

# On the right track

Developing an innovative and evolving MBA curriculum

**Ajoy Kumar Dey** explains how the MBA curriculum is kept fresh and relevant at a leading Indian institution



**I**n their renowned article “How business schools lost their way” in the Harvard Business Review (May, 2005) the authors Warren Bennis and James O’Toole warned that business schools are on the wrong track.

Even if the admission processes are getting more selective and pay packages glitzier, schools are facing criticism for failing to impart requisite skills, failing to prepare leaders, failing to instil norms of ethical behaviour and even failing to prepare good corporate citizens. Professor Henry Mintzberg of McGill University in Montreal, Canada, has squarely blamed a not-so-relevant curriculum as the main culprit.

Due to ever-growing diversity among students of management in terms of their educational, social and economic backgrounds, skill set possessed, and career goals and aspirations, curricula reforms remain elusive.

The two major components of MBA education are knowledge and skills. Under the influence of ever-changing external forces knowledge and skill sets become obsolete at a rapid rate. In the next five years about one third of the competencies currently required in an MBA graduate will be replaced by newer skill sets.

By 2020, the Fourth Industrial Revolution will have brought us advanced robotics and autonomous transport, artificial intelligence and machine learning, advanced materials, biotechnology and genomics.

These developments will transform the way we live and the way we work. Some jobs will disappear, others will grow and jobs that do not even exist today will become commonplace. What is certain is that the future workforce will need to upgrade knowledge and realign its skill set to keep pace.

Among the various aspects of management education, the most important is curriculum design. Critics point out that poor design of curriculum is the prime reason that graduates display disregard towards ethics, demonstrate poor levels of interpersonal, teamwork and leadership skills, have limited awareness of as well as concerns about global issues, and display high levels of materialism

and abysmally low concern for others.

How do MBA programmes/business schools ensure that they evolve continuously and remain relevant to the ever-changing needs of students, business and society? How to maintain a curriculum current and relevant? How to evolve continuously in tandem with a dynamic environment? How to meet changing expectations of students, recruiters, businesses, society and all stakeholders? How to communicate the distinctive feature of a programme?

### **Framework for curriculum design**

For design and development of curriculum, my own institute, the Birla Institute of Management Technology (BIMTECH) in Greater Noida, India, follows a six-layered framework based on the inside-out approach (see Figure 1 on p63). The six layers are: General Business Management Knowledge, Master Degree level Knowledge, Skills, Values, Innovative and Evolving processes, and Unique Design of curriculum.

At the core of the framework is the student and his or her learning approach. Depending on the need, capability and motivation, and facilitated by the pedagogy, a student adopts one of the approaches - surface or deep – for a course. A deep approach to learning is considered an appropriate approach as students gain understanding, derive enjoyment from the learning task and apply the acquired knowledge to the real world. On the other hand, a surface approach to learning is inappropriate as students rely on rote learning and memorisation, avoid personal understanding and are unreflective about their learning experience. A life-long learner follows the path of deep learning.

Next is the desired business management knowledge, divided in two stages: general graduate level and specialised for a master’s degree. An institute may follow the modules of management knowledge as devised by AACSB or develop its own. A similar list can be arrived at by benchmarking with competing institutes supported by a literature review.

The bouquet of courses to be covered in MBA programmes (Post Graduate Diploma in Management – PGDM – for institutes not holding the status of a university) is guided by these knowledge components. Appropriate pedagogy is selected to maintain a proper mix of knowing, doing and being.

The next level in Figure 1 displays skill sets. Through regular interactions with industry experts and academia at large, BIMTECH keeps track of desired skill sets. Many organisations such as GMAC and Bloomberg carry out yearly recruiters' surveys and capture the skill set desired in a management graduate. In the Figure 1 the skill set as identified by AACSB for master-level management programmes are shown. Conscious attempts are made to provide students with ample opportunities to hone their skills through co-operative and extracurricular activities.

Apart from knowledge and skills, BIMTECH also wishes to inculcate values among students. Our slogan is "excellence with values". The set of values that we stress are: ethics and integrity; sustainability and transparency; innovativeness and entrepreneurship.

### Concerns in redesigning a curriculum

Redesigning a curriculum raises three major concerns: programme structure; course content; and pedagogical approach.

Programme structure deals with the total class contact hours, number of courses to be covered (split between core and elective courses), distribution of total class hours between various knowledge domains such as economics, quantitative, marketing, finance, OB/HR, operations, communication and information technology, duration of summer internship projects and similar components of the programme.

The content of each course must be spelt out in detailed course outlines that should also contain course learning outcomes, duration of the course, assessment method, cases to be covered and other aspects of course delivery.

