



BA (Hons.) Business Management (In-Company) Degree: a programme designed by Nottingham Business School to enhance graduate employability

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Summary

This case study provides an overview of an undergraduate degree programme designed and implemented by Nottingham Business School, which specifically aims to address the notion of enhancing graduate employability. In addition to highlighting the key distinctive features of the degree design it also provides key findings from research undertaken which involved students and graduates of the programme, academic staff involved in the teaching and management of the programme and company representatives that sponsor the 2 year in-company period which offers a unique work based learning experience. Research conducted to date suggests that simply having a degree per se does not secure employment; it is a combination of knowledge, skills and attitudes, developed through the particular design features of the BA (Hons.) Business Management (In-Company) degree, that has an impact on employability.

Objectives

The objectives of this case study are as follows:-

1. To provide an overview of an approach undertaken by Nottingham Business School (NBS) to design an innovative under-graduate level degree programme that aims to enhance graduate employability.
2. To highlight the key distinctive features of the degree design that distinguishes the programme from traditional sandwich degree programmes in the UK.
3. To provide summary evaluative information on the key success factors of the degree to date which have been derived from a range of stakeholders, namely BABM students, BABM graduates, sponsoring employers and academic staff involved in the management and delivery of the programme.

Rationale

The BA (Hons.) Business Management (In-Company) degree (BABM) was designed by Nottingham Business School (NBS) in a direct response to criticisms from graduate employers in the mid-late 1990s that despite a significant increase in the number of graduates entering the graduate labour market, there was a lack of 'quality' in terms of the level of personal transferable skills, which recruiters considered as valuable as a degree, per se, in terms of enabling graduates to "hit the ground running".

Having a reputable history of vocational education NBS considered this to be a challenge worth addressing, hence in 1997, Professor Martin Reynolds, Dean of NBS, commenced the process of designing a Business Management degree that would not only deliver learning outcomes focussed on the traditional knowledge and understanding associated with this wide ranging subject area, but would also have a focus on establishing learning outcomes that addressed skill development and an assessment strategy that would have work-based learning as its central theme.

Context

The BA (Hons.) Business Management (In-Company) degree programme was validated in March 1998, and its first cohort of students commenced in September 1998. The programme

was designed in a partnership of NBS and a small number of blue-chip organisations, including Reuters Ltd, Marks & Spencer plc and British Sugar plc. The principal objective of the programme's design was to develop "*outstanding business graduates whose employability and performance in the work place will be enhanced by a unique work-based learning experience*" (BABM Course Brochure, 2004/5, p2). In essence, the degree aims to produce employable graduates who can "hit the ground running", are equipped with a sound business knowledge and commercial awareness, and have developed a set of strong transferable skills. The programme, therefore, provides students with the potential to develop both their self and opportunity awareness (Malkin et al, 1997) during the unique experience of completing the second and third years of their degree programme whilst based in one of the consortium companies that sponsor the programme (see Stewart & Knowles, 2001, 2003).

Within the University, the BABM course has become the most popular degree in terms of applications per place available; it has the highest average A Level input measure; its design places it out on its own in terms of preparing students for the world of work, which is acknowledged by students, companies and academics, and it involves sponsoring organisations in establishing and reviewing programme policy and procedure for years 2 and 3 via the programme's Corporate Policy and Advisory Group, which meets twice during each academic year.

To date, 77 students have graduated from the programme. In June 2005 a further 15 students will graduate and in the academic year 2005/06 the course will consist of 50 new start year 1s, 28 year 2s and 24 year 3s. NBS decided to increase the intake on the programme in 2005/06 because of increased interest from sponsoring organisations wanting to offer 2-year placements to BABM students.

In summary the course aims to:

- Recruit high quality students onto a unique business degree that will significantly enhance the employability potential of graduates through a programme of integrated learning and work experience.
- Develop students' knowledge and understanding of business and management issues from both a theoretical and practical perspective.
- Develop students' practical business and management skills necessary to be effective in a business organisation with a particular focus on commercial awareness, professional skills and interpersonal skills.
- Develop students' self-awareness and skills in support of their own personal career development and lifelong learning.
- Fully exploit the benefits of a three-way partnership between the Business School, the business community and students.

Description

Students enter the two-year in-company period having successfully completed a full-time first year university business studies programme. During the two years students return to the Business School for four intensive study blocks of three weeks each. The partnership approach to designing the programme led to employers encouraging an emphasis on skills development being an integral part of the curriculum throughout the three years of the degree, with the principal driver being the notion of the "self reliant learner". The course was therefore designed to enable progressive development of students' commercial awareness, self reliant learning, professional skills and interpersonal skills.

Such skills development is facilitated in Year 1 by the taught module *Developing Learning for Business and Management*. In Years 2 and 3, the students have four study blocks (each of three weeks), each followed by a work period that focuses on a skills area:

- *Communication* - in work period 1
- *Team working* - in work period 2
- *Adaptability* - in work period 3
- *Leadership* – in work period 4

Each of these is acknowledged as a key skill area for graduates entering those organisations that sponsor the programme in years 2 and 3.

At the end of each work period, students have to complete a reflective piece of course work that documents and provides evidence of their development in the skills area, and which includes a personal development plan highlighting future courses of action. Each student is assigned a mentor from the Business School and within the company and it is through this support structure that students agree their skills priority areas at the beginning of each work period. The mentors from NBS and the company assess and agree the mark for the students' skills development reports, and provide detailed written and verbal feedback to the students.

