

DISTINGUISHED EDUCATION EXCELLENCE AWARDS

Category: Collaborative Excellence Award

Case Study of the Team-Based Initiative

Title: Insights from team collaboration in the co-creation of an effective leadership and management development programme: The Mini MBA

Summary: *This case covers the effective teamwork and resultant impact created in the design, development and delivery of a Mini MBA course for Axiom, a world leading legal services provider.*

Approach

Colleagues in the Department of Management Leadership and Marketing, Department of Accounting, Finance and Economics, Business Institute, Centre for Flexible Education (CFE), the Library Resource Centre and the Business Engagement Unit worked together in partnership with the company. In total 11 people formed the team (8 internal cross department members and 3 company representatives (the Training and Development Director, the Vice President of Europe and America).

This was the first time such a diverse team had been formed and the members had never worked together in co-creation of an innovative new initiative.

The company required management skills' development across their global divisions and wanted to have selected 'talented' participants from across the globe (15 at a time) undertake the programme with the aim of upskilling their future leaders with the latest applied management thinking, underpinned by world class theory.

The company met with the internal team to outline their management skills requirements. Internally, a team lead (TL) was appointed. The sessions were underpinned by **Ulster's Integrated Curriculum Design Framework (ICDF)** and the team leads internationally published research into collaboration. The team lead facilitated an initial brainstorming session with all stakeholders using innovative **design thinking techniques**, in association with whiteboards, post its and general discussion (akin to the Contextual Research and Analysis and Stakeholder Engagement stage of the ICDF). The overseas team members used video-conferencing to be part of the initial discussions.

Key management themes developed through the application of a thematic coding approach. Refreshingly, these themes largely mapped to our current MBA programme.

The company held focus groups with the selected students in partnership with the TL to get feedback before, during and after the programme delivery. This was shared by the TL internally.

The mini MBA was formed comprising a five-day introduction to the latest management techniques across a range of topics, such as leadership, finance, innovation and strategy. The major benefits were the 'taster' and CPD elements of the programme which had the potential to be a pathway to the full executive MBA on completion.

Several roles were created by the team lead. Teaching Team (TT), Library, CFE and company liaison (CL). The

The teaching team comprised four internal team members across the topics. The TT firstly created individual content in line with the wider stakeholder discussions and then had bi-weekly meetings to share notes and

themes to ensure continuity and cohesion across the modules. The TL chaired these meetings and a member of the TT was appointed the CL. The TL and CL met bi-weekly to ensure appropriate content and the company provided relevant applied details to enrich the applied content. Our Faculty Librarian took responsibility for delivering support for research skills development and used innovative Nearpod software to reach international participants to assist with coursework completion once international participants returned home. Our CFE colleague was responsible for administration and enrolment (i.e., getting students registered, creating student cards, examination board management and completion certificate).

A *WhatsApp* group was created by the team to quickly address issues or challenges or share ideas as they arose. Similarly, a VLE discussion group including students led to instant feedback and feedforward.

What was done:

Rationale

A central aim of Ulster University's 'Five and Fifty' strategic vision, (2016-2034) is to ensure *"our educational experience will transform lives, develop skills, raise ambitions and prepare future leaders..."*. Inspired by this aim and the Teaching and Learning Strategy mission (2018/19 – 2023/24, p2), aiming to achieve *'An excellent student learning experience delivered through inclusive, relevant programmes and curricula'* the Mini MBA team was formed.

Engaging students as partners (SaP) in higher education has the potential to radically transform the relationship between students and staff (Healey, Flint, & Harrington, 2014; Marquis et al, 2018).

This co-created educational approach challenges traditional assumptions and as the product development outlined in section 1 demonstrates, 'makes way for respectful, mutually beneficial learning partnerships where students and staff work together on all aspects of educational endeavours'. (Matthews, 2017b, p1).

In pursuing this vision, Ulster University Business School (UUBS) has the ambition of being the leading provider of entrepreneurial education in the UK, with an innovative approach to developing non-traditional courses by working with collaborators. Throughout our teaching and learning activity, the aim is to maintain an appropriate balance between academic rigour, vocational expectations and professional and personal skills development, to prepare students for future careers and/or for further career development.

In the case of developing and delivering this particular course, the programme was designed to enhance the skills of practicing managers and lawyers so they could perform better in their work. For the client, Axiom, their ambition of attracting, developing, motivating and retaining staff was achieved.

