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National University of Ireland, Galway

An Coiste Feabhais Acadúil

The Committee on Academic Quality Improvement

The Academic Quality Assurance Programme 2008 - 2009



**REVIEW OF THE
EXECUTIVE MASTERS IN BUSINESS
ADMINISTRATION (EMBA),
NATIONAL UNIVERSITY OF IRELAND, GALWAY**

(Pre) Final REPORT

(1st April 2009)

This report arises from a visit by the review team to the School of Business and Economics on the 20th March, 2009. The EMBA Self Assessment Group had already prepared and submitted a 'Self Assessment Report' that, with other documentation, was made available to the review team well in advance of the visit.

The review team consisted of: Professor Geoff Wood, Management School, University of Sheffield, UK (Chair); Professor Nic Beech, School of Management, University of St Andrews, UK; Mr Fergal Broder, LotusWorks, Sligo; Ms Mary Dempsey, Discipline of Industrial Engineering, NUI Galway; and Dr Aoife Boyd, Discipline of Microbiology, NUI Galway acting as Rapporteur.

The report is structured to cover the following main topics:

1. Aims and Objectives
2. Organization and management
3. Programmes and Instruction
4. Scholarship and Research
5. Community Service
6. The Wider Context
7. Key Recommendations
8. Summary and Concluding Remarks

Opening remarks:

The review panel was impressed by the dedication of the core staff teaching and co-ordinating the EMBA programme. Were it not for this commitment of individual staff to the programme the review committee feels the student experience and quality of the programme would have been irreversibly damaged. In addition, the review panel was impressed by the quality of the students and the alumni that it met on the day of the review, many of whom expressed the view that the EMBA brought added value to their careers.

However the review panel feels that there are serious shortcomings in the EMBA programme, particularly regarding the poor level of University support for the programme. These shortcomings are outlined below under each of the main headings.

At a general level, the group would question the effectiveness and usefulness of the review process for the MBA programme as there was little evidence that few, if any, of the recommendations, of the previous 2001 quality report (Review of the MBA programme, May 2001, Academic Quality Assurance Programme 1999-2000) have been implemented. Many of the key recommendations of the 2009 review panel reiterate those identified in the earlier report 8 years ago. The panel therefore supports the follow-up measures to evaluate in 12 months time the progress that has been made on implementing the recommendations of both the previous report and of this report at the level of programme and at the level of the University as outlined in Section 3.4C, page 12 of the Academic Quality Assurance Programme 2008-2009 booklet - "The Unit also prepares progress reports about one year and about three years after the review visit".

1. Aims and Objectives

The EMBA aims to deliver a broad education in management for mid career executives in the western region. The programme has a largely theoretical basis in the first year of the course offering taught modules in foundation areas of management. In the second year more emphasis is placed on the practical side of management, and the teaching is at its best when it draws on the experience of the cohort of students. The brand of the University and the School appeared to be a real strength, and could be built on.

This is a critical time for deciding the future of the EMBA programme. To quote from the Self Assessment Report *"It is the unanimous view of this self-assessment group that the choice facing the school and the institution with respect to the future plans and priorities for the EMBA is a stark one as the programme cannot continue without the financial support, appropriate governance structures within the new school's structure and the professional management that are demanded by the competitive market conditions and increasing student service expectation levels. The choice is that the programme should be developed further to successfully seek AMBA accreditation or the programme should be discontinued and not offered as a flagship programme of the School of Business and economics."* (p. 32-33.). It would seem to be the opinion of the Self-Assessment Group that the future of the programme depends on accreditation and on it being a flagship programme for the School of Business and that achieving accreditation and providing an EMBA programme to the standards expected by students of such a course will require a considerable input of resources. The review panel supports this conclusion, but it was not clear to the panel that the University was in active support of this choice.

