

An African MBA fit for purpose

Hayley Pearson explains the rationale behind a major re-thinking of one of South Africa's leading MBA programmes

Spurred on by the fast-changing global business environment and an increased demand for competitive skills, the Gordon Institute of Business Science (GIBS) has undertaken a full rethink and refreshment of its flagship MBA programme.

The South Africa-based business school, part of the University of Pretoria, recognised that technology, digital disruption and profound global shifts required globally relevant African executives capable of navigating exceptional change while seizing new opportunities in untapped markets.

The process was long and exacting, forcing GIBS to examine its own internal structures, teaching approaches and the current and future needs of students. Run entirely in-house, the refreshed GIBS MBA was rolled out via a structured and staged process leading up to the initial pilot in 2018.

Prior to the refresh, the GIBS MBA was largely similar to the structure and approach adopted by many business schools around the world and run in a very siloed fashion, students complete individual course such as corporate finance, management accounting, human resource strategy, marketing and so on, completing one course and then progressing to the next.

The decision to refresh our MBA was informed by global and African trends as well as in response to the demands coming from business recruiters. We further recognised the need to radically rethink the heavy emphasis being placed on assessment and the lack of integration across the programme.

All these inputs – together with a nationwide re-accreditation of the MBA by South Africa's National Qualifications Framework – gave us a great opportunity to really think deeply about our MBA.

We began the refresh process by splitting-out the functional subjects students would expect from a traditional MBA programme – such as financial

accounting, marketing and operations management – and housed these MBA fundamentals in Year One of the refreshed programme. Then we took the higher-order thinking outcomes and ensured they formed part of a highly integrated Year Two.

Year One was converted into a Post Graduate Diploma in General Management and Year Two into the MBA. All students, with a few exceptions, complete both qualifications.

The design team thought hard about what they wanted students to achieve with a GIBS MBA. Ultimately, having come out of our programme, we would like our students – within five to 10 years – to be general managers, heads of large business units, running their own business or advising businesses.

GIBS adopted a three-phase approach to the design of the refreshed programme. Phase One was the completion of a comprehensive review process, which included detailed input from all key stakeholders including interviews and focus groups with faculty, alumni, current students, GIBS Advisory Board members and key representatives from business.

A historical review of the programme's evaluations was taken into account, as were the MBA designs of other top-ranked business schools. The latest articles and literature relating to MBA programmes and management development and the accreditation requirements were considered alongside input received through a series of workshops held with representatives from across the business school, the programme management and the executive education team.

Phase two focused on programme structure and Phase Three centred on operationalising, content development and delivery.



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Across the process, faculty were given the latitude – and time – to formulate new outlines and agree on essential elements; in spite of the administrative demands. This proved critical as the time it took to formulate the courses was far more than we expected and the debate that occurred for faculty to arrive at finalised content and a seamless flow took far longer. But there needed to be flexibility in the system to ensure time to think, critique and debate in order to arrive at the best outcome.

Navigating that tension was certainly interesting but faculty buy-in, alongside that of the programme management team and administrators was critical. As a result, from the start special attention was paid to capacity issues and stresses on the system; leading to the phased roll-out approach.

Other challenges included the dramatic shift from a traditional teaching perspective to a team-based teaching approach. Teaching sessions were added to the programmes, some almost doubling teaching time as well as outcome expectations. There might be anything up to five faculty teaching on one core course.

Teaching teams really pushed GIBS to think carefully about achieving a succinct narrative around course outcomes.

A change management process was needed to help faculty, who had taught in one particular way for so long, to open their hearts and minds to teaching in a different way.

There was a lot of work around selecting faculty, getting faculty to come together, working through what those course outcomes were as well as the latest thinking in areas. We had to assign a course lead to take ownership of the overall process.

In spite of the challenges, the new teaching approach elevated both delivery in the classroom and the preparation. In part, this was due to the direct comparisons students could draw between teachers, forcing faculty to “step up” and rethink how they were teaching, what they were teaching and how their positioning of content linked with the broader subject.

Adapting the teaching approach was integral to the core courses, which made up the new MBA. These core courses (referred to as buckets in the initial design phase) include:

- Environment of business
- Innovation and design



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The RRBM encourages elite journals to publish more problem-centred research “oriented toward critical social and business questions that are complex and span disciplinary boundaries.” For example, terrorism is a an organisational problem but it is one that we ignore. The organisational and management implications of climate change also cries out for deeper analysis but is again largely invisible in management journals





- Decision making
- Strategic implementation
- Leadership

Once we had made the decision about the 'buckets', we reorganised and reviewed the current outcomes of the existing MBA programme through a lengthy mapping process. We arranged the outcomes according to the new areas, removed redundant ones and added new and relevant ones in line with the programme goals. As we added all the bells and whistles, we needed to ensure we did not lose any of the fundamentals.

In order to create a common thread linking all the courses, the designers incorporated leadership as the explicit integrating course. The leadership course cross cuts and integrates into each of the other courses so when a student embarks on the environment of business course, for example, leadership would be taught as part of that course and students may be pushed to consider leadership outcomes in the context of that specific core subject.

Leadership, as the explicit integrator, would itself be supported by two implicit integrating mechanisms: strategy, which was woven throughout the core course, and technology, which was embedded in all subjects.

While this approach better reflected the multifaceted nature of modern-day business and the multiple touch points facing managers, the designers were concerned that students should clearly understand how this interplay worked in practice.

A GIBS MBA Road Map – not dissimilar to an underground metro guide you might pick up in any global city – was created as a visual guide (complete with individual core subject icons) to illustrate how the various streams intermingled with and fed off one another. The Road Map also includes components beyond the core, such as electives, an integrated business simulation, a global module and the independent research project.

What the Road Map could not illustrate were the specific focus choices made by each student as part of the refreshed MBA's radical personalisation of the learning journey.

Three personalised pathways were included, which overlaid and ran parallel to the MBA programme. The intention was to give each student the ability to fine-tune the MBA experience to their specific personal and career needs.

Each student selects his or her focus in Year One and this choice permeates the suite of electives and workshops on offer, global module, and the portfolio of evidence options available to them.

The first personalised stream is "Run a Business", the general management focus and GIBS's standard offering; the second is "How to Start and Grow a Business", an entrepreneurship-focused MBA; and finally "Advise a Business" the consulting focus.

GIBS piloted its entrepreneurship focus in 2019 and took in a full intake of 40 students in 2020. The consulting focus was piloted in 2020 with 17 students signed up for the first intake and with a hard start planned for 2021.

While this is the first major shake-up for the GIBS MBA in 20 years, it is by no means set in stone and will benefit from ongoing improvements. Based on the feedback from the students and wanting to improve a variety of areas, we have already made some changes.

One example is that the integrated simulation has been moved to after the final report hand-in date, bringing students back to the classroom after their global electives to compare and contrast their experiences and to assess their leadership style, capabilities and thinking around responsible leadership; a key principle underpinning the leadership course.

It is also a clear indication that while GIBS believes it has created a blueprint from which others can learn in terms of process, integration and design, that the journey is ongoing.

If we think about what we wanted to achieve and what we have achieved and the outcomes that we wanted our students to obtain then we have certainly delivered. The refreshed GIBS MBA is forward thinking and innovative. The student experience is deliberate from all aspects, ensuring our students achieve the overall programme goals and objectives.

GIBS is now focused on benchmarking its refreshed MBA programme against other traditional MBAs and this will be an important next step in our refinement process.



About the Author

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