



# MBA RESEARCH PROJECT: BARRIER OR BENEFIT?

Is it still necessary to do a research project as part of the MBA? **Dr John Morrison**, lecturer in Research Methodology and senior researcher at USB, takes a closer look.



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**D**o MBA students really have to submit a research assignment? The easy answer is yes, we have to comply because it is a requirement set by the South African Council on Higher Education. Still, many international business schools offer MBAs without the research component. Also, some lobbies in South Africa argue that it is a matter of time before the authorities will be convinced to wave this requirement. Where should we as USB stand in this debate?

The issue around research is not a simple one. For students, the research assignment is this intimidating last step at the end of a very tough MBA learning journey. Having sacrificed work

time, family time, own time, and so much else, they now want to celebrate and get on with their lives. However, ahead remains this task they call 'academic research' – the one final obstacle that so often prevents students from graduating on time, or even graduating at all.

Similarly, academic staff members find research supervision a taxing exercise. It demands considerable attention to individual students. It would be much easier to design more classroom-delivered content for the MBA. Arguably, the burden on lecturers would be less and graduation throughput higher if we are allowed to follow this route.

However, an appetite for easier routes will not determine the position of USB. One has to weigh up the value of the research component >

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more carefully against the anti-research arguments. By looking at the matter from three important perspectives, we find ourselves firmly in the pro-research school.

The first perspective relates to the term academic research, which is commonly associated with research on a master's level. This term alone scares students, especially those who have not done research previously. Students fear this seemingly endless task, an endeavour that they eventually have to present in many pages of writing, called the 'thesis'. Moreover, this text is supposed to be decorated with all the right words in the right places to seek the approval of the academic purist. The terminology so characteristic of research methodology is vast and often deeply philosophical. While some of these research terms have relatively obvious meanings and assist students to make useful choices, others are hard to understand even for dedicated scholars. Students sometimes spend days deciphering terminology simply to include an adequate bouquet of terms to make the 'thesis' sound right. The impression may be created that the research component is merely done to force students to demonstrate academic skills on master's level that are irrelevant in terms of their practical careers.

However, it is possible to take a more pragmatic stance. The skill of research is not confined to the so-called academic research world. Research is an everyday practice of observation or data collection in order to make decisions or solve problems in an informed way. It happens in any organisation, and the demand for research skills are increasing. Organisations have learnt that relying on consultants coming in to implement blueprint, off-the-shelf 'solutions' is not the answer. Standard systems forced upon a situation with its own contextual uniqueness often fail to deliver the expected results. Leaders in organisations need to understand their own contextual environments and the potential mismatches these present to standard offerings.

The ability to ask the right questions about a situation, to decide on the information required to understand the issue, to gather the information and analyse it in a rigorous way, and to develop sound recommendations is a much-needed skill for leaders. Therefore, we firmly believe in equipping MBAs with such skill, which is in effect equivalent to research skills. We also position the research away from purist academic research to more practical-oriented research, without sacrificing scientific rigour. We see the research component of the MBA as a final opportunity for students to experiment and

build confidence in creative problem-solving skills while having someone to guide them.

The second perspective to consider relates to general uncertainty about how to organise and regulate the world into which we are moving. We live in an era in which the relevance of management models of the not-so-distant past is questioned. The capacity of leaders to keep learning and to discover new insights will increasingly become a sought-after skill. Not only will this demand formal research initiatives by practitioners, it will also require the ability to listen intelligently to the information signals emitted from everyday activities, from inside as well as outside the organisation – and to learn from these.

In this light we cannot support a notion that sees the MBA qualification as a box of tools delivered in class. We would rather see the MBA as a foundation sprouting new phases of learning. The MBA programme must instil that capability and desire to learn, and we believe that a substantial, practically oriented research project can help shape the qualities required.

The learning brought about by MBA research also flows back to the business school as important new knowledge. Supervisors sometimes learn as much as students from seeing how new insights emerge from studying practical situations. Several MBA studies have already provided wonderful material for use in class discussions. We live on a continent with unique problems and we cannot rely solely on teaching content and case studies developed in America.

The last perspective relates to USB's accentuation of integrated thinking. We believe organisations need leaders who can rise above the paradigms of their own functional expertise; leaders who can see the bigger picture. On our MBA programme we include more and more opportunities that can give students exposure to problems that span various subject disciplines and organisational borders, and thus integrated problem-solving.

We see the research project as an extension of this vision. Research topics focusing on practical solutions are almost always multi-disciplinary and have to consider interests across, as well as external to, the organisation.

The bottom line: For the USB MBA and other USB MPhil programmes, the research assignment is here to stay. This will not change. But we can all make a mind shift from 'doing academic research' to 'acquiring creative and practical problem-solving skills' which will stand us in good stead for the remainder of our working lives. <sup>a</sup>



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