MBA degree. Identification of these benefits should lead to inferences on the reasons for choosing the degree. But since our premise is that online programs encourage the participation of more experienced students, we believe that understanding the motives for choosing a specific program is also important. Our review of the literature is organized to highlight these two points: the value of the MBA, and the motives for choosing a particular type of MBA program.

The Value of the MBA

To understand what motivates students to enrol in an MBA program, it is important to consider the perceived value of completing this degree. Research has focused on the career impact of the MBA and on specific skills acquired in the process of earning the degree. Some research has reported specific age and experience effects on the value of the MBA in skill acquisition and in career progression. For example, in one study, more promising career switching opportunities held greater importance for a younger (under 35) sample segment, while those with 8 or more years of work experience placed greater importance on improving analytical ability (Thompson & Gui, 2000). Learning about business in general and making new business contacts were more important for those with less than 8 years of work experience. Significant age and gender interaction effects were found for assertiveness skills acquisition, while significant age effects were found for sensitivity to differences and to diversity skills (Simpson, Sturges, Woods & Altman, 2005). Other studies, however, have found no effects for gender and experience (Zhao, Truell, Alexander & Hill, 2006). Still others have claimed that MBA graduates with more work experience reap fewer benefits (Richards-Wilson & Galloway, 2006). The research findings on age and experience are, at best, inconclusive.

Previous research on career implications of the MBA has focused on career anchors of executive MBA students (Chang, Hwang, Liu, & Siang, 2007), career expectations (Simmering & Wilcox, 1995), expectations of MBA quality (Rapert, Smith, Velliquette & Garretson, 2004) and student motivations (Thompson & Gui, 2000). The MBA degree is perceived to have a positive impact on employment, annual income and both short and long-term job promotion prospects (Zhao et al., 2000). Similar findings of improved career development prospects following MBA completion were reported in another study of Hong

Kong distance MBA students (Chiu, 1999). It seems the most frequent reasons given for MBA studies were career progression and improved management performance (Lewis, 1992; Mihail & Elefterie, 2006).

While age and experience appear to result in differences in perceptions of the value of the MBA, gender has also emerged as a significant predictor (Powell & Butterfield, 2003). A study of Hong Kong executive business students (Thompson & Gui, 2000) found it was more important for men than women to become better at one's job and obtain more promising career switching opportunities. In a replication of previous research that had found effects for gender on MBA perceived benefits, when comparing the relative importance of extrinsic benefits, e.g., pay or promotions, to intrinsic benefits such as enhanced feelings of confidence and self-worth (Simpson et al., 2005), women had not advanced to the same extent as men nor received the same level of financial rewards. While both equally valued the degree, "...men are significantly more likely to be satisfied with their career advancement..." (Simpson et al., 2005, p.222). In the same study, the most common reason for completing the MBA was improving job opportunities, particularly for younger men and older women. Younger women placed greater importance on career change while older men were more motivated by the prospect of intellectual stimulation. Thus, the interaction of age and gender on the value of the MBA needs to be considered. While some evidence of age, experience and gender differences in perceptions of the value of the MBA have been reported, the evidence is inconclusive, suggesting that further research is needed.

Choosing an MBA Program

Research has shown that institutional reputation is the most important criterion in online MBA program selection, with workload and time to complete the next most frequently given reasons (Chiu, 1999). Other research has found convenience (Dunning & Mijayaraman, 2000; Tallent-Runnels, Thomas, Lan & Cooper, 2006) or flexibility in time management to be of greatest importance in choosing online education in general (McEwen, 2001; Moskal & Dziuban, 2001; Ryan, 2001; Smith, 2001). Flexibility was also found to be significantly associated with perceived learning and satisfaction (Arbaugh & Duray, 2002). For online MBA students, learning applicable to the job was ranked among the top reasons for online program choice while learning opportunities from interactions with other students were considered much less important (Bocchi, Eastman & Swift, 2004). Given the reported significance of flexibility, both in terms of access and reduced completion times, it is

important to examine how significant these factors are in the program choice decisions of more experienced students.

Online MBA programs, because of their convenience and flexibility, are potentially more attractive to mid-career students, precisely those that are better suited, according to critics of the degree. Because of their work experience and intimate knowledge of practitioner challenges, these students presumably have better defined management education needs and expectations. Yet research on these topics, in large part, has not focused on North American mid-career online students, suggesting a need to better understand this particular group. By examining the experiences of this group, our research aims to respond to criticisms of MBA education in the North American context, and to consider the implications for content and design that emerge from our findings. Specifically, with our sample of 280 mid-career students enrolled in a full-time, online MBA program, we examined what students expected to gain as a result of their MBA studies, how important the online program design was in their choice, the skills students expected to acquire and their perceived importance.

