

Criteria for the  
Accreditation of

# MBA Programmes



## 1 INTRODUCTION

### Framework & Eligibility

- 1.1 This document sets out the criteria for MBA programme accreditation. While setting the standards that accredited provision is expected to meet, these criteria are not intended to be so prescriptive as to stifle innovation or to preclude other measures by which quality may be assessed.
- 1.2 At the core of the accreditation scheme is full recognition of the autonomy of individual degree awarding institutions to offer MBA programmes and of the need for individuals and employers to have an internationally recognised accreditation process based on external and peer review of MBA provision.
- 1.3 Accreditation assesses the current standards of postgraduate management education offered at an institution while promoting a developmental philosophy and a commitment to continual improvement. Institutions gaining accreditation are expected to maintain and demonstrate this commitment to regular improvement within their own programmes over the duration of each accreditation period.
- 1.4 Assessors will base their judgement on the overall context of the MBA provision under assessment, taking into account the quality of the institution offering the MBA.
- 1.5 Where an institution offers the MBA designation for a programme which is recognisably functional, or specialist in nature, the institution is expected to provide an explicit rationale for the MBA designation.
- 1.6 An institution must have been graduating MBA students for a minimum of three years. As an assurance of continuity and sustainability of quality provision, an institution and its MBA provision will have conformed to the majority of the Association's criteria for a minimum period of three years prior to assessment.
- 1.7 An institution's MBA provision in its entirety must be tabled for assessment and be judged to meet the accreditation criteria. Programmes offered at multiple campuses should each undergo an on-site assessment to ensure the equivalence of experience for students at each site.

### Collaborative Provision

- 1.8 Portfolio assessment will include all programmes delivered at the institution, outreach programmes, franchises, and programmes delivered in conjunction with partner institutions. All institutions involved in the delivery of collaborative provision should expect an on-site assessment visit to assess the quality and equivalence of experience

offered on the specific programmes, and partner institutions with unaccredited MBA provision will be expected to apply for accreditation within the current review cycle of the multi-centre programme. The awarding institution must assume full responsibility for the quality of collaborative delivery.

- 1.9 Where an MBA programme is to be awarded jointly by more than one institution, one (accredited) institution is to be designated the lead provider and will be responsible for what is delivered by the partner institution(s). This also applies to programmes which allow students to undertake exchanges or modules delivered by other institutions.
- 1.10 Programmes that are 'franchised' to another institution or institutions come within the portfolio and will require separate assessment and this should be sought jointly by the institutions involved. The franchising institution will need to provide evidence that the quality of the franchised programme meets the accreditation criteria. There should be clear evidence that the franchiser is regularly monitoring the performance of the franchisee. The term 'franchise' is used to include any contractual agreement whereby a significant proportion of the teaching delivery and/or assessment of a programme awarded by one institution is carried out by one or more other institutions.

## 2 THE INSTITUTION

- 2.1 The assessment of MBA provision will take account of the institution offering the programmes. The institution will have:
  - (i) an appropriate mission, explicitly expressed and regularly reviewed, which reflects its key strengths;
  - (ii) a well-defined, credible and coherent strategy, realistically reflecting its resources and constraints as well as its stated mission;
  - (iii) well defined and implemented policies of governance and continuous improvement, with members of the corporate community participating in the development of these policies;
  - (iv) market legitimacy, secured financial viability and institutional continuity;
  - (v) a discrete identity and an appropriate degree of autonomy (e.g. from the wider University) for decision making on issues such as strategic development and resourcing with respect to educational provision and management of educational resources;

- (vi) an effective and integrated organisation for the management of activities, with a significant degree of autonomy and control over its future;
  - (vii) identified its target population and have a developed sense of the market for its products including means of regular access to employer opinion; and
  - (viii) a clearly articulated and effective policy with regards to its relations with the organisational and managerial world, including a well-developed customer orientation.
- 2.2 The institution should be able to demonstrate satisfactory outcomes from its own internal and national audit processes. The institution should provide evidence that it has responded successfully to any recommendations resulting from these processes.
- 2.3 Institutions should demonstrate that the level of overall resourcing is appropriate for postgraduate/post-experience students. Library, computing and research facilities must be of a high standard and should be accessible, at least electronically, out of normal working hours and at weekends. Access to industry-standard hardware and software is important, as is the availability of business databases and literature search facilities.
- 3.5 Research quality should be of a high standard in all areas of activity and show some evidence of an international dimension.
  - 3.6 The institution should be able to demonstrate that there are effective mechanisms by which results from research, consultancy and contact with the organisational corporate world are regularly incorporated into the MBA provision.
  - 3.7 The institution should have a well-founded faculty development policy to ensure that faculty continue to meet high standards.
  - 3.8 The MBA teaching faculty should be of a size which can, with regard to the overall supervision and number of participants, fully resource the provision for which accreditation is being sought. Due regard will be given to the following factors:
    - (i) the need for a critical mass of core staff to administer, deliver and manage the MBA programme effectively;
    - (ii) new innovative approaches to delivery and learning which transcend the traditional concept of the school and tutor/student interaction.

