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Reimagining curriculum, pedagogy and digital technologies in a large-scale online MBA

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Reimagining curriculum, pedagogy and digital technologies in a large-scale online MBA

Summary

This developmental paper outlines the process, framework and rationale used to redesign the curriculum, pedagogy and use of digital technologies in a large-scale online MBA. This holistic approach was anchored in extensive research with students, alumni and business leaders, was guided by a newly developed ethos and themes, and was grounded in sociomaterial theory. It provides evidence of a shift in market conditions, including increasing student expectations regarding online learning and rising demand for leadership, ethical practice and innovation. It proposes ways in which institutions can realign their curricula with current and future needs, and methods to enrich the online student experience via learning technologies. Its findings are likely to be of interest either to educators who are considering curriculum change or institutions looking to enhance their digital offering.

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Introduction

Reports of [the death of the MBA](#) may have been exaggerated, but the literature on its perceived shortcomings is now considerable. Several authors have identified a largely unfulfilled need for MBA programmes to develop students with leadership and people-management skills, the capacity to deal with complexity and change, and the ability to integrate business disciplines to address complex problems (e.g. see Varela et al. 2013, Laud and Johnson 2013). Moreover business schools are accused of failing to create empathetic and ethical practitioners, leading to urgent demands that they re-examine their curricula, and even [ask themselves why they exist at all](#) (e.g. see Jarvis 2011). Against this backdrop, this developmental paper outlines a strategic change programme to transform all aspects of the student experience in a large-scale online MBA offered by a UK business school, including curriculum, pedagogy and the use of digital technologies. The school's three main aims were: to realign the curriculum with the current and future needs of students and business; to transform the content and pedagogical design of its online courses; and to make innovative and appropriate use of digital technologies.

Research

In order to anchor these developments in evidence, between February and April 2017 two pieces of research were carried out.

Firstly, in order to investigate curriculum needs specialist consultants were commissioned to conduct a survey with prospective students, enrolled students and alumni (447 responses/79 countries); a survey of business figures (70 responses/15 countries); two focus groups with students; and in-depth interviews with eight business leaders.

Secondly, in order to gather feedback from students about their experiences of, and aspirations for, online learning at the school, an online survey was circulated to 9,717 students. We received 1,171 complete responses (a response rate of 12.1%); of these 96.7% gave consent for their data to be used in published research, giving an overall sample of 1,132.

The main findings of this research included the following:

- Employers saw leadership, strategy, critical thinking, project management and change management as key capabilities that future MBA graduates must possess.
- In our context there was demand among students and alumni for a broad set of entrepreneurship skills (i.e. creativity and innovation), rather than focusing specifically on new venture creation.
- Demand for more technical aspects of finance and accounting were seen to be diminishing, replaced by a need for more strategic risk analysis and decision-making skills.
- A need to help students develop the resilience required to operate in volatile and unpredictable business contexts, and for educators to respond to these conditions by constantly re-evaluating and refreshing their curricula.
- Around a quarter of respondents overall and the majority of dissatisfied students felt that their experience of online learning had fallen below expectations in three main areas (see Figure 1):
 - gaining support and direction from tutors;
 - being part of a learning community with peers;
 - accessing learning content in a variety of formats.

- In a thematic analysis of over 800 open-text responses, increasing the amount of video and audio material was by far the most frequently requested enhancement (mentioned by roughly one in five respondents). Other students identified an increasing need to move beyond individual self-study towards a more collaborative and interactive online learning experience.

