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Post-experience MBAs: The transition back into the workplace for FT students

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ABSTRACT: Full-time students undertaking a MBA experience a number of transitions, most notably from work to study and study to work. Consideration of effective transition strategies may offer insight into improving course structure, design and delivery. This paper explores these transitions using Bridges (2009) three stages of organizational transition as a structure. Initial findings suggest that the Bridges model is a useful approach for understanding the role the MBA plays within the student transition. The period of study can be broadly considered the neutral zone within Bridges model. Course design can be engineered to support the transitions by aligning curricular and co-curricular activity to student career development. Transition design should be incorporated early within the course structure to allow the student space to develop their work identity. For the MBA at the Robert Gordon University making transition activity explicit can help set a context for the 'four pillar' framework and offer a different perspective on course improvement.

1 Introduction

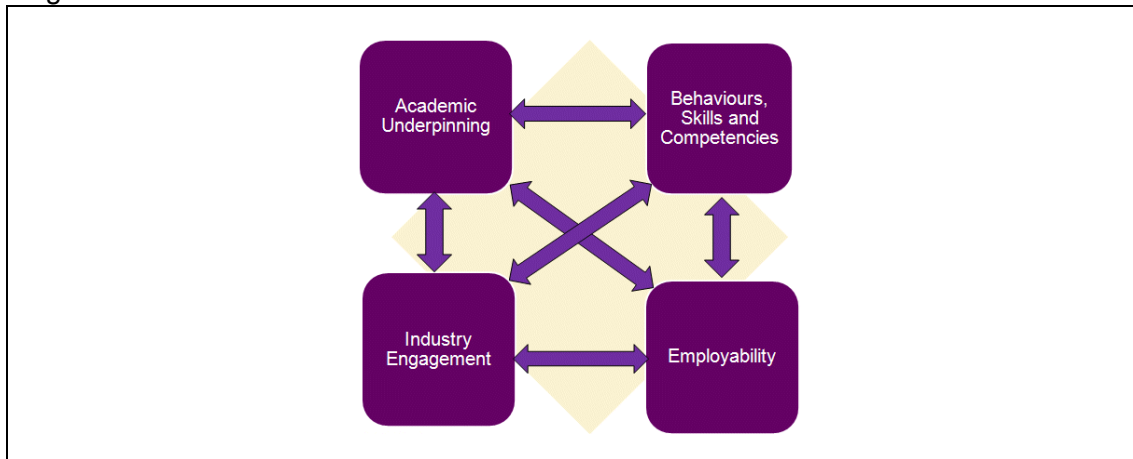
Undertaking a Full-Time (FT) Master of Business Administration (MBA) programme is a high-involvement decision. This is particularly true in the case of 'post-experience' programmes due to a combination of financial, personal and time commitments. From the outset there is a high expectation that participants re-enter work immediately and with improved prospects. Detractors of MBA programmes, including Mintzberg (2004), Pfeffer and Fong (2002) and Schlegelmilch and Thomas (2011), have claimed that MBA programmes often fail to deliver the required levels of knowledge and skills expected by employers. As a counterpoint to this, Bruce (2010) has considered reasons why participants value the MBA experience, while Datar et al (2011) have stressed the need to re-assess the value proposition delivered by an MBA in response to participant expectations. With the notable exception of Andrews and Harris (2009), there have been few attempts to evaluate the impact of postgraduate study on subsequent work experience. This current paper explores the transitional periods that managers experience between work and study and between study and work, building on the work of Andrews and Harris (2009).

2 Background to the MBA

The MBA at Robert Gordon University (RGU) was instituted in 1985. The past five years have been a period of intensive course development. A 'Four Pillars' framework has been used as a guiding principle to enhance approaches to teaching, learning and assessment

and to reinforce and embed course-level learning outcomes within the programme (Sutherland, Russell and Scott, 2013). The four pillars in question are: academic underpinning; behaviours, skills and competencies; employability; and industry engagement (see Figure 1). In 2013, a Course Design Intensive (CDI) initiative, as developed by Dempster, Benfield and Francis (2012), was initiated to accelerate the implementation of the Four Pillars framework.

