

What makes a great MBA Programme?



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In October the Financial Times released their ranked list of Executive MBA programmes. Every year, business schools eagerly await their ranking positions with anticipation. How well have they done compared to their competitors? Will there be any significant movement? Having led Imperial College Business School's MBA suite of programmes, I was delighted to discover their EMBA programme went up one place. Although small, that one place demonstrates years of hard work, from Imperial's programme team, their dedicated academic director and the hard work and determination by the cohort of students being ranked.

The Financial Times and other rankings are important to the top schools. It provides prospective students and employers with a benchmark to compare the quality of business school programmes. I could engage in lengthy debates over which metrics should carry the greatest significance for an MBA programme. It got me thinking what constitutes a great MBA? What delivers the best value to students?

What are students looking for?

Prospective students pursue an MBA for a variety of reasons; climbing the career ladder, honing their skills, making a career switch, or even nurturing their entrepreneurial dreams as they progress in their professional journey. The Graduate Management Admissions Council's GMAC's latest prospective applicant survey data shows that a salary increase is the top post-MBA goal for all applicants.

Naturally, every student has their unique career goals, and that impacts what kind of MBA programme they're looking for. A strong MBA programme should be flexible enough to cater to individuals with diverse and non-traditional backgrounds who are eager to expand their knowledge and sharpen their business expertise. Prospective students look to gain skills for their chosen fields and become the leaders of the future.

Universities often tap into their research strengths when designing MBA programmes, attracting candidates who resonate with their research identity. I'm always conscious this approach works wonders for specialised postgraduate programmes, but an MBA must cater to a wide range of interests. When designing a truly great programme, you should think about how you can accommodate these diverse needs.

Now, if you're wondering what it takes to develop a truly great MBA programme, here are my top 10 considerations to keep in mind.

Review your curriculum regularly, leveraging data and industry insights...

Prospective students will actively assess a curriculum to make sure it lines up with their career goals. They seek a program that encompasses a broad range of business disciplines while also desiring the flexibility to specialise in their specific area of interest. You need to design a curriculum that aligns to their aspirations.

Strong MBA programmes stay on top of the game by annually reviewing the latest trends, emerging technologies, and the latest skills you need in today's dynamic business world. The MH&A approach to programme development is to first harness the power of data science, using machine learning

to interrogate labour market data. Focusing on the skills different sectors require from MBA graduates allows you to stay on top of a quickly changing business world. It's no secret that integrating digital skills and technology into the curriculum is now essential for both the current world and the future of work. A recent article published by the Association to Advance Collegiate Schools of Business (AACSB) discusses why programmes must adapt swiftly and incorporate new skills into their curriculum. Recent developments in artificial intelligence are a game changer for businesses and they'll want employees who can harness its capabilities for positive impact.

Students like to be the curators of their own learning journey. A robust curriculum holds the promise of achieving this by offering elective modules that allow students to specialise in their chosen fields. You can also provide choice in a variety of projects and hands-on experiences that assist them in developing the career-specific skills they're aiming for. You may even want to go a step further by grouping elective modules into concentrations to better support the ability to specialise. It's all about giving students the power to shape their educational path.

And a well-designed curriculum will strategically weave impactful assessments into the programme's structure. To enhance their learning experience, you need to ensure appropriate assessments are in place to allow students to develop the knowledge and skills that are critical for their success.

Don't forget the soft skills...

When it comes to impressing employers, it's all about having the right mix of skills. Both soft skills and technical hard skills are equally regarded. You should be actively fostering the growth of students' soft skills in your curriculum, with a strong emphasis on leadership, communication, and interpersonal capabilities. These are the skills that really set students apart.

In this fast-paced digital age, employers are searching for well-rounded individuals. They want employees who can not only adapt but thrive in the ever-evolving business landscape. Students also need to be resilient, ready to bounce back from challenges, and have a genuine enthusiasm for embracing new technologies.

Think about how students will interact with your mode of delivery...

The pandemic enabled universities to evolve and experiment with online delivery. The rise of HyFlex teaching, where classrooms are designed to stream synchronous delivery, provides students with flexibility and choice to be in the classroom or join online. Furthermore, it presents opportunities to increase enrolment, as discussed in a recent article in [EdTech Magazine](#). For MBA programmes, it allows part-time students to seamlessly integrate learning into their already hectic work (and home life) schedules. It's making their learning more accessible and more attractive to the MBA market.

However, operationally it also has its challenges. It's not always possible to simply move current synchronous teaching activities online. The same activity that worked well in the classroom, may not be possible in the dual HyFlex mode of

delivery. You will need to carefully evaluate how students are engaging with their learning. It's not just about offering options; it's about tailoring teaching, learning, and assessment to match the mode of delivery to create the best learning experience possible.

There have been great developments in technology to support synchronous and asynchronous methods. Platforms such as Engageli provide tools for universities to design classroom activities based on active learning principles. They offer module leaders and instructors a variety of options to assist in delivering learning objectives suited to their chosen delivery mode.

The importance of a strong careers service...

When running career services at the MBA level, the focus isn't on entry-level positions. It's essential you effectively serve mid-career students who are looking to enhance their career trajectories. An MBA needs to offer a comprehensive career package. You must consider how to equip students with the resources and support they need to not only secure internships but also land those coveted full-time positions across various business sectors.