Motivation and aims:

UUBS are embedded within the local economy through a range of networks, associations, and knowledge transfer initiatives. Our networks established that there was increasing demand for bespoke innovative bitesize courses and that traditional undergraduate and postgraduate offerings were not necessarily meeting the management and leadership development needs of these organisations. Organisations are so intensely busy they simply don't have time to permit staff to leave their organisations for large periods of time. Further, they needed programmes that provided instant value that could be embedded into the organisations without making a significant upfront financial investment. Further, in the legal industry, lots of their legal staff are agency staff, part time, or on zero hours contracts. Axiom are seeking to transform their approach and to recruit greater numbers of full-time staff with a training and development pathway. They viewed the Mini MBA as being a key product to add competitive advantage into their business and also to retain and develop staff.

The programme has led to the company increasing its retention figures and increased culture of innovation and leadership. Internally, staff liaised across departments, and engaged with relevant international research, industry bodies, and the company to develop the content. The benefit of this is to be able to bring together agile teams who can use their expertise to deliver innovative solutions within tight timeframes.

Implementation:

An outline of how the team carried out the initiative, the approaches you adopted. What professional knowledge did you draw from to underpin your approach?

Genesis

From the outset of this project inter-university collaboration was evident as the School of Law and UUBS identified a potential client. The School of Law had worked with Axiom and noted that there was a potential need for leadership and management development. This information was passed on to the Business Engagement Unit team who arranged to meet with the Global Head of Learning and Development at Axiom.

After an initial discussion, which identified the need for generic business, management and leadership skills, the next step was to organise a meeting with an appropriate academic member of staff. This meeting established the general scope of a potential programme and the ability of UUBS to deliver what was required.

Co-creation

The next step was to invite all the key stakeholders into the room, this included senior members of the Axiom leadership team and a cross-faculty team of academic subject experts from UUBS.

External teamwork and collaboration

This team began to formulate the content of modules via creative design sessions and round table discussions. These sessions distilled content to meet the company objectives and using the course team expertise to establish the most appropriate academic input to meet the client's needs. By the end of the session the overarching aims, objectives and rationale for the proposed programme, namely:

- Delivery of a bespoke course to provide an overview of business and management practice and theory to practicing legal services professionals
- Teaching of the course contextualised through the lens of Axiom and their industry
- Modules to be taught on University premises
- Course content was outlined
- Course to be credit bearing

Specific learning outcomes / objectives established were:

- 1/ Students should develop a practical understanding of key business models and techniques across the range of topics, informed and underpinned by research informed learning and teaching;
- 2/ Students should become more self-aware and reflected on their own personal development journey;
- 3/ Students have the opportunity to network within the group and build positive future relationships and collaborations;
- 4/ The outcomes of the course should benefit both the individual and the sponsoring organisation.

Collaboration

This phase would be underpinned by the Ulster University's Curriculum Design Principles, whereby:

"The purpose of the principles is, through the curriculum and delivery of courses, to engage students in high quality learning experiences through learner-centred pedagogies and research-led teaching, which prepare graduates to

excel in a diverse and interconnected global society, and to advance the region's cultural, social and economic development"

Ulster University Student Learning Experience Principles, 2018

Delivery

Cross University teamwork and collaboration

As well a collaborative team approach to developing curriculum, UUBS worked closely with other university departments to ensure that the course could be administered and delivered in the flexible way requested by Axiom. It was determined that the course under development fell outside the 'normal' curriculum offering and therefore UUBS staff collaborated closely with colleagues in the **CPD unit** to ensure that the programme was accredited, administered and examined to university standards and that the student experience through application and registration was excellent.

The Faculty Sub-Librarian from the **library** was asked to deliver a workshop to the Axiom students about referencing and navigation around the various business databases and learning resources, which was invaluable to those learners who had not been in education for some years. This helped develop the students' information and research skills in preparing them to successfully complete their coursework. The workshop was arranged with Axiom's Learning and Development Department using their video-conferencing facilities with Belfast-based students in attendance as well as students from countries such as Poland and USA.

The initial session was focussed around their assessment and was interactive in nature using the Nearpod software to introduce elements of polling and quizzes to test student understanding during the session. A library exercise was developed for the session so that the students could start putting into practice straightaway what they had learned exploiting the extensive online information resources available to support their research. Following very positive student feedback, the workshops have subsequently been run for each new cohort completing the mini-MBA. To further support the students undertaking the programme a library website has been developed in collaboration with academic staff and Axiom's Learning and Development Department. The tailored website was promoted to all of the students as a reference tool in starting out in their research and includes useful information to relevant library services and resources, information on specific support for off-campus students and has some short user videos and practical exercises in interrogating key online resources.

Other innovative technology was used to support students post course, for example support for assignments was provided via Skype electronic town meetings as some of the students were based outside the UK.