### **3 FACULTY**

- 3.1 The institution offering an accredited programme must be able to provide relevant evidence of the quality of teaching from within its faculty, and that those teaching on the MBA are of the highest teaching standards.
  - 3.2 The institution should be able to demonstrate high levels of quality across its faculty as evidenced by relevant management research, scholarship and consultancy. The majority of the MBA teaching team should be actively involved in all three activities.
  - 3.3 Faculty teaching at MBA level must be appropriately qualified and credible. Therefore at least 75% of the institution's teaching staff should have a relevant postgraduate degree. It is expected that the majority of faculty will hold a Doctorate.
  - 3.4 The MBA teaching team should:
    - (i) be aware of debates at the forefront of knowledge in the relevant management field;
    - (ii) be able to relate their subject to other subjects in the MBA;
- 3.9 The institution should address the issues of collegiality, availability and integration of staff into the total teaching and learning environment of the school, including part-time faculty, faculty from another part of the institution, staff from other institutions and practitioners. All members of the MBA teaching team, irrespective of origin, should be subject to the institution's quality assurance policy.

### **4 PROGRAMME MANAGEMENT & STUDENT ENGAGEMENT**

- 4.1 Mechanisms must exist to ensure adequate feedback and response to student reactions to course delivery and content on the MBA.
- 4.2 There should be clearly defined roles relating to the academic leadership and administrative responsibilities for the MBA programmes with individuals identified for each.
- 4.3 The institution should be able to demonstrate a level and quality of administrative support appropriate to the size of the MBA provision.

- 4.4 Facilities should exist to assist in employment for full-time students at the conclusion of their studies, with career development opportunities available for all students.
- 4.5 Mechanisms must be in place to ensure that students, especially international students, receive adequate pastoral care and support throughout their course of study.
- 4.6 A well-established and active association of MBA alumni is expected, which provides tangible networking and lifelong learning opportunities for its members.
- 4.7 Where course members have been away from formal education for an extended period of time, explicit help in learning skills should be provided.

## 5 STUDENTS

- 5.1 The MBA is defined as a career development generalist programme for those who have significant post-graduation work experience on which the learning process should explicitly build.
- 5.2 There should be an expectation on the part of the provider that the student will be able to fulfil the objectives of the programme and achieve the standard required for the award. Evidence will be required to show rigour in procedures and standards for admission, for example, standard testing and interviewing. If interviews are not used, evidence that applicants' statements have been verified will be required.
- 5.3 The MBA is intended for a variety of able candidates, primarily:
  - (i) graduates from any discipline; and/or, holders of an equivalent professional qualification.
  - (ii) Exceptionally, mature and experienced managers with the potential to meet the learning requirements of the MBA may also be considered as candidates.
- 5.4 Students are expected to have a minimum of three years appropriate and relevant postgraduate work experience upon entry and the student body as a whole should average at least five years of such experience.
- 5.5 Evidence of language proficiency will be required. Where teaching is in English, evaluation of students for whom English is not a first language by IELTS, TOEFL or interview will be expected.
- 5.6 In order to maintain cohesion and integrity of the student cohort and the programme, admission with credit, admission with advanced standing and exemptions will not be accepted for accredited full-time MBA programmes and, exceptionally, should be limited to no more than 20 percent of the course of study for other modes of delivery. Additionally, no more than 20 percent of a student cohort may be admitted with credit, advanced standing and exemptions.
- 5.7 The institution's policy with regard to admission with credit, admission with advanced standing and exemptions should be made explicit. The criteria and processes used must be rigorous and reliable. Where credit, advanced standing and exemptions are awarded, the institution must be able to demonstrate that any learning undertaken prior to enrolment on an MBA programme, either within the institution or elsewhere, is at Masters level and is comparable to that offered to students admitted directly onto the programme. Any prior learning for which credit, advanced standing and exemptions are awarded must have been acquired no later than five years before enrolment to an MBA programme.
- 5.8 In order to promote mutual learning among peers, students should be selected on the basis of the contribution they may be expected to make as well as the benefit they may gain. Given the important role members of the cohort play in enriching the learning process, student diversity across a range of metrics is essential. To achieve adequate group interaction, the expected intake on an accredited programme would be a cohort size (distinct learning group) of at least 20. Due regard will be given to the following factors: the need for a critical mass of participants; geographical factors which may serve to constrain a local market; and, the combination of cohorts from different modes of delivery, whilst maintaining overall cohort cohesion and integrity.
- 5.9 In order to ensure programme diversity and sustainability, individual cohorts should be internationally diverse and balanced where possible. This is especially important for full-time programmes where the international experience offered by the MBA is an industry standard.
- 5.10 Single Company and Consortia MBA programmes may be accredited provided that final decisions on admissions, student progress, curriculum, assessment and award of the MBA remain under the control of the institution. Since a major source of learning flows from the interaction between managers from a variety of backgrounds, it is essential that the profile of the student cohort conforms to criterion 5.8.