1.1. The review panel believed that the aims and objectives of the programme are generic and could be made more specific. A strong distinctive mission statement for the EMBA is needed. Quite simply, the panel would like more of a “feel” of what the EMBA programme was about. Certainly, an EMBA is about a general management education, but even then, more information – and evidence – on distinguishing features is vital.

1.2. As the strategic plans for the University, Colleges and Schools are currently in development, the review panel could not reflect on the position of the EMBA within these plans. The panel would recommend that the Strategic Plan of the College of Business, Public Policy, & Law, which is currently being drafted, should make direct reference to its support of the development of the EMBA as a flagship programme for the College and the University, especially in terms of the resources that should be available in order to develop the programme to achieve the high standards necessary to compete as an internationally recognised accredited EMBA programme. Furthermore within the School of Business and Economics, authority should be given for the programme director to be part of the School executive committee and due recognition of his/her role in their workload model should be emphasised. It would be helpful to be clearer as to what constitutes a “flagship programme” from both an organizational and a resource viewpoint.

1.3. At senior levels of the University outside of the College of Business, Public Policy, & Law, there appeared to be a lack of understanding and interest in the EMBA, and of management studies more generally. On the part of some individuals this was evidenced by lack of preparation for the review process. If the EMBA is to be developed as an accredited flagship programme, there must be committed leadership, recognition and support throughout the University. This recognition and support was not evident to the panel.

1.4. There is an absence of a clear marketing and recruitment strategy. The students on the course primarily are located within the Galway City region and location was a prime consideration when choosing NUI, Galway for their EMBA studies. The newly introduced PAC online application system seems to work very well. There appeared to be a decline in the number of applications, raising questions as to the sustainability of the programme without renewed marketing. Marketing should be extended to a wider area along the Western seaboard, which will increase the number of applicants and maintain and increase the quality of the selected applicants. The possibility of a full-time provision, aimed at the international market, could also be explored. If the programme is to meet the stated vision of an accredited programme a well resourced and well planned marketing and recruitment strategy is required.

1.5. The review panel saw evidence that the past and present programme directors have exerted considerable effort to maintain the EMBA programme at a high standard. This was especially noted since EMBA programme management requires a sizable administrative workload in addition to teaching and research activities. However given the current lack of administrative support the planning appeared to be extremely short term, and primarily focused on trouble shooting. To achieve the aim and objective of being an accredited EMBA programme, immediate provision of administrative support is required to free up the Programme Director and the Dean to develop a strategic plan for the accreditation of the programme. The review panel was given to believe that a substantiated request for such support would be welcomed by the Registrar's office.

2. Organization and management

The review panel was concerned by serious governance failures within the programme which seem to result from inadequate resourcing. These failures include a lack of systematic engagement with business and other stake holders. Internally there was insufficient evidence of coherent programme management and quality control procedures.

2.1. It appears that 90% of the fee budget was unaccounted for and not available to the School. More generally speaking, the financial matters appeared opaque, and workload and costings models were conspicuous by their absence. There appeared to be a lack of reflection regarding the setting of fees and consideration should be given to setting an appropriate fee structure to support an accredited EMBA programme.

Most importantly a much greater proportion of the fee budget will need to be returned to the School in order to develop and maintain an accredited EMBA.

2.2. The programme appears currently to have no administrative support whatsoever. Exclusive programme administrative support is normal in the many international business school that we are aware of and it is essential for the development and maintainance of an accredited EMBA, given the specialist needs of MBA students, and the intensive nature of the curriculum. Most universities have recognized that an MBA is not like ‘normal’ masters programmes and requires a quite different approach. Typically, accredited MBA programmes will have their own dedicated support for registry activities, student support, facilities, marketing and alumni.

2.3. The authority of the programme director seems limited. There is a need to clearly define the role and status of the programme director so that he/she has the authority to set a co-ordinated programme of module aims, have the ability to direct and support teaching, budget properly, and operationalize strategic objectives.

