Stephanie Hussels describes how Cranfield uses case study writing as a means of integrating research, teaching, and practice on the MBA course

Case by Case

2006

The year the Bettany Centre for Entrepreneurship at Cranfield School of Management was founded

25

The Business Growth Programme (BGP), going for nearly 25 years is the longest running programme for the development of owner-managers in the UK...

1250

... and to date has helped more than 1,250 owner-managers achieve their business and personal ambitions

The Bettany Centre for Entrepreneurship at Cranfield School of Management was founded in 2006 and named after Tim Bettany, Cranfield MBA alumnus and serial entrepreneur, who endowed a Chair of Entrepreneurship at the School of Management. The Centre has now developed a diverse portfolio of entrepreneurial activities across five broad areas: internationally recognised research, graduate programmes, networking events, technology transfer, and executive education.

This article describes how executive education and graduate programmes have been linked at Cranfield, to the benefit of both entrepreneurs and students. The executive education portfolio, Exhibit 1, covers the entire entrepreneurial life cycle from start-up, growth, to harvest and exit. The flagship programme of the executive portfolio is the Business Growth Programme (BGP), the longest running programme for the development of owner-managers in the UK. It has been running with great success for nearly 25 years and has helped more than 1,250 owner-managers achieve their business and personal ambitions.

Around a quarter of Cranfield MBA students are personally involved in venturing within 10 years of graduation. Keeping this in mind, the MBA entrepreneurship elective covers the entire entrepreneurial life cycle. During the course MBA students are challenged to learn both sides of the entrepreneurial process by evaluating a venture from an investor's point of view, as well as getting first-hand experience by developing their own business plan, which they then have to pitch to real investors at the end of the elective. To enhance the practical aspects of the elective, case studies are employed throughout the course. The cases are based on businesses well known to us. As a consequence, Cranfield entrepreneurship faculty have written numerous case studies over the years (see for examples Exhibit 2). In addition, case study writing has been incorporated on the MBA entrepreneurship elective, allowing students to write a case study and accompanying teaching notes as an alternative to writing their own business plan.

How does it work?

Prior to the elective we identify businesses that have come through our executive portfolio and that might create a good case. Then in the outline session of the elective we briefly introduce the students to the options. Once the course kicks off they have to form teams of up to five students to work on their case study and teaching notes.

Students can also use their own contacts to identify firms and secure company access should they wish. To help them with the process, we run a session explaining the classic structure of a case study and the process of setting-up and writing a case study and the teaching notes. Good writing conventions are highlighted. We also discuss typical issues around entrepreneurship and new venture creation that they might want to keep in mind when thinking about the focus of their case study. Moreover, we ask the MBA students what, in their opinion, makes a case study excellent. These points are collected on the board and kept as a reminder for two workshops where each team has to present work in progress to the whole class. To help the students understand the company background and focus on a core issue, the main emphasis of the first workshop lies on the case study itself, whereas the second workshop requires them to review the theory covered on the course and present the accompanying teaching notes. Exhibit 3 provides some of the questions raised during previous workshops. The students arrange company visits and discussions with the entrepreneur and key company staff to gain all the necessary insights.

Once the case study and teaching notes are submitted for assessment, the MBA teams usually present their final version to the company. Following this, the best student cases are then worked up by faculty before submitting them to the European Case Clearing House (ECCH), academic journals, and case study competitions such as the annual EFMD case writing competition.

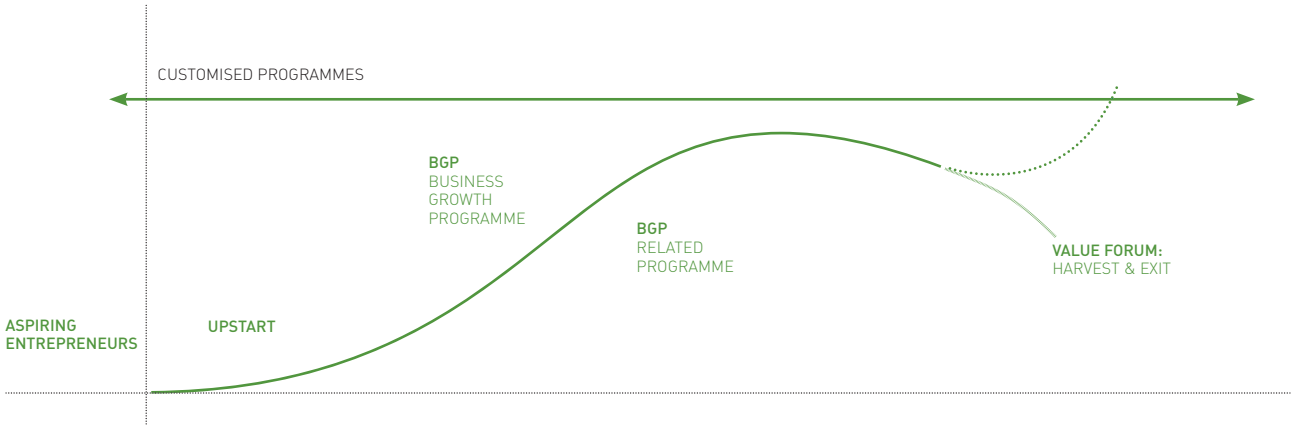

Exhibit 1:
The Bettany Centre Executive Education portfolio

What are the benefits for all parties involved?