## 6 PURPOSE AND OUTCOMES

6.1 The MBA is a career development generalist degree for those with significant relevant work experience, which contributes to learning. The emphasis is on leadership through strategic management with a significant practical and professional orientation to the programme of study.

6.2 The purpose of an MBA is to:

- (i) enhance and develop previous relevant experience in business and management;
- (ii) prepare students for leadership and transformational roles in business;
- (iii) develop strategic thinking, innovation and entrepreneurial skills;
- (iv) develop an understanding and provide experience of global business issues, including the potential contribution that business can make to solving these issues;
- (v) develop the ability to apply previous and newly acquired knowledge and experience to complex business issues in a range of contexts;
- (vi) develop knowledge, at an advanced level, of organisations, their management and the environment in which they operate;
- (vii) develop an understanding of responsible risk management and sustainable value creation on the basis of the environmental, social and governance impacts of business;
- (viii) develop interpersonal and group-working skills;
- (ix) encourage lifelong learning and personal development.

6.3 Each individual MBA programme should have clearly stated aims, objectives and learning outcomes. Learning outcomes should be clear and explicit in describing what participants are expected to know and be able to do as a result of the programme. They should make clear the ways in which the institution recognises and assesses intellectual, analytical, personal and enterprise qualities as well as the specific knowledge developed by the programme.

6.4 In terms of knowledge and understanding, an MBA graduate will be able to:

- (i) understand the concept of leadership through strategic management;

- (ii) integrate new knowledge with previous learning and experiences;
- (iii) know and understand organisations and their stakeholders, the external context in which they operate and how they are managed from a sustainable and long term perspective;
- (iv) integrate their learning from a comprehensive range of managerial subject areas to understand and address complex situations holistically;
- (v) be able to analyse, synthesise and solve complex unstructured business problems.

6.5 Employers can expect graduates, over time, to:

- (i) apply consistently in-depth knowledge and understanding, based on previous work experience and advanced study, to complex business situations;
- (ii) apply strategic management skills at a senior level in changing business environments;
- (iii) transform organisations through strategic leadership, intellectual rigour and professional ethical values;
- (iv) understand and have experience of global issues;
- (v) lead and develop others in an organisational context;
- (vi) have well-developed interpersonal skills including the ability to communicate effectively and to interact with groups and individuals at all levels;
- (vii) make sound judgements with incomplete data and communicate conclusions clearly to a range of audiences;
- (viii) be self-directed and able to act autonomously in planning and implementing projects;
- (ix) take responsibility for continuing to develop their knowledge and skills.

6.6 When assessing the overall quality of the programme, consideration will be given to the value added by the MBA programme to work experience and career development. The views and experiences of appropriate alumni, employers and sponsors will also be sought. The transfer of learning from the programme to the place of work will be evaluated, and evidence that these outcomes are being met by graduates in the workplace is expected.

## 7 CURRICULUM

7.1 An MBA is Masters-level programme of study and is postgraduate in nature. Institutions should be able to demonstrate that Masters-level learning is achieved across the programme.

