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Mitchell, C and Lowe, D (2010) A winning approach to Executive Education from Manchester Business School. *Contracting Excellence*, 6. eScholarID:88994 | <https://www.iaccm.com/resources/?id=8122>

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A winning approach to Executive Education from Manchester Business School

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Key points:

- Delivering rigorous and tailored learning in the most recent principles, processes and techniques of commercial and contract management
- Combining the best features of executive education to deliver award bearing programmes for the commercial and contract management community
- Offering flexible, joined-up qualifications: an MSc, a postgraduate certificate or diploma, or a pathway to gaining a specialised MBA

One of Manchester Business School's (MBS) most successful executive education programmes, now in its third year, is the bespoke BP Managing Projects programme. Its success has been attributed to a unique set of features designed to meet the challenges faced by today's leading businesses. An approach that is essential if Business Schools are to survive in the Executive Education market.

When approached by BP to develop an executive education programme in Managing Projects, the University was faced with a challenge: how to combine the best aspects of experiential learning, professional practice, tutor-led workshops, case-based instruction and distance learning for busy senior executives located at different global locations. We knew from experience (CEEBL, 2009) and from the literature that a blended learning approach delivers the best results (Garrison and Kanuka 2004) but when delegates can only be released periodically for short periods of time from their workplace, and you have also been asked to deliver a programme leading to a postgraduate award and a path to a MBA, the challenge starts to look 'scary'.

In addressing this challenge an approach was developed that has now been proven with the BP Managing Projects (MP) programme and subsequently on the BP Engineering Management (EM) programme, and is now being applied to programmes in the commercial and contract management field. It can, we believe, be widely applied to other Executive Education programmes and offers a framework and path for executives through Postgraduate Certificate, Diploma, Masters, and MBA.

MSc. Commercial Management

MBS has delivered an MSc. in Commercial Management for several years. Initially commissioned by BT, but more recently offered to a closed consortium of private sector companies, including Rolls Royce, who have been able to enhance their commercial and contract management capability through the rigorous academic learning of an MSc provided through a world class business school.

Executive commercial and contract management education is about developing individuals with the essential skills and knowledge to support key inter-organization exchanges, who are able to formulate, implement and manage appropriate contracting and procurement policy, strategies and tactics under conditions of uncertainty and rapid change. Skilled practitioners who are adept at considering and accounting for the various interdependent factors that

need to be addressed when they put together new deals and supporting contracts; these include:

- the nature of the transaction
- supplier and client capabilities
- market conditions
- institutional constraints

These attributes are also relevant to practitioners managing the private-public interface, as well as to those overseeing business to business exchanges.

The MSc. in Commercial Management provides a thorough understanding of the key principles of:

- Commercial Leadership
- Reflective Practice
- Market Driven Strategy and Innovation
- Risk Management
- Financial Engineering
- Commercial and Contracting Strategies and Tactics
- Law & Ethics in International Contracting

The course is delivered through an innovative blended learning format, combining substantial face-to-face contact with independent study supported by a virtual learning environment: a flexible alternative to full-time study. The distinctive features of our approach are:

Blended learning

Our programmes are designed around the provocation of ideas. This is achieved by combining a variety of pedagogic approaches, which include: case-based teaching, discussions, experience sharing, group work and individual activity, reflective practice, research, distance learning, reading, literature reviews and analysis, work based application and peer support.

Reflective practice

Experiential learning is a central feature. It facilitates the integration of concepts, theories and practice introduced during formal sessions and through distance-learning into the delegate's working practices. It also provides a mechanism for developing the delegate's competence in real life work situations.

Reflective practice papers are used as a dynamic learning framework to help structure the reflection process around the delegate's current role and responsibilities, including their professional experience to date.

The whole process is about enriching the delegates' current knowledge and experience through structured reflection and clearly relating the codified knowledge discussed in workshops with tacit knowledge of the subject area.

Rich web-enabled tutor and distance learning support

One of the difficulties of Executive Education is the limited time that senior managers can take away from their primary responsibilities. Our programme structures addresses this

directly by incorporating a limited number of short but intensive residential sessions. Delegates on the MSc in Commercial Management, for example, attend a series of eight three-day workshops, based at MBS, spread over a two-year period. The programme, therefore, is not too disruptive to lifestyle and work commitments. Moreover, workshop sessions – as well as being ‘paced’ – are made relevant to the delegates’ professional contexts.

During these sessions and for the remainder of the programme we use web-enabled tools (based on a core Virtual Learning Environment) to support delegates, provide distance learning, access to a vast body of electronic literature via the John Rylands University Library, tutorial support and a ‘community of practice,’ team communications and support facilities. This also encourages delegates to develop an external curiosity in seeking new ideas, and to be less internally focused.

Award bearing and integrated into a suite of learning opportunities

We have found that the inclusion of a formal assessment process provides a clear focus and an additional motivation for delegates. Feedback from participants is that, although initially daunting, the assessment component actually proved helpful and that they found the entire reflective practice process extremely valuable in improving real work situations and their understanding of programme concepts and principles.

Besides obtaining a MSc. in Commercial Management, the flexible learning approach embraced at MBS allows delegates to achieve a shorter postgraduate certificate or diploma. Alternatively, credits gained on the programme can be used to obtain a specialised MBA.

Cross faculty input

Recognising that many of today’s business issues cross traditional functional boundaries, our programmes include significant contributions from other faculties. For example, the MP programme is run jointly with the Faculty of Engineering and Physical Sciences. This ability to offer cross-faculty Executive Education is a real strength of MBS and a direct benefit of having a business school that is part of a major University rather than a stand-alone entity.

Research based but grounded in practical experience

MBS comprises several research centres, for example, it is home to the Centre for Research into the Management of Projects (CRMP). Senior researchers lead the design and delivery of course content, which provides delegates with access to the latest world leading research and thought leadership – something that only a research based Business School like MBS can provide.

To ensure we meet the needs of our client companies such as BP, BT and Rolls Royce, and in order to provide an appropriate balance between original thinking and current practice, we work closely with subject matter experts (SMEs) from sponsoring companies on the design and delivery of our programmes. Additionally, external speakers participate in the programmes to provide additional breadth.

There are also very real benefits to the University of Manchester, Manchester Business School and its academics and researchers: relationships and contacts within participating organisations, insights into their structure and culture, and the potential for exploring future research ideas.

The relevance and ‘freshness’ of our programmes is maintained by a rigorous continuous improvement process based on detailed analysis of the effectiveness of every delivery – we do not believe in a “steady state” for our programmes!

Open access to the Programme

Manchester Business School is delighted for 2010 to be able to open up this highly sort after programme to the wider commercial and contract management community across both public and private sectors.

Key benefits:

- Delegates achieve an MSc from one of the world’s leading business schools without interrupting their career
- The course is recognised by the International Association of Contract and Commercial Management (IAACM)
- Delegates gain immediate practical benefits which they’ll be able to pass on to the sponsoring company
- A self-driven, self-selected dissertation provides the opportunity to undertake a research project on a practical commercial management issue, while also providing a return on investment to their employer.
- Face-to-face workshops provide the opportunity to network with academics and fellow delegates from different industry backgrounds.

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Original Thinking Applied

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