Now, what makes a career service truly robust? You need to go the extra mile. Consider supplying workshops that focus on enhancing those ever-valuable soft skills. You need to be in direct conversation with employers, providing opportunities to connect them with students and providing one-on-one consulting to help polish those CVs and prep for interviews. It's about giving students all the tools they need for success.

Some universities are taking it a step further by offering post-MBA support. They're there for their alumni, ready to assist them in their quest for promotions or even when they're nurturing entrepreneurial ideas. You can build a lifelong connection with students after they join your community of alumni. Maintaining these relationships are important for Schools for feedback on future curriculum design, providing insights into developments across the business sectors and direct links to employers. Their success is your success!

A culture of experiential learning...

You need to think about adopting an active approach to learning through practical experiences. Consulting projects, case studies, or global immersions can enhance students' skill sets and make them more appealing to employers. [Times Higher Education](#) have recently discusses the benefits of effective learning. Fostering curiosity and enthusiasm through emotional engagement can promote an impactful and memorable learning experience.

Engaging simulation exercises and projects that tackle real-world problems head-on are like a sneak peek into a future career path. These experiences don't just boost their skill set; they can also be appealing to potential employers. Students are not merely reading about it; they are experiencing it firsthand.

Being taught by renowned faculty is highly motivating for students. You may also choose to offer occasions for industry specialists to instruct on applied subjects, further enriching their experiential learning.

Global opportunities develop essential skills...

A top tier programme will offer opportunities and unique perspectives that a student might not get anywhere else. You need to consider whether developing global exchanges with renowned institutions, creating memory-making global experience weeks that provide a deep dive into foreign businesses, or establishing international consulting projects can be embedded within your programme. It's a passport to a world of experiences that not only sharpen a student's skills but also broaden their cultural horizons, making them a standout candidate in the eyes of employers.

If you think about the world we live in today, it's a global village, and businesses are constantly evolving to keep up. Both giant corporations or small startups deal with international suppliers, customers, and have diverse workforces. In this context, the ability to communicate across cultures isn't just important; it's an essential in our interconnected world.

Cultivating professional networks for lifelong success...

One of the most powerful motivations driving students to pursue an MBA is the opportunity to build their own professional networks. These connections, cultivated during their time on the programme are the seeds of potential business partnerships and job opportunities. You need to actively support the building of these connections, providing opportunities for students to learn from each other and the wide alumni network they will become part of. It isn't just a club; it's a treasure trove of resources for job hunting and propelling their careers to new heights.

The transformative power of diversity...

A diverse MBA cohort creates a vibrant and inclusive learning environment. It's not just a nice-to-have; it's a critical aspect of preparing students to thrive in today's complex and interconnected business landscape.

You need to think about the power of classroom discussions in a diverse setting. They're enriched by a multitude of viewpoints on business matters and global challenges. Students develop cultural competence, understand the importance of inclusivity, learn from numerous perspectives on business issues and global challenges. It's like having a global summit right in your classroom.

Life-long learning and the benefits of continuous education...

Our world is evolving faster than ever, and it's essential to stay on top of the latest developments to keep growing, both personally and professionally. [Times Higher Education](#) discusses the importance of developing students to 'learn how to learn.' Employers are more and more keen to see their employees continuously develop.

The concept of lifelong education has gained immense popularity in recent years, and for good reason. It allows graduates to keep fine-tuning their skills, even after

they've earned their degrees. Developing a strong executive education portfolio focusing on the latest knowledge and skills can be enticing to students; knowing they can return to take modules, workshops or online courses to further develop long after they graduate. Students have committed substantial financial and personal resources to undertake an MBA programme. Staying informed about relevant trends and enhancing their expertise in evolving fields serves as a compelling strategy to safeguard this valuable investment.

Universities are also using these opportunities to strengthen their ties with alumni. By offering lifelong learning options, they're fostering relationships that extend far beyond graduation. You may even choose to provide discounts to nurture these connections. It's a win-win, offering a wealth of benefits to both students and the university community.

Don't underestimate support services...

You cannot underestimate the importance of having systems and processes that are crystal clear and user-friendly. When students are in the thick of their studies, they're already dealing with a lot of academic pressure. That's why it's absolutely crucial for all the procedures and systems to be simple, straightforward, and easy to understand.

A robust suitably staffed programme support team is essential. This team are like a trusty companion on a student's MBA journey. They're there to assist and guide students every step of the way. What students are really looking for is convenient access to all the help they might need; whether it's guidance, mentoring, or health and well-being services. It's about making sure they're fully supported, ensuring that nothing stands in the way of their success.

In the ever-evolving landscape of MBA education, complacency is not an option. The dynamic nature of the business world and the evolving aspirations of students ensure MBA programmes will need to innovatively adapt and expand to stay relevant. I'm excited to see how MBA programmes advance. How they embrace and integrate technology into their curriculums. How they cater to the unique needs of Gen Z, who prioritise value for money and purpose-driven education. How universities become more innovative in their design and delivery methods. I anticipate learning to work with Artificial Intelligence will become a significant component in MBA programmes, both as a subject to learn and a tool for teaching and assessment. The future of MBA programs promises to be anything but dull, with its evolution resembling the annual transformation of Taylor Swift, and, in her words, they'll never go out of style.

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