### Nature and design

7.2 The nature of an MBA programme is based on the assumption of significant relevant previous experience of the participants. The MBA is designed for those who may be expected in time to make a significant contribution to managing at a strategic level in their organisation. The MBA is a programme of study aimed at the preparation for strategic leadership and transformational roles in organisations. It should offer both a rigorous and intellectually demanding programme of study and the opportunity for personal development.

7.3 The design and content of the programme should embrace a range of relevant theory firmly linked to the practical world of sustainable leadership, business and management. Employing organisations should contribute directly to the development of the programme.

7.4 While all programmes should reflect the general character of the MBA, individual courses may be designed to meet the needs of a specific business function or sector. While it is encouraged that a programme includes some specialisation appropriate to the institution's resources and strengths, the MBA should retain its generalist, broad character.

### Knowledge, Understanding and Skills

7.5 An MBA programme should encompass relevant knowledge and understanding of organisations, the external context in which they operate, their stakeholders and how they are managed. Care should be taken to ensure that the academic programme is rigorous while properly related to the practical world of management. While a specific module is not expected for each of the below, all programmes should demonstrate that students acquire a significant understanding of the major areas of knowledge which underpin general management, including:

- (i) the concepts, processes and institutions in the production and marketing of goods and/or services and the financing of business enterprise or other forms of organisation;
- (ii) the concepts and applications of accounting, of quantitative methods, and management information systems including IT applications;

- (iii) organisation theory, behaviour, HRM issues and interpersonal communications;
- (iv) the processes and problems of general management at the operational and strategic level;
- (v) Macro and micro economics;
- (vi) business research methods and consultancy skills;
- (vii) the impact of environmental forces on organisations, including: legal systems; demographics; ethical, social, and technological change issues;
- (viii) explicit coverage of the ability to respond to and manage change;
- (ix) business policy and strategy;
- (x) leadership and entrepreneurship;
- (xi) an understanding of the impact of sustainability, ethics and risk management on business decisions and performance;
- (xii) further contemporary and pervasive issues, such as creativity, enterprise, innovation, e-commerce, knowledge management, and globalisation;
- (xiii) the international dimension to the above, including political risk and contemporary processes of regionalisation, emerging markets, global governance and globalisation.

7.6 To ensure an international dimension to the programme, the curriculum should take care to incorporate an understanding of management styles and practices from different regions and cultures, and to include diversity in examples and / or case studies. Examples should encompass a range from prevalent international business standards to local norms and expectations.

7.7 An MBA should contain substantial evidence of programme integration, usually undertaken primarily as an in-company project, which demonstrates each individual student's ability to integrate the individual core subjects. Where included, such a project should be practically based and allow candidates to demonstrate an understanding of theory and its application at Masters level. Although co-operation of an employing organisation is encouraged, and a joint supervisor from the employer may be appointed. Where such co-operation is not available, the institution should provide alternative means for the student to carry out a practically based project. The expectations, learning outcomes and assessment criteria should be made

explicit. Research and consultancy skills training should be provided in preparation for the above. Any other methods of integration are acceptable but evidence that such methods are effective and substantial is expected.

- 7.8 Evidence will be sought that programme design and review has incorporated an understanding of the balance between theory and practice, and between functional and integrative teaching.
- 7.9 The programme must also be explicit about the means by which transferable and 'soft' management skills are developed throughout the programme. Such skills include, but are not restricted to: ability to manage change; communication; leadership; teamwork; dealing with ambiguity; negotiation; problem solving; critical thinking; values.
- 7.10 The general educational aims of the programme should be to develop cognitive, critical, intellectual and relevant personal and interpersonal skills at leadership level. It is important that participants are able to apply the concepts learned during the programme.

#### Teaching, Learning and Assessment

- 7.11 The applied nature of much of the MBA demands a range of teaching and learning methods. These methods include lectures, seminars, workshops, action learning, reading, individual and group projects, distance learning, computer-based training and in-company training whether formal courses or in-company learning with a mentor. Co-operation of employers is to be encouraged and it is expected that much of the learning will be practically based.
- 7.12 Much of the learning in an MBA is expected to take place between members of the learning group, and opportunities for collaborative learning should be provided. Such interaction can be face-to-face and/or through the application of a virtual learning environment, as long as this encourages both synchronous and asynchronous interaction.
- 7.13 The key purpose of student assessment is to enable students to demonstrate that they have met the objectives and achieved the learning outcomes of the programme at the standard required for the award of an MBA degree. The assessment scheme should have detailed criteria and specify the range and relative weights of the various assessment methods used. The assessment scheme should be comprehensive and consistent across the various subject areas, and underpinned by a suitable assessment strategy.