Figure 1: The RGU MBA 'Four Pillars' Framework



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In order to enhance further course design within the 'Four Pillars' framework, it seemed desirable to learn more about the transitions experienced by full-time MBA students at RGU. We elected to conduct interviews with recent graduates based on a questionnaire informed by research into transitions, career change and work identities.

3 MBA Transition, Liminality and Identity

3.1 Transitions and career change

Bridges (2009) identifies three key stages of organisational transitions: the ending, the neutral zone and the new beginning. He provides guidance on how organisations should support employees through transitions and notes that not all employees in transition will be at the same stage of the journey. A comparable model, for adult career development and counselling, was put forward by Schlossberg et al (1995). The three major stages in their model are: approaching transition, taking stock of coping resources and taking charge. Of particular relevance to our study is the "4S" model developed from the second stage (taking stock of coping resources). This identified the following variables in coping with transition:

- Situation – what is happening?
- Self – what are the differences in terms of personal situation and psychological resources?
- Support – what help is available?
- Strategies – what is the individual's range of coping resources?

3.2. MBA Transition

Muja and Appelbaum (2012) examine the social, cognitive and affective processes underlying career change and, in particular, the thought processes involved in the conscious planning of voluntary career change. Eight stages, highlighting how psychologically

demanding career change is, were outlined by Caprino (2012). These are:

- disengagement from an unsatisfactory work environment,
- dis-identification – reduced identity with career, questioning of past efforts, low self-esteem,
- disorientation – confusion and uncertainty resulting from the decision to change career identity,
- letting go – psychological freedom associated with embracing career change,
- re-engagement – increasing confidence, excitement of novel environment, future-oriented,
- discovery – identification of new career identity, consolidation of the past with the future,
- clarity – fully transformed and ready to apply new knowledge, skills and abilities,
- integration – self-actualisation, developing new career identity through work experience.

This model offers more insight into the psychology of a student passing through the MBA transition and can be roughly mapped onto the three stages of Bridges model: the ending, the neutral zone and the new beginning. At this point, it might be of interest to note that FT MBA students normally begin their studies at the point of 'letting go', 're-engagement' or 'discovery'. For this reason, the focus of our paper is on the latter stages of Caprino's model, from 're-engagement' onwards.

That a number of MBA students develop 'upward mobility tactics' during the period of transition, or neutral zone, to prepare for success in re-entering work was observed by Laud and Johnson (2013). These tactics include individual skills (such as interpersonal, networking, leadership and communications skills) and aptitudes for risk-taking, confidence and work-quality. Their paper suggests that there have been historical barriers to curriculum change and offer some prescriptions and rationale for enhanced soft-skills development that will be valued by those in practice.

From a more generic perspective, Bridgstock (2009) produced a conceptual synthesis of graduate attributes for employability. Her model includes: underpinning traits and dispositions, discipline-specific skills, generic skills, self-management skills and career-building skills. The last she breaks down into:

- being familiar with one's target industry,
- being able to identify effectively and choose the best opportunities for advancement,
- knowing how long to stay in a role, when to exploit a new employment or training opportunity and having the ability to move quickly once an opportunity arises,
- knowing how to apply effectively for and obtain work, representing one's skills and abilities in a way that is attractive to employers or clients,
- creating social capital through strategic personal and professional relationships.

Hay (2006) suggests that MBA learning 'inform[s] actual management practice by facilitating the manager in seeing differently in respect of self, others and organisation'. Kelan and Dunkley Jones (2009) confirmed the transformative importance of the MBA as a rite of passage in the era of a 'boundaryless career'.

3.3 The concepts of liminality

Liminality is best described as a state of 'in-between-ness' and ambiguity with a dynamic situated in time and space together with 'before' and 'after' identities. Liminality, in other words, is a kind of neutral zone. Czarniawska and Mazza (2003) and Beech (2011) provide

useful summaries of the origins of this concept based largely on the prior work of van Gennep (1909, 1960) and Turner (1966, 1977, 1982). Sturdy et al (2006) refer to liminality as 'a fluid and largely unstructured space where normal order is suspended and which is experienced as both unsettling and creative'. The notion of transient, unsettling and creative space is core to work by Simpson et al (2009) in their examination of the experiences of Chinese students on a UK-based MBA.

