

Path to greener business pastures



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A Master's in Business Administration is one of the most common, if not the most common postgraduate qualification at the moment. This can be attributed to its broad application and all-inclusive nature, as graduates have come from backgrounds as varied as agriculture and microbiology and graduated into positions ranging from self-made entrepreneur to directors. The beauty of the MBA is that there are no limitations; there are general MBAs, there are those with specialisations, MBAs accept students from any background, and often within a broad range of working experiences, and they can be practiced in any industry, anywhere in the world. Unlike, say, a master's in English Literature or Aeronautical Engineering that can only be practiced within a certain field and professional level to make it worthwhile, an MBA has a much wider playing field, translating into better opportunities.

Or so we have always thought. The MBA's versatility and popularity have also been contributing factors to the apparent problem of MBA graduate oversupply. Thanks to the very fact that it is the most encompassing of degrees, it comes as no surprise that almost every institution of higher education has chosen to offer its own version of the favoured scroll.

From Stamford to IESE, and Curtin Sarawak to UPM, the bandwagon has been thoroughly filled. But isn't this just the effect of supplying for the demand?

There is no doubt that there has been a great demand for MBA holders to take leadership positions in corporations, especially in the early 90s and onwards. Even now, demand still exists, and research by the European Foundation of Management Development shows that employers consistently report high levels of satisfaction with MBA graduates. Yet more than half of the institutions that offer the MBA programme have reported an increase in enrolments, and they also expect this trend to continue into the following academic year.

More enrolments mean more competition. And more competition forces both students and institutions to take action to set themselves apart.

WHAT DO YOU WANT FROM AN MBA?

For most people, the MBA represents an investment. It is good to identify what exactly it is that you hope to achieve by pursuing an MBA, whether locally or overseas, as that would guide your choice of institution and investment for the next couple of years. Dr Avvari V. Mohan, Associate Professor of Strategic Management and Director of MBA and MSc Programmes from Nottingham University Business School, University of Nottingham

Malaysia Campus narrows down the reasons an MBA would be a priority to some: practitioners who hope to have a career change, perhaps from dealing with technical aspects to a managerial function, professionals looking to move up the career ladder at work, entrepreneurs and owners of SMEs who hope to apply what they learn to their businesses and those who would like to move from professional to entrepreneurial ventures.

Basically, an MBA is an opportunity to graduate into a higher income bracket. At the same time, it is one of the more expensive non-scientific higher education certifications in Malaysia, compared to master's programmes offered by the faculty of humanities or that of the arts and social sciences, and research has found that one in four MBA graduates have unrealistic job expectations. The one may in fact cause the other – the cost of the programme makes it necessary to procure a better paying position, and the better paying position may require an MBA.

But whether or not these ambitions are realised is dependent on several factors.

"How useful an MBA is in the working world depends on the quality of the MBA itself," says Prakash Arumugam, Senior Lecturer at Wawasan Open University's School of Business and Administration. "The currency of the curriculum is a key factor in ensur-

ing the MBA has a realistic reflection of the corporate world. Some MBAs may have up-to-date information in terms of the theories and practices of the business environment; some may not."

Prakash also points out the fact that Malaysians are spoilt for choice when it comes to choosing an MBA, and how that has had a unfavourable side effect.

"MBA graduates are getting younger by the day," he says. "Fresh university graduates pursue an MBA without workforce experience. Employers have pointed out that being the proud owner of an MBA is not enough if the owner cannot demonstrate a comprehensive understanding of the inner workings in a corporate arena."

WHAT CAN INSTITUTIONS OFFER?

Each institution will boast a unique experience that will set you apart from other MBA graduates. Double qualifications, flexibility in hours, an internationally recognised degree are all attractive factors. For working adults who have time and location constraints, an open university like WOU or OUM would be able to fulfil their needs, with their online capabilities and convenient hours. Local branches of foreign campuses offer brand-name recognition for a more accommodating price, while local institutions like the Graduate School of Management at UPM and

UNIRAZAK's Graduate School of Business provide a regional perspective and easier accessibility for both local graduates and local employers in terms of practical application.

"MBA studies should be the analysis of real life business problems in class," says Associate Professor Dr Syed Musa Syed Jaafar Alhabshi, Dean of Universiti Tun Abdul Razak's Graduate School of Business. "There should be discussions and deliberations for generating new knowledge and providing practical solutions, enabling graduates to leap straight into the business upon graduation, or even during their studies, and act as an asset to the company."

While it is the responsibility of the institution to provide students the tools to discover practicable solutions through the analysis of case studies and real-life business problems, potential MBA students should also understand what they hope to achieve with the gaining of their MBA. It would appear that the MBA is most valuable to those who already have several years of working experience under their belt in a business capacity, as it provides a clear advantage in terms of business expertise and therefore career mobility, or a possible career change. Nevertheless, at the end of the day it is entirely up to the individual to follow their own vision of the future – as long as it is done wisely.