- 7.14 The assessment scheme should reflect the particular aims and characteristics of the course. Individual examinations should play a balanced role in any such scheme since they are seen as testing intellectual rigour under controlled conditions. While innovation in assessment methods is welcomed, particularly where new teaching and learning methods are being used, detailed evaluation by the school of such innovations will also be looked for.
- 7.15 Assessment should also be used to provide feedback to students and assist in the subsequent individual and group learning.
- 7.16 Evidence is required that steps are taken to ensure that the individual's own work is being assessed, and that assessment standards are consistent.

## 8 MODE AND DURATION

### Duration

- 8.1 The duration of an MBA programme is expected to be equivalent to at least one year's full time study and at least two years' part-time study (or 90 ECTS credits equivalent). More flexible modes of delivery should be expected to take between two to three years to complete, with a clear and managed progression rate and an upper limit in exceptional circumstances of not more than seven years.
- 8.2 An MBA programme will correspond to the equivalent of at least 1 800 hours learning effort. Additionally, the total number of contact hours is expected to be not less than 500 hours. Contact hours are defined as compulsory, scheduled face-to-face contact between the learning group and faculty.

### Delivery Mode

- 8.3 Programmes may be full-time, part-time, distance/open learning or multi-mode (blended). Innovative approaches to design and delivery are welcomed if they enhance learning opportunities and can maintain the coherence and integrity of the course, while meeting the general standards outlined in this document. It is expected that cohort integration is achieved through programme and delivery design even on the most flexible of delivery modes.
- 8.4 It is expected that all programmes will contain some element of support through an online platform which students can access off-campus and out-of-hours.

- 8.5 Where programmes are designed on a modular basis, the design should, given the importance of a multi-disciplinary approach to management problems, clearly provide means by which the integration of individual subjects is achieved.
- 8.6 Some programmes may deliver a significant part of the learning experience at a distance, ranging along a spectrum from offering one section or module of the course online, to 'blended learning', to 'distance learning' in its purest sense. In such cases, it is expected that all standards outlined in this document will continue to be met. Programmes delivered by such modes must ensure that students receive an equivalent learning experience to that of students studying on a face-to-face basis. Accreditation will therefore focus particularly on examining evidence that there is:
- (i) a physical base from which the programme operates, which provides an effective logistical and administrative infrastructure that ensures that all participants engage with the programme as intended, that monitors this engagement, and that consistency is maintained year on year. This should also extend to include local teaching and support facilities where appropriate;
  - (ii) a specifically designed quality assurance system to ensure the continued quality and currency of all staff, systems and teaching materials, with a systematic process of periodic quality review;
  - (iii) remote out-of-hours access for all students to the necessary study materials, library resources and software, with dedicated technical support available and readily accessible;
  - (iv) consistent academic leadership which provides cohesion for the programme underpinned by appropriate research and scholarly activity, and with responsibility for the review of course content, delivery and academic standards;
  - (v) a tailored system of programme management and support, ensuring transparent coordination and regular communication between the various departments involved in the delivery of the programme;
  - (vi) a customised system for regular and responsive student engagement with the institution, to include access to academic and support staff, student feedback and pastoral care;
  - (vii) a means to ensure that students studying at a distance receive appropriate career development opportunities, in addition to evidence that the development of transferable skills are addressed explicitly;
  - (viii) a transparent system to regularly monitor student interaction and progression on the programme, with effective means to remedy any issues that arise as a result of this monitoring;
  - (ix) a platform to provide, encourage and monitor peer group/cohort interaction, both synchronously and asynchronously, across key elements of the course. This should provide an effective means for group work as well as an opportunity for networking and peer support;
  - (x) a robust and secure assessment system, which guards against plagiarism, ensures the correct identity of submitted work, and allows for appropriate feedback to students, both formative and summative;
  - (xi) a structured, effective and interactive learning platform underpinned by both synchronous and asynchronous interaction between the learning group and faculty/tutors. The minimum requirement for the face-to-face element on a distance learning programme is expected to be 120 hours, which can be partly substituted by demonstrably effective technologies that allow for synchronous interaction between the student cohort and faculty. For other blended modes of delivery, the number of contact hours is expected to be considerably higher than 120, though it may be less than 500. The balance of 500 contact hours must be mandatory interactive student-faculty learning, although this can be delivered asynchronously.



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