Method

The research relied on a convenience sample of mid-career MBA student cohorts that began their studies between 2001 and 2005. The program was offered by a University with a mandate to serve the adult, mid-career learner population. As a result, instructors in this program were expected to employ teaching methods that would effectively engage students with work experience in high-level organizational roles. The program blended experience in face-to-face classes, delivered in short-duration residencies, with online courses. Students typically completed the program over an 18 month period.

To guide survey development, telephone interviews were conducted with a sub-sample of 12 students. Key areas of interest in the research, including the perceived purpose of the MBA degree, characteristics of the program that influenced their choice, and skills they expected to learn were explored. Thematic analysis of responses resulted in a series of survey questions with 7-point Likert-type response scales. Demographic questions preceded the survey questions. The survey was available on a university web-site allowing students to log on at their leisure.

Results

In the fall of 2003, the survey was administered to then current students along with previous cohorts from 2001 and 2002. It was again made available to the 2004 and 2005 when they were current students. Overall sample size was 280 with an average response rate of 23.8%, ranging from a low of 14% for 2001, to 29% for 2003 and 2004. These response rates are consistent with others reported in the literature specific to web based surveys. Dillman et al. (2009), for example, reported a response rate of 12.7% to a web based survey, even when using an initial telephone call to recruit, and offering a small monetary incentive. In the present case, the rate may, at least partially, reflect the difficulties the students were having balancing home, work, and school responsibilities. Women comprised 43% of the sample; gender and age were unrelated. Using the same age cutoffs as previous research (Thompson & Gui, 2000), we found 28.4% of the sample was under 35. The work experience profile for the sample revealed 5.3% of respondents were in entry level positions, 11.3% were first line supervisors, 40.9% were middle managers, 27.6% were in senior management positions, and 15% were self-employed. Additional correlations were found between age and current position level but not between gender and position, i.e., women were not under-represented at more senior levels. Age and gender were significantly related to salary level. There was a marginal relationship between age and previous post-secondary studies but no relationship between post-secondary studies and gender.

Respondents were asked to evaluate reasons for choosing MBA studies. These results, which we have interpreted as learning expectations of the program, are shown in Table 1.

TABLE 1: Reasons for pursuing the MBA degree

Reason	Mean	SD	“to some extent” and higher - %
Will broaden my perspective of business	6.47	0.96	96.0
Will give me new ways of thinking about the world	6.26	1.18	83.7
Will allow me to be a more effective leader	6.11	1.24	92.1
Will help me understand the business world	5.95	1.31	87.8
Need more skills in strategic planning	5.38	1.45	80.1
Need more skills in managing people	4.95	1.57	67.9
I recently assumed more general management responsibilities	4.71	1.93	64.5
Need more technical skills in finance	4.61	1.86	59.2
Need more technical skills in marketing	4.55	1.71	57.0
Colleague highly recommended the MBA degree	4.09	2.15	49.8
Need more technical skills in accounting	3.76	1.97	41.9

Of greatest importance were developing a broader perspective of business and new ways of thinking about the world, becoming a more effective leader, understanding the business world and strategic planning skills. These skills which we perceive as integrative, i.e., based on a variety of disciplines, were more important than purely functional skills such as managing people, accounting, finance and marketing. There were significant differences related to gender and position held. Men were more likely to express a need to acquire skills in accounting ($t=1.92$, $p<.1$), finance ($t=2.85$, $p<.01$), and marketing ($t=2.18$, $p<.05$), while women placed greater importance on developing a broader understanding of business ($t=1.88$, $p<.1$). In terms of position, middle and senior level managers were more likely than self-employed to pursue an MBA because they either had recently assumed general managerial responsibilities ($F=3.12$, $p<.05$) or needed more skills in managing people ($F=5.3$, $p<.001$).

Respondents were also asked to indicate the instrumentality, or usefulness, of the MBA in terms of achieving a number of outcomes. Results are detailed in Table 2.