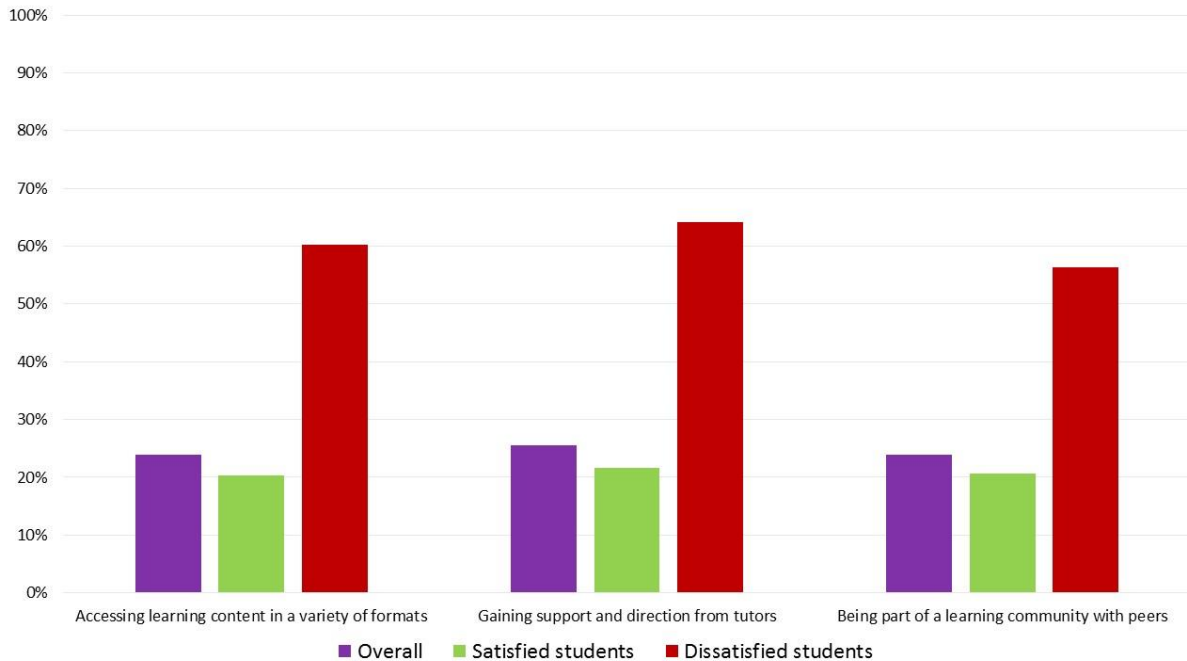


Figure 1. Proportion of all ($n = 1,132$), satisfied ($n = 1,029$) and dissatisfied ($n = 103$) students who stated that aspects of the online learning experience had fallen below their expectations.

Full findings and potential responses to the identified challenges and opportunities were discussed by the school's academic team, board, senior management and other stakeholders via a series of collaborative workshops.

Our response

Curriculum redesign

To provide clear structure and alignment, two key aspects of the curriculum were defined first: the curriculum *ethos* or overarching mission statement; and four *themes*, the common academic threads that run through all core modules (Biggs 2003, Gosper and Ifenthaler 2014).

The *ethos* centred on the need to prepare managers for professional leadership roles in global, dynamic and multi-cultural contexts and to help them develop the core knowledge, skills and attributes required to respond to rapid technological, societal and environmental change.

The four *themes* that ran through all modules were:

1. An innovative, creative mindset
2. Business leadership
3. Flexibility and adaptability to dynamic international contexts

4. Ethical and sustainable practice

The previous MBA curriculum had separate modules in accounting and finance; instead the redesigned curriculum provided a single module in this area, with a strong emphasis on decision-making tools and techniques. The soft-skills element was expanded to include two modules, one devoted specifically to leadership and the other to people management in organisational contexts.

Six new core modules were developed:

1. *People, Work and Organisations* develops a critical awareness of people-management concepts at multiple levels across dynamic and international contexts.
2. *Economics for Business* develops a systematic approach to decision-making and the ability to interpret economic information while dealing with uncertainty.
3. *Strategic Marketing* provides the required tools and frameworks to make proactive marketing decisions that take best advantage of market conditions.
4. *Financial Decision-making* enables students to analyse and critique financial information and make more informed and effective decisions.
5. *Leadership Theory and Practice* develops a critical appreciation of the role of leadership across diverse organisational, societal and cultural contexts.
6. *Delivering Successful Projects* helps managers to conceive of, plan and deliver projects, supporting successful execution while managing multiple trade-offs.

A new capstone module, *Developing and Executing Strategy*, was also developed to support the holistic integration of concepts across the six core modules and to develop students' ability to critically analyse and act on complex strategic issues.

Pedagogy and technology

While the high overall satisfaction ratings indicated that the school's flexible, modular approach remained highly valued, specific opportunities to enhance the online student experience were also identified.

In response a number of changes have been implemented over the last two years, including:

- Developing a new set of online learning principles (articulated directly from the ethos and themes) and a new manifesto for online learning to redefine the institution's approach to digital pedagogy.
- Making extensive and innovative use of video and audio materials in new modules to enhance tutor presence, explore key concepts and strengthen links to business practice.
- Designing scaffolded peer-to-peer discussions so learners can engage with multiple perspectives, access feedback at scale and increase confidence and independence (see Gašević et al. 2015).
- Creating a small team of online learning specialists, through a mixture of external recruitment and the development of existing professional services staff.

In accordance with sociomaterial theory, the material environment in which online learning occurs was seen to be deeply enmeshed with, and co-constitutive of, teaching and learning practices.[1] Therefore, a new online learning environment was conceptualised concurrently

with the above pedagogical changes; these two elements existed in constant dialogue rather than one determining the other.