From the start, the course's emphasis is on preparing students for future graduate employment with a particular focus on the end of Year 1 selection process, which determines the placement and company in which the students will be based in years 2 and 3. The *Developing Learning for Business and Management* module provides workshops that focus on both study and transferable skills and highlight the role they play in graduate recruitment and selection, with assessment centre type activities (e.g. competency based interviews, negotiation exercises and group problem solving activities) playing an important feature in the reflective learning approach that not only underpins this module but also the skills process highlighted above in years 2 and 3. Additionally, taught inputs from the university's Careers Service on career planning, CV preparation and competency-based interview skills assist in preparing students for the rigorous selection practices that they will face at the end of Year 1. The fact that students experience, early on in the degree programme, a range of employers' selection procedures and practices in order to secure a placement for years 2 and 3, helps reinforce the learning, and the emphasis that graduate recruiters place on transferable skills.

Evaluation

In 2003 a course review was undertaken by the Programme Management team, with the principal aims of investigating stakeholder perceptions of the positive and negative aspects of the course from a design and operational perspective and to gather views on how the course could be improved. Stakeholders included: graduates from cohorts 1, 2 and 3, students who were currently enrolled on the programme in years 2 and 3, academic members of staff involved in module management and delivery across all 3 years, academic mentors and company representatives. Students on the first year of the programme were excluded from the research because of their limited experience of the programme at the time the research was conducted. The evaluation methods included 12 focus group discussions:-

- 2 with current students,
- 2 with BABM graduates
- 3 with academic members of faculty
- 1 with company representatives who also act as mentors
- 3 with academic mentors
- 1 with course management and administrative staff.

The focus groups yielded three key themes: perceptions of employability, the degree as a fast track to a good career and the importance of skills development in securing a job upon graduation.

Employability

Graduates and students felt that they had a distinct advantage over standard graduates entering the labour market, which included traditional one-year sandwich graduates. The BABM experience was valued as enhancing employability in the graduate labour market. These opinions were further supported by the company mentor focus group where one company mentor stated that the BABM students “*grow up much quicker*” and further claimed “*BABMs are more marketable*”.

Fast track to a good career

A key aim of the degree is to enhance graduate employability so that upon completion of the programme students will be able to “hit the ground running” and be suitable for management level positions in a relatively short time. The graduate focus group said that the two-year in-company period “*makes the course different and enables progression to the world of work much faster than most*” (BABM Graduate, Cohort 2). A similar perception was evident from all the graduate and student focus groups who felt that two years’ worth of company experience would lead to a robust CV at the end of the programme, thereby enhancing both employability and faster career development and progression. Research on BABM by Bateman (2003) established that 14 out of 22 respondents had secured a management role within 1 or 2 years and 16 out of 22 rated their jobs as being typically associated with someone with more experience than a relatively new entrant to the graduate labour market. In terms of progressing careers quickly 9 respondents had been promoted since graduation and 13 were aware of opportunities to be fast tracked and/or promoted in the near future. Such claims were supported with statements such as “*there is a 5 year plan for me to become senior management if I stay with the company*” and discussions around early exit from a graduate scheme was claimed to be “*due to my previous experience which will constitute a fast track into a more senior management position*”.

Skills development

The graduate focus groups linked the skills development process with the design and delivery of the programme and saw the process as a vital component that helped prepare them for future interviews and performance reviews in their employing organisations. To quote a third year student, it provided “*good feedback, with continual assessments all being useful for graduate schemes*”. (BABM Student, Cohort 4).

Similarly, year 2 staff and academic mentors considered the process to be supportive of future company performance management systems, and a BABM graduate from Cohort 2 claimed “*since graduating I have better interpersonal skills, self assessment and commercial understanding than other graduates in the company. This is noted through appraisals*”.

This emphasis on the role of skills development playing a key role in graduate employability was reinforced by a company Resourcing Manager (Bateman 2003), who said that BABM graduates have a direct advantage over both standard and sandwich graduates and are more employable and linked their success in particular to the emphasis placed on skills development within the degree programme.

Discussion

Reviews of the BABM programme to date suggest that it is not simply having a degree that secures employment; it is rather the combination of knowledge, skills and attitudes developed through particular design features of the degree that has an impact on employability. Additionally, evidence suggests that BABM graduates secure positions and promotional opportunities traditionally associated with graduate jobs and careers. This is not common for all graduates (Pollard, 2004) and so it seems reasonable to hypothesise that the BABM degree affects the quality of employment as well as straightforward employability. This is, at least, the perception of BABM graduates.

This latter point has some connection with the notion of careers. Many employers involved with BABM engage with the programme in order to identify and develop candidates for their graduate schemes, or graduate-related roles. In that sense BABM is perceived to be the start of a career development programme. Perhaps the idea of a long-term career, and indeed that of the internal labour market, is not entirely dead. From the course review it seems that many employers, students and graduates still operate with a traditional mindset in relation to “careers”: a relatively high proportion of graduates remain with their sponsoring organisation, and significant numbers experience promotion in a relatively short time. To date, Rolls-Royce plc, a major sponsor of the BABM programme, has an 80% retention rate and British Sugar plc, a 100% retention rate. These high rates could be attributed to the perceived high investment by sponsoring employers in the education and development of BABM students. Some graduates and company mentors have said that the degree effectively prepares individuals for company-based competency frameworks and performance management systems. It may be the case that such preparation and matching predisposes both graduates and employers to continue their employment relationship.

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