What the above work suggests is that students studying the MBA degree who seek to change identity, and in particular work-identity, almost certainly will experience liminality. In this context, the MBA experience is a neutral zone. Meyer and Land (2005) explore the threshold concepts that a student may need to overcome to transition from liminality – that is, navigate and move out of the neutral zone. They consider that a threshold concept will:

- have the potential to transform the student's sense of self,
- allow students to integrate knowledge, ideas and relationships,
- be irreversible – any identity transformation will be long-standing and not easily unlearned,
- be troublesome, unsettling, off-putting and incommensurate with the student's intuitive understanding,
- establish boundaries within certain areas of knowledge.

Baillie et.al (2013) attempted to integrate the notions of threshold concepts and knowledge capability in curriculum design. Their work was aimed particularly at “developing graduates' capability to deal with previously unseen situations in their professional, social and personal lives” rather than with liminality per se. Hawkins and Edwards (2015) built on the work of Meyer and Land to examine what they have termed 'managing the monsters of doubt' by drawing on liminality and threshold concepts in the sphere of leadership learning. Beech (2011) and MacIntosh et al (2012) stress the importance of dialogue and reflection as part of the process of identity construction which is central to the process of transforming the student's sense of self. Petriglieri and Petriglieri (2010) put forward the notion that Business Schools should view themselves as identity workspaces, that they should develop management education that goes beyond influencing what managers know and do, and supports them in understanding and shaping who they are.

In an Insead Working Paper, which acts as a conceptual link to the work of Bridges, Ibarra (2007) reviews identity literature and reconciles this with concepts of liminality and transitions. However, it is Warhurst (2011) who brings us back to the thrust of the exploratory research undertaken for this paper. He recommends that MBA education be redesigned to better enable manager-students' identity formation. We apply Bridges model to the voluntary MBA transition in the context of MBA career development, work identity and liminality.

4 Research methods

The exploratory study described here is based on interviews with ten graduates from FT MBA courses (MBA and MBA Oil and Gas Management) completed in 2012, 2013 and 2014. The interviewees were of both UK and international origin and encompassed the range of motivations for undertaking MBA study (career progression, change of work identity, change of sector or industry). The sample was predominantly male, but this is reflective of the gender balance in the MBA as a whole, and reflected a range of organisational hierarchies (supervisor, manager, director). As far as could be established, selected candidates had completed all three stages of Bridges' model.

The Interviews were conducted either face-to-face or on the telephone. The interview questions were structured around Bridges' model and were subdivided into four main sections: 'Nature of the Transition' (ending their old world and starting on the MBA); 'Neutral Zone' (Studying on the MBA); 'The New Beginning/MBA Ending'; and 'New Beginning, New Job'.

5 Findings

5.1 Nature of the Transition (ending their old world and expectations on starting the MBA)

There was unanimous confirmation that the decision to study an MBA was voluntary. When asked about the difficulty in leaving their previous role, there was significant variation in response, reflecting a range of personal circumstances. In setting out transitions experienced by choosing to study an MBA, reflections included the switching of roles from being a transmitter of knowledge to one who receives knowledge. Most responses also included individual context and emphasised transitions in returning to formal learning. There were indications of feelings of loss, including removal from familiar environments (work, social and cultural) and the loss of the ability to earn during the full-time programme.

Given the importance and emphasis in the found literature on 'identity' a series of questions on participants' views of 'identity' were formulated. There was usually strong agreement that the MBA was part of the transition from one identity to another. It was common for participants to recognise and anticipate that change was expected as a consequence of enrolling on the course, and this identity transformation was anticipated and desired by participants. Indeed, it was apparent that most of the participants were distinctly dissatisfied with their previous work identity and that the MBA was seen as the major catalyst to deliver change.