After exhaustive analysis, we decided that no single learning management system could deliver our ambitions for the student experience (see below). Therefore, we decided to develop a new bespoke platform underpinned by a combination of several ‘best-of-breed’[2] tools and custom-created software (see Figure 2). This approach, while somewhat risky, enabled us to integrate multiple interoperable components to create a highly customised online experience. And as the development of new MBA modules got underway, the new online learning team supported the continuing dialogue between the emerging platform and the emerging module content.

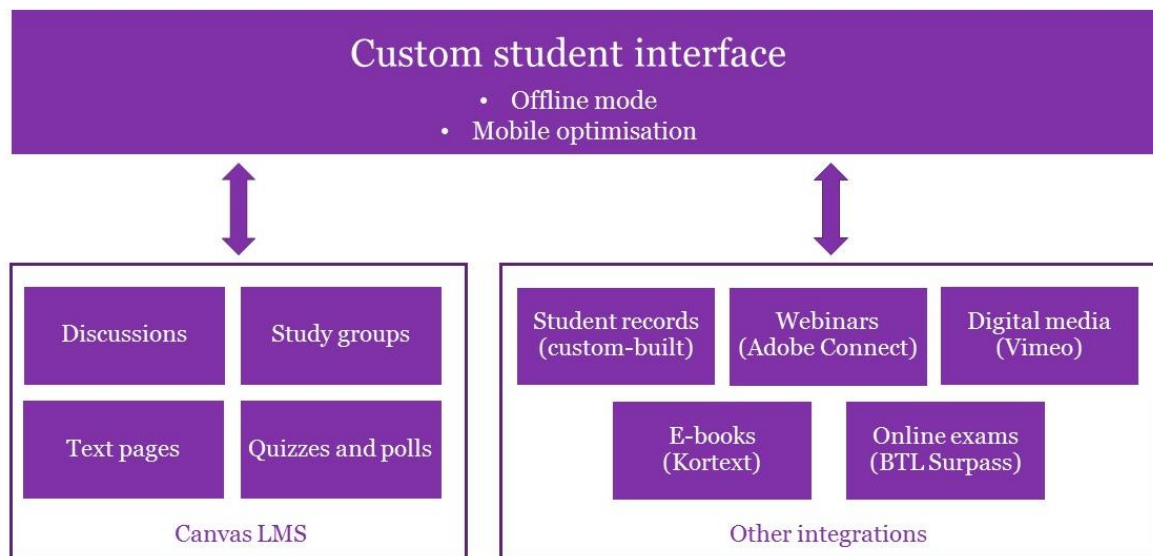


Figure 2 The integration of multiple tools and bespoke software developed in-house to create a new online learning environment.

Key features of the new environment (scheduled for full launch in August 2019) include:

- giving students the ability to download entire modules and access them offline;
- optimising all pages for use on smartphones and tablets;
- surfacing tutor and peer activity through a social-media-style newsfeed and notifications;
- visible progress tracking for students at programme, module and unit levels;
- using digital badges to recognise students’ engagement with tutors and peers;
- hosting peer-to-peer asynchronous study groups;
- gathering rich data on student activity to inform module enhancement and student retention efforts.

Impact and contribution

This developmental paper provides new information on students’ experiences of learning online in a large-scale global MBA, and particularly on their expectations regarding tutor presence, peer-to-peer interaction and the use of digital media. It also provides evidence of shifting demand among students and business regarding MBA curricula.

Taken together, the holistic approach we have adopted towards curricular, pedagogical and technological change strives to instigate a shift from what Joksimović et al. (2015) terms a ‘distance learning’ (i.e. print-based, individualised) paradigm towards a more social and immersive *online learning* approach (‘a form of distance education where technology mediates the learning process, teaching is delivered completely using the Internet, and students and instructors are not required to be available at the same time and place’ (Joksimović et al. 2015, p. 100)).

The redesigned curriculum embeds creativity, ethics and sustainability across all modules, a need identified in several critiques of MBA curricula (e.g. Glen 2014, Jarvis 2011). Meanwhile, our findings also help to address a perceived gap in the literature on business education regarding the interactions between technologies and online teaching practices (Arbaugh 2014), as well as the need for a greater understanding of how design choices interact with students’ experiences (Toetenel and Rienties 2016).

By identifying several key challenges and opportunities, and the institution’s holistic response to these, this paper proposes positive ways in which business education (and particularly online business education) can reposition itself and realign with changing needs.

Notes

[1] See Bayne (2015) for an overview of the implications of sociomateriality for education, or Fenwick (2011) for a more detailed analysis.

[2] Brown et al. (2015) outline the contours of this hybrid approach.

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