2.4. The programme committee board appears to only act sporadically. This committee should include all teaching staff, as well as other relevant stake holders. Amongst other roles it should regularly review curricular content and quality and ensure integration of module content to facilitate the learning objectives of the programme as a whole.

2.5. There needs to be systematic engagement with relevant Chambers of Commerce and other relevant business organizations, including mechanisms for formal input into curricula. In this regard there is a need for a proper advisory board. The alumni of this programme would seem to be a much under-used resource to develop such interactions.

2.6. While feedback was collected from the students on a seemingly ad hoc basis, no formalised and systematic feedback mechanisms were evident. Moreover where feedback is gathered this seems not to be communicated to all staff involved in the programme. Formalised and systematic student feedback and staff response mechanisms should be defined and systems put in place to communicate these findings to the stakeholders, including the programme board, so that they inform ongoing improvements.

2.7. There is a great need for an accreditation advisory structure to guide the programme through the accreditation process and to ensure all the required standards are met.

3. Programmes and Instruction

There was a clear passion, drive and ambition for the School and the programme. The course directors (serving and emeritus) were clearly engaged with enhancing the effectiveness of learning, ranging from personally performing administrative tasks to engaging at the strategic level. Many of the staff that the review panel met were enthusiastic and motivated about their teaching and with their interactions with the students. Members of the teaching team were willing to help out with teaching gaps, even on the margins of their core field of expertise. Staff appeared to be readily available for advice and support.

The review panel found that the key foundations of business and management were covered in the curriculum and that the integrating project was an innovative idea that was well received by the students. A great strength of the programme was the excellent infrastructure, including an exclusive teaching room. The review panel met alumni who believed that their studies had added value to both themselves and their business and they met current students who generally said that they would recommend the course to prospective students.

3.1. While the basic foundations of management studies are covered in the programme, the level of advanced study appears to be restricted and the quantity of coverage appears to be considerably less than would be expected by AMBA or other accreditation bodies.

Some of the key aspects missing from an MBA accreditation point of view are:

- A research methods course.
- A research dissertation (in addition to the integrated project).
- Separation and greater emphasis to be given to areas that are currently conflated, e.g. the management and organisation module which covers a range of topics could be split into 2 modules.
- 500 hours contact time; the review panel estimated there were 300 contact hours currently associated with the EMBA.
- Evidence of progress from foundation modules at the start of the programme to advanced modules later on.
- A full length induction programme aimed at equipping candidates from from different educational backgrounds to succeed in management studies at a graduate level.
- More evidence of the development of soft skills (e.g. coaching, mentoring, leadership, teamworking).

3.2. There is a lack of integration between modules and an opacity between them. This can be seen in part in the syllabi that were provided, which were diverse in standard and format; there is a need for greater standardization, and, in some notable instances,

improvement. There was also a lack of communication between lecturers on different modules leading to redundancy in course content. The sharing of specific instances of best practice between instructors on the course would be of benefit to all. The programme board would help in part to address these issues

3.3. There was a need for more systematic evidence to demonstrate Masters level learning, and the possibilities for progression to Doctoral level.

3.4. Internationalization appeared lacking, especially the possibility for student visits to a peer institution abroad.

3.5. Increased systematic engagement with local business should be initiated. Also welcome would be an increase in the opportunity for students to work with local businesses on a problem-solving basis.

3.6. Opportunities for self development were insufficient due to the scarcity of soft skills provision that would be normally associated with a MBA programme.

3.7. The absence of student-staff fora limits the opportunity for actively engaging students in the learning process. The depth to which research skills and expertise are disseminated to the students are not clear.

3.8. Student assessment procedures are varied and adequate. The provision of external examiners reports would have shown the review panel the standard of the assessment process. We would recommend that the programme board would overview the assessment procedures to ensure equality of student effort in each area.