TABLE 2: Perceived usefulness (instrumentality) of MBA

Feature	Mean	SD	“to some extent” and higher - %
Facilitates upward move to consulting	5.64	1.81	84.1
Facilitates upward move to related organization	5.37	1.97	79.6
Facilitates upward move to another field	5.34	1.96	79.4
Facilitates upward move to another industry	5.28	2.02	78.3
Essential for career success	5.18	1.99	74.6
Facilitates upward move in current organization	4.12	2.38	54.3

For this sample, the MBA was perceived to have the greatest instrumental value for moving into the consulting field and for upward career moves in related organizations or to another field. Additional analysis of these instrumentality dimensions revealed significant differences based on current position level, specifically between the self-employed and the rest of the sample. For example, in comparison to first line supervisors or senior management, the self-employed did not view the MBA as instrumental for a promotion or upward career progression. An upward move to another industry was less important for the self-employed compared to first line supervisors and middle management ($F=4.14$, $p<.01$). Finally, a move toward consulting was a more important career outcome for the self-employed in comparison to senior management ($F=2.7$, $p<.05$).

Correlations between MBA instrumentality and personal career outcome importance revealed the strongest relationships were those involving upward moves in new organizations ($r=.48$, $p<.001$), other industries ($r=.48$, $p<.001$), new fields ($r=.46$, $p<.001$) or moving into consulting ($r=.52$, $p<.001$). A career move within one's own organization was still significant ($r=.31$, $p<.001$) but not as strongly related.

Turning next to reasons for choosing an online MBA, the questionnaire asked respondents how various program features influenced their choice. Results are summarized in Table 3.

TABLE 3: Reasons for choosing the online MBA program

Reason	Mean	SD	“to some extent” and higher - %
Online format fit with personal life	5.98	1.26	88.3
Program offered desired specializations	5.85	1.36	86.9
Program was progressive	5.83	1.18	88.3
Program was accessible	5.80	1.19	89.3
Online format provided adequate structure	5.46	1.27	81.4
Program invited student input	5.33	1.42	76.4
Opportunities for face to face interaction with other students	5.27	1.50	74.7
Relatively short time to complete the degree	5.23	1.66	73.1
Program and job requirements could be coordinated	5.07	2.04	69.4
Program was recommended by peers/colleagues	4.67	2.08	64.3
Program was recommended by previous teachers	3.16	2.04	33.4

The most important reasons were accessibility, fit with personal life, perceived progressiveness of the program and desired specializations offered. On a number of variables, effects for age and gender were found. The older the respondent the greater was the influence of face-to-face interaction ($t=2.84$, $p<.01$), fit with personal life ($t=3.41$, $p<.001$) and shorter time to complete ($t=1.87$, $p<.1$). Compared to men, women were more influenced by how the program structure fit with personal life ($t=2.87$, $p<.05$), whether the program offered the desired specialization ($t=2.73$, $p<.05$), by recommendations from peers or colleagues ($t=2.05$, $p<.05$) and by the shorter time to complete ($t=2.64$, $p<.01$).

In a related question, respondents were asked to indicate the importance of specific program design features and assess the extent to which they were available in the online format. The results are shown in Table 4.

TABLE 4: Importance of program features and extent to which they are available online

Feature	Mean	SD	“to some extent” and higher %	Mean (presence)	SD	“to some extent” and higher %
Blends with work schedule	6.48	0.98	96.4	5.62	1.61	84.1
Fits with personal schedule	6.24	1.07	91.8	5.42	1.58	78.3
Interaction with a broad cross section of students	6.04	1.21	89.2	5.64	1.43	81.5
Opportunities for learning through asynchronous communication	5.97	1.11	89.5	5.70	1.48	84.5

A program designed to be compatible with the respondent’s work and personal schedules was the most important design feature for this sample, however, respondents did not feel strongly that their online MBA program provided this feature. Compared to self-employed respondents, those in middle and senior management considered both blending with work schedule ($F=4.01$, $p<.01$) and the use of asynchronous communication ($F=3.16$, $p<.05$) to be more important.

Summary of Results

The mid-career students surveyed in this study chose to pursue an MBA to develop integrative skills, combining knowledge from different disciplines. They wanted to learn new ways of thinking about the world and broaden their understanding of the business world although there was a gender difference in this regard with more men expressing an interest in improving functional skills. Most respondents expected the MBA would open consulting opportunities or facilitate access to higher level positions outside their present organization, although the self-employed were less interested in upward mobility. In addition, students chose the online format because they believed it would provide a fit with their personal and work lives. Students who were older, or women, were significantly more interested in a program that maximized fit with their lives.

Discussion

Criticisms of traditional MBA education center on the lack of practitioner experience among students and an over-emphasis on functional skills at the expense of integrative learning (Mintzberg, 2004). Other critiques question the value of the degree even in the face of continuing program expansion (Pfeffer & Fong, 2004). In light of these criticisms, the present research set out to examine the experiences of North American mid-career MBA students, precisely those that critics say should be targeted. In keeping with previous research, the present study looked for differences based on gender and experience, both in terms of age and current position. Since this sample was drawn from mid-career students in a program specifically targeting this segment, it was reasonable to assume that the experience these students had already acquired in the workplace would heighten their awareness of any skills they were lacking.

