

An illustration of two hands holding a pair of black binoculars. The hands are rendered in a light peach or orange color. The binoculars are positioned centrally, with the lenses facing forward. The background is a solid, vibrant blue. The text is overlaid on the binoculars and the background.

Harnessing disruption – a glimpse into the future

An innovative programme in Canada is showing how co-operation between academia and business can profit both. By **Ralph Eastman**



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There are few business sectors that are not being affected by disruptive technologies in one way or another. From web-based video changing how we access news and entertainment to 3D printing changing the way we design and manufacture products, emerging technologies are transforming the modern workplace.

It is no different for the professional services industry and that's the impetus behind an innovative new partnership between Simon Fraser University's Beedie School of Business in Vancouver, Canada, and KPMG in Canada.

The first program of its kind in Canada, Digital University provides KPMG audit professionals the opportunity to build their skills for the future through specialized courses on the latest advancements in technology and data and analytics, and prepares them for an era of machine learning, artificial intelligence, and other digital advances.

"We're a people-based business and there's been a huge explosion of disruptive technology that is changing how we need to work with our clients in an audit," says Kristen Carscallen, Canadian Managing Partner for Audit at KPMG in Canada. "This technology provides an auditor with far more access to client's data than ever before. To analyse this massive amount of data requires new tools and skills."

Historically, audits were sampling-based and would produce an extrapolated, statistically valid audit result. Now, as new capabilities increasingly allow an auditor to process large amounts of data, all data can be analysed. This now includes more than just the numbers as an auditor now can access and analyse unstructured data, such as e-mails, invoices and memos exchanged between companies.

An audit of the future will run all client data through new audit tools that will flag anomalies and outliers allowing more complex risk assessments.

"This is the future," says Andrew Gemino, Associate Dean, Graduate Programs, at Beedie School of Business. "Cognitive analytics and our ability to work with computers in very sophisticated analytical frameworks are emerging and that's why KPMG is investing in the programme. This is about changing the way auditors think and work. This will help them get there."

SFU Beedie was selected to deliver the programme through a rigorous competitive process during which the school demonstrated its ability to design and deliver the specialist courses to support the auditors' growth.

"This programme is not about learning content, it's about changing practice," Gemino explains. "We are creating an experience for them that allows them to innovate and do it with the confidence of knowing that they have data and analytics expertise. But as important to us is leading that change through the organisation."

Carscallen says that KPMG also sees the new credential as not only a differentiator with its clients but also a factor that will increase the appeal for people to work at the firm.

80

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"This is a big investment in our people," she says. "It is hard to measure the cost of turnover but it can be big. You can't always keep people for their entire careers but if we can keep them even a couple of years longer, it is hugely beneficial for us. This programme is part of KPMG's commitment to invest in our people and develop our emerging leaders. We are really excited about the momentum it will create."

The programme is designed to be completed with stackable credentials in two phases. Participants can earn a Graduate Certificate in Accounting with Digital Analytics in year one and have the option of continuing and gaining a Master of Science in Accounting with Cognitive Analytics in phase two. It is open to qualified CPAs with three to six years' experience in KPMG's Audit Practice. (KPMG and Beedie collaborated on the admission and selection process, ensuring SFU Graduate Studies Policies are followed.)

The programme will integrate four skills dimensions: advanced auditing techniques; data and visualisation skills; statistical and analytical capabilities; and advanced leadership/team building skills. It will teach participants not only technical knowledge in data analytics but also how to combine these skills with critical thinking to derive meaningful business insights from data. The courses will provide a valuable complement to KPMG auditors' core abilities, setting them apart in the industry.

Starting in April 2019, the first cohort of 80 KPMG participants will begin the Graduate Certificate programme, which is largely held on-line, but is also blended with face to face interactions through a combination of interactive online learning through an advanced interface and four in-person teaching sessions, including hands-on use of leading-edge software tools to solve real-life problems.

In both the Graduate Certificate and Master of Science programmes, participants will take five courses, each course delivered over an eight-week period. The final required course will cap off the year in the form of a major project where the skills developed in the programme can be leveraged to provide greater insight and value to clients.