Participants were asked to consider what changes they were trying to achieve and changes in work identity featured strongly in responses along with improved prospects in career and material reward. Other considerations included personal satisfaction, building knowledge and competence, developing thought processes and making a better contribution. Most participants strongly agreed that the MBA had helped them to gain a new professional identity. When asked about the expected scale of the anticipated career transition there was a significant variation in responses. Those who anticipated significant change highlighted the following drivers: a move in discipline expertise (from engineering to management); in professional sector (from financial services to oil and gas); and in management level (from middle to senior management). Those who did not anticipate making a significant career transition pointed to wishing to achieve a similar position in a new firm (with incremental movement up the career ladder). Others pointed to wanting to become more rounded and to have increased exposure to professional activities. About half of the sample identified some major life events (such as job loss, change to family circumstances, challenges to values) as a reason for wishing to change their individual work identity.

There was usually strong agreement that individuals viewed the MBA as a turning point in their career. The extent to which participants believed that they had a clear view of the career which they wished to pursue following completion of the MBA was somewhat polarised with those intending to switch discipline or professional sector claiming clarity in their career direction prior to enrolling on the MBA.

5.2 Neutral Zone (Studying on the MBA)

Most interviewees agreed that the MBA had helped to define a new work identity. Evidence of this was given in a range of positive benefits. These included: building and participating in personal networks (especially when wishing to engage with new sectoral professions); developing knowledge and techniques in managing change; and building knowledge in new disciplines. Several participants identified the importance of networking and claimed that they should have spent more time networking throughout the MBA programme. In addition, the importance of the consultancy project, whereby students undertake a 16-week placement within appropriate companies, emerged as a major contributor to new work identities. These projects are matched to students' stated career aspirations.

Respondents were asked at what point in the course they perceived clearly the work identity they would pursue on completion of the MBA. Responses were wide-ranging. For some, options for a career emerged early in the delivery of the programme. Others were influenced by external corporate speakers. For many, the new work identity emerged during the consultancy project (delivered towards the end of the programme). Those for whom work identity did not change commented that the course provided further reinforcement of these choices and additional motivation to pursue them. One student commented that they were still reflecting on their work identity in a new role some four months following completion of the MBA.

Most participants agreed that they had planned for the transition to work. Most claimed that this planning process started in the very early stages. When considering motivation to manage their own careers, participants agreed that strategic career thinking, and reflecting on their own achievements, performances and attributes were important as was appropriate labour market knowledge. Professional networking was also identified as a useful technique to find and assess potential opportunities. In addition, personal networks and those developed during the MBA were used to seek out and meet people in the line of work that individuals were considering. This had the effect of validating choices (or prompting alternative choices) and acted as a check to affirm or re-affirm the direction of travel. Some also sought and received feedback from their network on how they were viewed.

The MBA programme includes a MAPP™ (Motivational Appraisal of Personal Potential) Test (Assessment.com, 2015) which aims to match personality characteristics and career aspirations. There was usually a positive response to the extent to which this had a value in helping students to understand their strengths and any limitations.

When considering opportunities during the MBA to develop new skills, improve strengths and address limitations, there was a recognition that such opportunities existed, but some interviewees expressed the opinion that additional opportunities would be valued. Some students were vocal in stating that it was down to the individual to assume ultimate responsibility for personal development. There was usually strong agreement that the programme had played an important part in preparation for the initial job and subsequent career development. It was felt that the MBA experience provided the potential to act as a platform for finding work or developing individuals throughout their careers. The provision of networking opportunities was identified as an important aspect of the transition from study to work and it was generally felt the course provided sufficient networking opportunities. However, some commented that some of their peer group did not always recognise these opportunities and their importance.

5.3 The new beginning/the ending of the MBA studies

Did the students feel prepared for the new beginning/end of the MBA? Responses varied. Some students were preparing all the way through the degree programme. Others were 'taken by surprise' on submission of their final piece of course work.

Individuals seeking change in work identity used the project to experience a different work environment. There was usually strong agreement that experiential learning components within the programme helped both the transition and the formation of work identities. However, participants also stated that the time available to develop these identities often conflicted with other priorities of delivering project outcomes and module assessments. When asked about conflicts in being a student and preparing for the world of work, in general, there was no sense that this had been a major issue.

