



Being different: Ashridge's new MBA

Martin Lockett looks at the experience of redesigning Ashridge's MBA programmes

“” *All faculty were invited to put forward their own proposals for modules in the new MBA, these had to be aligned with distinctive programme-level learning outcomes. No one was excluded, to make it clear that the new MBA was going to be different*

In a global marketplace with around 150 EQUIS- and EPAS-accredited business schools offering MBAs and thousands of other MBA programmes, differentiation is a challenge.

For Britain's Ashridge Business School this came into sharp focus when a 2009 internal quality review concluded controversially that its MBA had been innovative and was excellent but was probably not right for the future. The response was a major strategic review leading to new integrated full-time and part-time MBA programmes, which started in September 2012. This article shares our experience in rethinking the Ashridge MBA and the challenges we and others faced in making it happen.

Stakeholders and design principles

A starting point was to involve many stakeholders in the design. Internally, this deliberately involved existing MBA faculty, others interested in working on the MBA and a few sceptical of the value of the MBA degree. Combined with alumni and others in corporate roles, participative working sessions evolved the principles of a new MBA.

Balancing "knowing", "doing" and "being" was one of these principles rather than focusing on knowledge [Datar, Garvin & Cullen *Rethinking the MBA*, HBS Press, 2010]. This meant building on the strengths of existing programmes and Ashridge's 50-plus years of executive development experience – then going further.

We also benchmarked ourselves against a wide range of other business schools. What had differentiated our 2005 MBA design was no longer so distinctive. At least in their publicity, by 2010 other business schools were making similar claims about such themes as relevance and leadership. The design sessions were clear that we wanted to be different and needed to move quickly to do this.

A branding study reinforced the "be different" theme, which then became a design principle. This was part of attention to detail throughout the design process. For example, benchmarking showed that blue was the dominant colour of MBA brochures, so our old shade of blue went out in favour of aubergine and lime.

The review recognised successes elsewhere in Ashridge that could be used on the new MBA. Our virtual Masters in Management, for example, had developed an online "Learning Zone" that won plaudits from EQUIS and QAA peer review teams as well as the highest student feedback of any programme. Faculty were starting to internalise that virtual did not mean second best – so integrating an online Learning Zone with face-to-face learning became another core principle.

Last but by no means least was feedback from students. As well as reinforcing the need to maintain our distinctive strengths, they were also critical of aspects of current MBAs. They questioned the relevance of hand-written exams and the primarily individual nature of assessments. They wanted a wider personal network rather than just those in their own year cohort. And they wanted more flexibility in when they could start – and potentially have the ability to move between full-time and part-time study if their personal circumstances changed.

Making it real

By 2011, a clear vision with broad support had evolved. Converting that vision into reality became the challenge. Many faculty wanted to be involved but did not have the time to help in all aspects of the design. As a result, a two-level structure emerged: a core design team that focused on the whole with faculty and other working groups on specific topics. Around 40 faculty and staff have been involved.

In doing this, all faculty were invited to put forward their own proposals for modules in the new MBA. These had to be aligned with distinctive programme-level learning outcomes. No one was excluded, to make it clear that the new MBA was going to be different. Some modules had competitive bids from which choices had to be made. Some modules had a single bid that was reviewed and challenged after review by the core team. And one needed a search for new faculty to fill the gap.

The core team developed the vision into more concrete principles that were applied across the whole programme. This covered many areas, two of which are highlighted here: the overall programme design; and the innovative learning approach that permeates the new MBA.

Overall programme design

Embedding nearly all the design principles in an MBA that could actually work in practice was a major task. The outcome, though, was closer to the vision than most believed would be possible. It included:

Networks and diversity: to enlarge personal networks and increase the geographical diversity of each class, full-time MBA students (most from outside Europe) mix for much of the time with part-time (primarily European) EMBA students

Flexibility: with six-month blocks of modules, entry can be half-yearly rather than annually. The learning design has 12 “sequence independent” modules that complement each other and could be studied in any order

Location independence: the MBA can be run in multiple locations, initially at Ashridge, a great reflective learning environment, and in London, a leading business city, as well as the one week International Business Experience