What skills do students expect to acquire?

For the sample in the current research, skill acquisition expectations were interpreted to represent the skill acquisition needs of students with substantial workplace experience. While some functional skills such as accounting, financial, and marketing were more important for men, the importance of integrated skills for more experienced respondents was particularly evident for those who had taken on general management and people management responsibilities. Our findings support previous research showing that older students derive greater benefit from MBA studies (Simpson et al., 2005).

Mid-career students perceive the development of integrative skills as an important dimension of MBA education. This appears to support the contention that MBA education should place greater emphasis on integrative learning (Gosling & Mintzberg, 2004). By doing so, programs will become more attractive to mid-career students. Certain functional skills were still valued by segments of this sample, suggesting a better balance between the functional and integrative areas of the curriculum is needed.

What is the perceived importance of these skills?

The utility of the MBA degree for respondents in this sample was measured in terms of its importance for overall career success and its importance for specific types of career advancement. While the degree was seen as important for both of these outcomes, it was not

seen as having as much career mobility utility for self-employed respondents in comparison to the rest of the sample. It is unlikely that self-employed students would be willing to sacrifice their perceived independence to enter the hierarchies necessary for advancement.

Overall, the MBA degree was seen as highly useful for career success and progression, supporting similar findings in other research (Zhao et al., 2000). For these mid-career students, career advancement and progression was expressed in terms of both upward opportunities within the same organization and lateral opportunities in other fields or industries. The portability of the degree was thus acknowledged as a valuable career asset.

MBA programs targeting mid-career students should keep in mind that for this segment, the degree is an asset in career development. Consequently, MBA program administrators may want to consider how the career development needs of their mid-career student population are supported and emphasize to potential students the resources available for assistance with career development.

To what extent is the online learning environment a factor in program choice?

As reported in previous research (McEwen, 2001; Moskal & Dziuban, 2001; Ryan, 2001; Smith, 2001), flexibility is frequently among the main reasons for choosing online programs. For the current sample, flexibility was expressed as fit with personal and work schedules, both in terms of communication modalities and the duration of the program. Flexibility for a mid-career student is likely a function of more than a simple choice of when to log onto the course site and post a comment. A shorter time to complete would also contribute positively to flexibility by reducing the overall time during which MBA studies might potentially conflict with work or personal schedules.

Supporting previous research findings, this study demonstrates that for this sample of North American mid-career students, flexibility was a significant criterion for choosing an online over a traditional program, even more so for older respondents and women. The students in this sample completed both short three-week residencies and online courses running for twelve-week sessions. The findings suggest that a balanced approach to course design offering opportunities for real time interaction, either online or during residencies, along with asynchronous communication would be most attractive to the mid-career student segment, particularly older, more experienced students.

Conclusion

Technology has provided the management education field with opportunities to reach more student segments than ever before. Inspired program design coupled with innovative technological solutions has the capacity to address many recent criticisms of the MBA degree and to improve the educational experience and outcomes for students. Our findings demonstrate that students consider the degree as a valuable career-related asset. While this study adds to the current literature because it is one of the few with a sample of North American online MBA students, additional research is needed to build confidence in the results.

Undoubtedly, there are limitations to the research reported in this paper. The extent to which these findings can be generalized is not fully apparent but the results of this initial exploratory research are certainly supported by the conclusions of previous studies. These students were also enrolled in a program combining short-term residencies with online course sessions, specifically targeting mid-career students.

It is also important to gather longitudinal data which would be helpful in determining relationships between expectations and actual outcomes. In returning to university studies, adult learners enact the principles of life-long learning engaging in an experience that can have far reaching career and personal effects. Post-graduation data looking at the career experiences of all or at least some members of this sample may reveal additional dimensions to the research questions posed in this paper. Aside from career implications, completing an MBA degree is also a process of identity development (Beech, 2006). Along with skill development, students are seeking integrative learning experiences which may positively contribute to the identity development process (Andrews & Harris, 2008) and lay the foundations for the life-long pursuit of management development. Building on the present findings, longitudinal data would more effectively elucidate these life-long learning dimensions.

For the present, these findings may be of help to those involved in program and platform design for online MBA education. Because of the relationship between expectations and achievement in education (Parry & Wharton, 2007), gaining a better understanding of the expectations of mid-career learners enrolled in online MBA studies may assist program

designers in developing meaningful curriculum, may stimulate development of improved online pedagogies, and may ultimately result in more effective learner orientations.

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