3.9. Students were positive about the learning experience when group learning activities and discussions were involved. One graduate explained that, on a Monday, he put in practice the theory learned following the Friday and Saturday classes. In contrast when the teaching was solely textbook-based and non-interactive the feedback was negative. The student response was most positive when their experience of the course met their expectations from the presented course objectives. Different students could identify particular modules that they found most useful/interesting. These probably reflected the students' expectations of the programme and also their backgrounds both in employment and academic disciplines

3.10. Students felt that they were not always treated at a level commensurate with their senior postgraduate status. "A flagship programme should offer a flagship experience". To cite a particular example, there needs to be a proper system for the

distribution of provisional results. The Examinations Office did not appear to be supportive of the programme and the needs of these students.

3.11. The timetable structure seems to accommodate the EMBA students' needs and appears to provide flexibility for a work life balance of study, family and work.

3.12. There is a definite need for systematic benchmarking, including visits to peer schools, and a proper engagement with the MBA academic community. The programme director should be given time and money to go to the AMBA, EFMD and AACSB congresses, and relevant supporting events.

4. Scholarship and Research

The School of Business places good emphasis on research. It remains unclear as to the extent to which there is research-led teaching in each module on the programme. Given the relatively small number of teaching staff across the school that we met by the panel it is unclear as to the level of staff buy-in in this regard across the school. There is a need for research leadership at a full professorship level to build up and nurture research teams within the college, which will feed into the MBA programme. There is a need for a review of research areas with a view to building on and investing in existing strengths e.g. in HRM. There were pockets of research excellence, but, outside of these, there was a need for further progress in order to meet international standards.

5. Community Service

The EMBA programme serves the local community around Galway city, but less so outside the locality.

The programme contributes a prodigious amount to the university, with little evidence of how this has enriched academic life within the school and beyond.

5. The Wider Context

The programme has a low visibility in the community of MBAs, and, indeed, outside of the greater Galway area.

6. Key Recommendations

* The programme needs to be properly resourced at the levels of teaching and of administration immediately. Due recognition for the programme director and administration should be given in workload planning.

* The programme needs a proper governance structure. This includes an advisory board, a fully functional programme board, and a staff student forum. Evidence needs to be provided of business input into curricula, and more systematic engagement with business, both locally and regionally, throughout the course.

- * The School needs a proper research strategy for consolidating, rewarding, and building on existing areas of strength.
- * The programme needs a more distinctive identity, and a proper marketing strategy.
- * More attention needs to be given to developing soft skills.
- * The School needs to negotiate a funding model with the University centre that is more in line with general practice in the sector.
- * More needs to be done to promote communication between module leaders, and to disseminate best practice in the programme.
- * An internationalization strategy needs to be developed, and exchange agreements with peer institutions secured.
- * Greater assurances are necessary of masters level learning. This would include the development of a full research dissertation.
- * Accreditation needs to be properly planned and resourced. We would recommend the establishment of an accreditation advisory board.

7. Summary and Concluding Remarks

Firstly, we would like to thank colleagues in the College and the University for their hospitality and excellent logistic organization. The opinions of the panel were based on the documentation supplied, and the paperwork and informal comments supplied on the day.

We met some dynamic and dedicated staff at both the teaching, and College and programme management level, most notably the Dean and the serving and emeritus programme directors, who clearly have ambition for the programme but in order to realise that ambition they need time, resources, and strong backing from all levels of the University. Without this support there is omnipresent danger of a serious quality failure that will bring the school and the university into disrepute.

Professor Geoff Wood (Chair)

Professor Nic Beech

Mr Fergal Broder

Ms Mary Dempsey

Dr Aoife Boyd (rapporteur)

(1st April 2009).

Comments on the Methodology of the Review Process

1. It may be useful if the review board had some time available and had the ability to recall some of the people we had met throughout the process. This would have enabled us to clarify some apparently contradictory statements. Should the review board have the power to “summon” the attendance of key personnel should they deem this important to the process?
2. It would be useful to have a Guidelines booklet for the Academic Quality Assurance Programmes that specifically and solely addressed the review of academic programmes.