Students gain a number of benefits from doing case study writing on the MBA entrepreneurship elective. Researching the company history, structure, and processes and subsequently writing the case study and teaching notes are an excellent tool of testing the understanding of relevant economic and management theory, and connect theory with practice. In particular, the creation of teaching notes requires students to reflect on the important learning points, thereby helping them to understand and assess choices made by the key parties involved and then link them back to the underlying theories covered in the class. With most MBA students coming from a corporate background, case study writing provides them with very valuable insights into the running of an entrepreneurial venture. Moreover, writing case studies and teaching notes forces students to make decisions with the available (most times limited) information, and allows students to step into the shoes of the entrepreneur and discuss 'real' business issues. It enables learning by doing. Additionally, the assessment gives students exposure to another business and provides them with something for their CV, especially if the case study is published in the ECCH or an academic journal. By dealing with the entrepreneur, presenting their work in progress in class during the workshops to gain feedback from other 'customers', it helps students to develop interpersonal and soft skills, time management, and communication.

Even though taking part requires time commitment from businesses – usually two to three visits from the students – the process also produces several benefits for the businesses and entrepreneurs. For example, the businesses and entrepreneurs gain exposure among students to attract talents for the business. In the case of Cobalt Telephone Technologies, Joanna Miller, the lead full-time MBA student, subsequently joined the business and now is the managing director of the company. Once completed, the case study often also creates a good basis for internal training and induction purposes. Moreover, the entrepreneurs are regularly invited back to Cranfield when covering the case studies in the classroom. On the one hand the entrepreneurs feel that they can contribute to education by sharing their experiences with the students, on the other hand through the discussions in the classroom the entrepreneurs gain new insights and perspectives from talking to faculty and students. Businesses that took part in programmes often see it as a privilege to come back and be involved with the school. Tristram Mayhew, 'Chief Gorilla', of the GoApe! company stated 'The Cranfield Business Growth Programme helped me take my business to the next stage. To have a case study written by Cranfield on the business is an honour and has proven very beneficial for internal training purposes'. Also, companies can gain exposure through publications and case writing competitions.

"Writing case studies and teaching notes forces students to make decisions with the available information, and allows students to step into the shoes of the entrepreneur and discuss 'real' business issue

Exhibit 2:
Case studies: participating businesses

In 2002, Robert Brown and David Molian were awarded the EFMD case writing prize for their study of Hotel Chocolat, a *Sunday Times* Fast Track 100 company that attended the Business Growth Programme in 2000. That success was repeated with the IViewCameras case in 2005 and yet again in 2009 with Pacific Direct. In 2009, the case study GoApe!, written by David Molian and Stephanie Hussels, also won the EFMD case writing competition in the category entrepreneurship.

Conclusion

Incorporating case study writing into the MBA curriculum is an excellent way to integrate research, teaching, and practice. It is as such very much in line with the ethos of Cranfield School of Management of transforming knowledge into action. It benefits all parties involved – and it is fun, too! **gf**

> *Case study writing is very much in line with the ethos of Cranfield School of Management of transforming knowledge into action. It benefits all parties involved – and it is fun, too!*

ABOUT THE AUTHOR
Dr Stephanie Hussels is a lecturer in entrepreneurship at Cranfield School of Management, UK.

FURTHER INFORMATION
For more information on the Bettany Centre please visit www.cranfield.ac.uk/som/bettany

Exhibit 3:
Workshop criteria

Case Study	Teaching Notes
What is the history of the business?	What are the learning objectives of the case study?
Is there a core issue or set of issues?	How do these objectives relate to theory?
Does the case study have genuinely alternative outcomes?	Who is the target audience?
Does the case study have enough information available to work through the alternative outcomes?	What is the structure of the classroom session?
Does the case provide a voyage of discovery and even some interesting surprises?	What is the suggested teaching approach?
Is it accurate, unbiased and non-judgemental?	Are there any additional resources for the case study?
Is the case study well structured and easy to follow?	

Persuasiveness of the team
Quality of presentation slides
Others