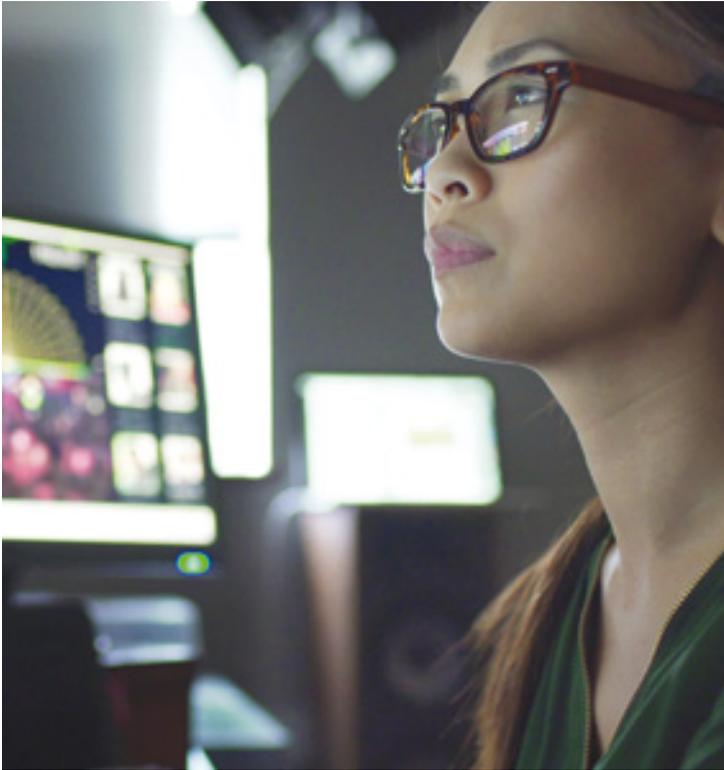


**CERTIFICATE
PROGRAMME COURSES**

- Foundations of Business Systems and Data
- Analysing and Visualising Accounting Data
- Collaboration, Teaming and Leading Change
- Applied Project (year-end)
- Data and Analytics for Auditing Practice

**MSC
PROGRAMME COURSES**

- Data Mining and Business Intelligence
- Predictive Analytics for Accounting
- Fraudulent Financial Reporting
- Applied Project (year-end)
- Advanced Analytical Auditing



“It has been a very collaborative process between Beedie and KPMG in designing and developing the programme,” says Ali Dastmalchian, Dean of Beedie School of Business. “They’ve been a great partner. They didn’t tell us what to put in the course or how to teach it. They shared what the issues are and the applications needed and the kind of people who are going to be in the programme and what the outcomes need to be, all while respecting our abilities on how to best deliver that.”

The collaboration included a needs analysis by SFU Beedie following which Beedie and KPMG worked closely together to develop the process and programme content.

“No one else is doing this in Canada,” Dastmalchian says. “A number of universities in Canada have developed data analytics courses but they are more generic. This is designed to meet a specific need and will be delivered within the company as opposed to on-campus in a full-time programme. KPMG wanted a much more interactive programme for their people that could be taught on their premises and built on their challenges.”

This type of programme is in SFU Beedie’s DNA, Dastmalchian adds. “We were the first school in Canada to develop an Executive MBA programme in 1968. And we’ve had relationships with a number of companies over the years. We have a knowledge and understanding of delivering masters-level courses to companies that address their issues and give their people a broader education.”

Though the programme is only being offered to employees in KPMG’s audit practice, Carscallen sees the potential to expand it to other practices.

“We’ve started in audit but going forward there will be opportunities to create certain electives that would be of interest to our tax and risk professionals,” she says. “There would absolutely be enough flexibility to open this up more broadly.”

For SFU Beedie, this programme is just the beginning of other similar opportunities.

“This programme is a glimpse into the future,” Dastmalchian says. “People are looking for programmes that really have an impact. The ties between industry and business schools are growing closer as we try to meet their needs.

“For example, specialising in particular areas instead of more general programmes and more flexibility in the way programmes are offered. All of these trends are embodied in this programme. The future is merging executive/management development programmes with our degree programmes.”



About the Author

Ralph Eastman is a freelance business author.