

The present is **so** out of

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There's a lot of breast beating and self-examination going on in the South African business school community at the moment. The national authority for higher education is increasing the entry requirements for MBAs, enabling schools to offer a 'professional master's' with a reduced research component. The accepted wisdom is that an MBA should do less in terms of research, allowing more time for 'applied knowledge'.

I'm not sure what my position is on this. One minute I think it's utter nonsense, the next I think it's complete rubbish.

Don't get me wrong, I'm not arguing against the changes to the MBA. They're badly needed. My issue is with the idea that research skills in an MBA are somehow not as 'important as contemporary knowledge'. That's just plain stupid. The contemporary knowledge you gain will get you that first job, of course, but over only a few years it goes out of date. That's why few of the top management consultancies recruit on the basis of an MBA. They look for first-class academic performance in subjects like Philosophy, Political Science, Economics and Mathematics. And that's because they know that the intellectual skills acquired studying these subjects transcend contemporary knowledge of vocational degrees. These skills don't wear out.

In the past two decades, business



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schools have moved from a subject-based syllabus to include 'integrative study' where students explore interactions between, say, Marketing and Finance, or Strategy and HR. It's essential for understanding how a business works.

But it isn't enough.

Senior business people, directors and CEOs are dissatisfied with the general

output of MBA programmes. What they say is interesting. It seems that when MBA graduates are in their early jobs everything's fine. But when they get more senior positions, just below board level, they're not capable of taking part in board-level decisions. That's worrying. For firms and MBA graduates.

As an educator the response is simple, and it is of course the exact opposite of the argument that research (and by extension other critical studies) must be reduced. Far from being a nuisance in an MBA, research, argumentation, advocacy and the other intellectual skills are **VITAL** for progression to a senior level.

This week a colleague said, "We can do something *really* imaginative with our MBA now, like doing common modules with other Master's degrees". No. Let's do something really imaginative like educating business people to think, argue and examine, as well as to do a balance sheet and make a marketing plan as smart as Google's marketing plan. No one else seems to be doing it. USB's well placed to do that. South African business schools must not allow themselves to be captured by a 20-year-old agenda of contemporaneity and 'applied knowledge'. We need thinking skills for the future.

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