Pedagogical approach covers the mix of lectures and cases, components of experiential learnings, self-paced learning modules, flipped classes, synchronous and asynchronous remote delivery of course content and other issues.

BIMTECH believes that improving graduate management education requires creating

specialised management knowledge to match the demands of a more context-specific and technologically advanced knowledge economy.

Experience guides BIMTECH to believe that rather than converting knowledge experts into managers, making managers more effective at managing technologically advanced organisations and personnel may create greater economic value. To create customised and unique graduate management education, the best option is to use stackable educational units and certificates.

### Quality audit

In 2017 BIMTECH conducted a quality audit to check whether the teaching/ learning processes along with the admissions and placement processes are actually taking place as they are planned.

To execute the initiative the starting point of reference was the curriculum development framework as displayed as Figure 1.

Audit firm KPMG was invited to conduct a process audit of admission and placement departments. On its recommendation student evaluation was also included in the scope of the audit. Policy and procedure documents, process flow charts and a list of files maintained by the departments were made available. The managers in the respective departments were asked to describe the process of information flow and decision making. This was compared with the policy and procedure documents. Mismatches were detected and corrective actions were planned.

Challenges faced during implementation were: updating and preparing comprehensive policy and procedure documents; designing rubrics to measure outcome (assurance of learning); and finding time slots to schedule meetings.

### Impact, uniqueness and applicability

Impacts produced by the continuous effort in upgrading the curriculum were manifested by BIMTECH securing the highest level of accreditations from two of the national bodies, National Assessment and Accreditation Council (NAAC) and National Board of Accreditation (NBA), and satisfactory progress towards AACSB accreditation.

Curriculum-related unique steps adopted by BIMTECH are reflected in the admission process by conducting a written ability test (WAT) and personal interview to assess traits such as openness,



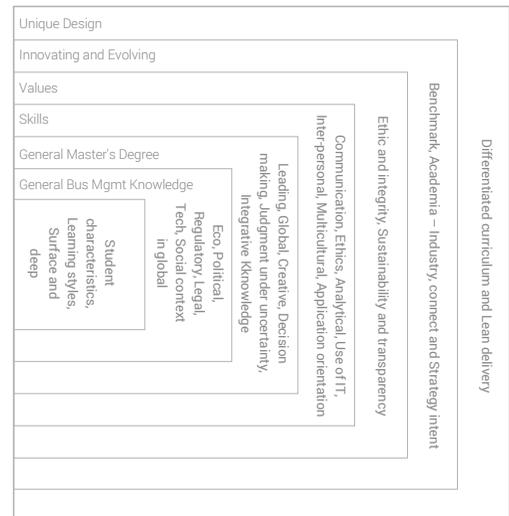


Figure 1



learnability, creativity and communication.

The processes followed in BIMTECH are applicable to any management institute. They are easy to adopt in a faculty- and student-driven environment focused on openness and experimentation and follow a systematic and participative approach to problem solving. BIMTECH is lucky to have created a culture that encourages self-audit and constructive criticism.

**Aligning with input variety**

While the structure and outlines of courses, text books, cases discussed, topics covered and evaluation methods followed are virtually the same in various institutes, there exists high degree of diversity among different institutes in terms of their ability to attract students, faculty, recruiters and deployment of resources, which are largely influenced by the brand and positioning of the institute.

In order to cater to this diversity among the institutes, we propose to add a dimension to MBA/PGDM curriculum design: creating three levels based on the presence of components “knowing, doing and being” and rigour in delivery and assessment

BIMTECH suggests differentiated characteristics of three types of curricula: Immersive, Experiential and Innovative and Evolving.

While the Immersive type of curriculum – that places more stress on “knowing” - may suit an institute that is resource starved and struggling to fill seats, the more resourceful institutes enjoying well-established brands can adopt Innovative and Evolving type of curriculum – that places equal stress on “knowing, doing and being”. The institutes lying in between may design a curriculum that is high on both “knowing” and “doing” and low on “being”. Such a modular structure of curriculum retains its freshness and relevance and flourishes with the progress of the institute.

There are three pillars of building a curriculum that is innovative and evolving: benchmarking with competing institutes; academia-industry connections; and alignment with the strategic intent of the institute.

Finally, differentiation is achieved by focusing on content, delivery, evaluation and feedback. Further, the supply chain of knowledge delivery, skill set building and inculcating values can be made lean by gradual removal of wasteful activities.



**About the Author**

Professor Ajoy K Dey is a professor in the supply chain and operations management area at the Birla Institute of Management Technology in Greater Noida, India. He is the chairperson of the Centre for Management Case Development and editor of the South Asian Journal of Business & Management Cases.