Group and individual: both learning activities and assessment mix individual and group activity, reflecting the reality of organisational life where not all success can be measured individually and you do not always choose colleagues

Disciplines and integration: as well as eight core subjects, there are four integrative modules on embedding sustainability, leading change, managing globally and creating value that integrate disciplines and include live cases

General management perspective: there is always more than enough potential content. The choice was made to reduce coverage of the internals of functions, so detailed HR content has given way to what every manager needs in order to manage people and change

Personalisation: rather than electives based on faculty preferences, the approach is to offer individuals opportunities to choose specific topics in their assignments (usually their own organisation in the part-time EMBA) as well as having full choice over the project work that counts for one-third of the final marks

Masterclasses: run every two months, they provide an opportunity to spend a day with academics and practitioners outside the MBA faculty on current topics, increasingly chosen by students themselves

Professional development: as well as a core “personal impact” module, there is a “professional development” module to help students manage themselves, individuals and teams as well as with an optional “employability” module on post-MBA careers.



MBA/EMBA



Be different. **We are.**

Rigorous. Relevant. Real. **The Ashridge MBA.**



ASHRIDGE
business school

“„ Masterclasses run every two months, they provide an opportunity to spend a day with academics and practitioners outside the MBA faculty on current topics, increasingly chosen by students themselves

Innovative learning approach

A clear learning strategy was set out that would be integral to the MBA. Based on Ashridge research into executive learning as well as experience from the virtual Masters in Management, this strategy was:

- "Knowledge transfer" is online in advance of class sessions
- Face-to-face class sessions are 100% interactive
- Assessment methods reflect what happens in the "real" world
- All learning resources are online.

This meant a significant change from a teaching style where little work other than some pre-reading was done before a topic was covered in class. In the new MBA students will have a range of resources in the Learning Zone that they need to use before a session, including online presentations by faculty giving overviews of the subject.

Face-to-face time builds on this knowledge, developing understanding and analysing key concepts. Application is critical, initially in a "safer" in-house environment, then moving to live consultancy work with real organisations. In addition, assessment was changed from a "one size fits all" style dominated by individual assignments and exams. Now it is more varied, with a mix of group and individual assessment with the style dependent on the module.

This approach can be seen as '4As' as shown in the diagram below: Absorb, Analyse, Apply and Adapt.

In terms of learning resources, the principle is "anytime, anyplace, anywhere" – which was ruthlessly plagiarised from the 1980s Martini advertising campaign. Anyone looking up these old TV adverts on YouTube will find what looks like an iPad on a beach, which is now the reality of the 2010s.



So we wanted students to have access to all that they needed 24/7, at home, work, when travelling or on the beach. As a result, physical books or articles have been almost eliminated from reading lists – which include e-books, articles from electronic databases and Ashridge resources in the Learning Zone. Despite some faculty and librarian scepticism, "anytime, anyplace, anywhere" has been achieved.

What's in the Learning Zone

- Online faculty presentations
- Programme calendar
- Reading lists clicking through to e-books, journal databases and websites
- Other programme learning materials
- Discussion groups
- Study skills – both general and MBA-specific
- Programme handbook and documentation
- Up-to-date feeds of selected news and articles on subject areas
- 'Virtual Ashridge' – an extensive virtual resource library

Challenges and lessons

Developing a new, different MBA has been a big challenge. While most issues have been resolved, some remain – such as integrating recognition for virtual resource development into faculty performance management systems. We will also monitor whether we should move more of the programme to London.

What has we learned that may be useful to others? Seven lessons stand out, though there are many more:

1. Don't be complacent – review your strategy before it gets outdated
2. Spend time developing the vision with a wide range of stakeholders
3. Don't just rely on the old team, bring in new people and new thinking
4. Keep student experience at the heart of design
5. Give faculty freedom to innovate within clear design principles
6. Use a core team to ensure programme coherence
7. Look for synergies in virtual content across programmes.

The result has been a new MBA that responds to the needs of the next generation of MBA students. **gf**

ABOUT THE AUTHOR
 Martin Lockett is Dean of Academic Development at Ashridge Business School