The consultancy project was frequently highlighted as the activity which triggered the sense of moving on to the next phase. When asked what else the programme could do to manage the transition from study to work, several participants declared that this was essentially down to the individual student to take greater ownership. Some participants also encouraged the use of more challenging projects and requiring students to find their own projects rather than these being negotiated with external organisations by the course team on behalf of students. Others identified mentoring opportunities with external organisations as potentially useful transition arrangements.

5.4 New Beginning, New Job

Participants were asked about their work identity in their new job. Most did not feel conflicted in these new roles. They also reported that the transition to the new job was largely stress-free and that they coped well with their new responsibilities. Participants acknowledged the positive and supporting role of the MBA and evidenced this with reference to modules on strategic management, people management and organisational development, finance, accountancy, commercialisation, leadership and consultancy project. In terms of soft skills, networking, behavioural training and working with diverse cultures were also frequently mentioned.

When asked what allowed participants to achieve early impact in their new role, many noted personal strengths, including analytical skills, leadership skills and team working, but they highlighted also specific academic modules, industry experiences and the consultancy project in supporting these.

Some students did not feel prepared for certain aspects of their new jobs - most notably, the increased influence they had. Gaps in practical knowledge, such as tax issues, the day-to-day specifics of running a small business, language barriers and the pace of activity in their new role also came up. Those students who felt unprepared in some way believed the MBA should have covered their shortcomings; others accepted that any course or provider can only do so much.

6 Conclusions

The Bridges model has provided an overarching framework to assist in the structuring of the design of the questionnaire used to surface the findings. In line with Bridges model and more broadly theories about personal change (i.e. liminality, identity change), students go through the varying transitions at different paces and this is evidenced by: arrival on the programme at different states of preparedness and strategies for coping with "letting-go";

changes in perceptions about their future direction through exposure to the “MBA experience”; and competitive behaviour about grades as opposed to focusing on the goal of getting to the next stage in their career. Whilst academic development and a number of interventions in the realms of skills development and careers support are largely delivered on a cohort basis it is clear that each individual is on their own journey. Individual interventions such as: course leader guidance, use of MAPP™ and personal CV support are clearly necessary but not sufficient if we are to assist students to reach their potential in the most effective manner.

At the induction for FT students we have emphasised that they should consider the MBA as their current “job” and that it was their job to get their next job. Our prior work using the ‘Four Pillars’ model as the underpinning philosophy for the MBA has helped us take considerable strides forward in dealing with the student experience holistically. The CDI approach has also paid dividends in developing coherent approaches to module design, delivery and assessment to enable students to demonstrate prowess against graduate attributes expected in the MBA marketplace. The advantage of this current exploratory research is that it has helped us to arrive at a greater understanding of the MBA in terms of liminality and identity change in the transition from being a manager to a manager studying on a FT MBA to a manager with an MBA. Importantly this understanding has been reached through the eyes of the students. The works of Beech (2011), Warhurst (2011) and Ibarra (2007) have been most influential in our conceptual thinking in supporting our next steps to embed transition management into the degree and in turn enhance FT MBA employability.

The centrality of the consultancy project as a transitional device in moving from the MBA to re-joining paid employment was recognised by the MBA Management Team when we departed, some years ago, from the more traditional masters’ dissertation. Facets such as greater independence in learning and acting, work identity experimentation, grappling with real opportunities and problems, managing expectations of multiple stakeholders, building convincing arguments, and putting forward recommendations have all been part and parcel of the consultancy process. This research has identified ways in which we can make improvements to the operation of the module so as to have greater impact on the personal transition and career goal attainment. Given that the research has been exploratory we now want to follow-up this work with a more extensive survey.

An interesting finding that we had not previously considered (perhaps it has been in the realms of “taken-for-granted” assumptions) was the extent to which the MBA prepared graduates for considerable increases their ability to influence situations due to the authority vested in their new role (when compared to the latitude that they had as a student). Whilst notions such as these have been covered in modules such as People Management and Organisation Development, Strategy, and Leadership Communication and Change, the exposure has been perhaps more from a conceptual rather than a practical perspective. This finding is something that we intend feeding back into the CDI approach.

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