Successes and lessons learnt:

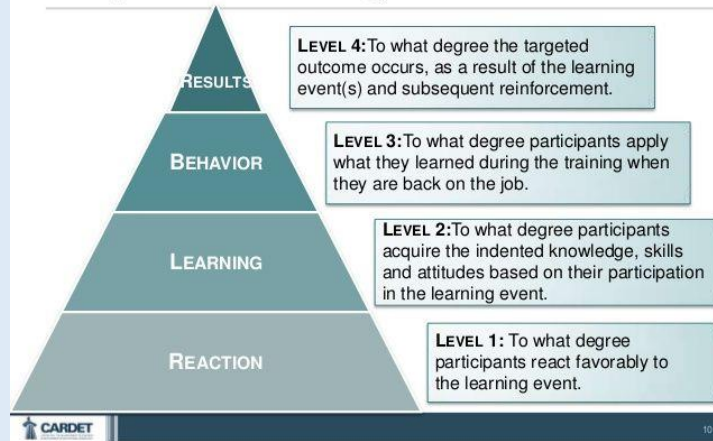
Reflect on what worked well for the team, any particular challenges faced and how these were addressed.

Comment on the approach taken to evaluation and understanding the impact and effectiveness of the initiative described. What did students think about your approach? Include evidence to support your understanding of its effectiveness.

Please also say if you are planning any changes or further developments.

The team led approach to developing this course required time to manage and co-ordinate but was ultimately successful with the clients requesting the course to be delivered to more staff. We utilised Kirkpatrick's Training Evaluation model (see below) for evaluation and feedforward changes into the subsequent cohort.

Kirkpatrick's Training Evaluation Model



This feedback from the the senior leadership team within Axiom, as part of this evaluation endorsed our content and approach. The company's Global Learning and Talent Director, Davy McAlinden, commented:

"This pilot has been truly amazing. I have never felt a buzz like it in all my years being in people development. The guys who undertook this programme have come back into their functions and their enthusiasm has been contagious. The senior team are so impressed with the attitudes, learning and applications of learning that 'THEY' all want to go on it too. The application of the learning cross functionally and cross site has been incredible. We can visibly see the culture changing to one of innovation and teamwork. The only negative – but it's a nice negative - is how I can stop the tsunami of interest. We advertised the programme for next year - with 25 places - and within 3 days we have 87 who want to go on it!!"

Table 1: Feedback Summary Table from Pilot**Student Feedback (indicative qualitative comments)**

Senior Leadership should sit in some of the future classes. I think that diversity will bring great dialogue and a better perspective on Axiom (big picture).

Thank you for the chance to be part of the pilot :)

I LOVED the innovation day and think it was so relevant to Axiom and invigorating our culture. I felt the level of the programmer across the board was spot on - stimulating and thought provoking without requiring any reading or study outside to be able to follow.

Managing People was transformational for most people, because it was so universal and changes thinking

Think the team building alone was invaluable. I feel I have forged fruitful relationships with our visiting team members from Chicago and Wroclaw - and would LOVE to see us extend this out and offer folks outside delivery the chance to attend. I think if we also had some people from Sales, Practice Management etc join in we could develop some really interesting perspectives and synergies in the classroom, and more importantly take those relationships and nascent ideas out into Axiom as well.

Enjoyed having interaction with different Axiomites across different team to hear their ideas and issues.

Great opportunity to interact with people from different regions and areas of the business. Provided excellent investment in our high-performance employees

A video of the process, insights from key stakeholders and the ‘graduation’ of the first Mini MBA is below:

[Mini MBA Video. Click to follow.](#) (Also found by typing ‘Axiom Mini MBA’ into YouTube).

The key challenge was around the size of the team and given each day was one or sometimes two tutors (one teaching am and one teaching pm), ensuring coherence and consistency both within and between the days was key. Our outlined approach and techniques early of regular meetings, useage of innovative online communication methods (VLE, WhatApp groups, Online discussion groups) really assisted.

Further, 5 days is very intense for students, so our approach of 3 days and then the weekend off and a further 2 days worked well. We also positioned accounting on the 3rd day (Friday) to allow students to digest this type of material over the weekend.

Impact and Results Section

A relationship and environment has been created whereby the client can provide open and honest feedback to the course team in order for future delivery of the course to be contently changed and improved reacting to changing company and environmental circumstances as well as feedback on content and delivery in the classroom.

The proof of the impact is in the fact the company are now in its third year of this programme, and a selected 4 from each cohort (fully paid by the company) has enrolled on the full Executive MBA (circa £13,000 each Non MASN income). In addition, internal approval with a pathway from Mini MBA (15 credits, to PGCert, to PGDip to MBA) has been approved for delivery in the US for this company, with a projected value of close to £1 million in Non-MASN over 5 years.

Since this programme has begun, it has now spread to Dublin also with 30 students due to undertake this course in April of this year, and a further 40 due to undertake this course at a local technology company in March of this year.

Transferability:

Is this practice transferable? Have you shared your experiences with colleagues? What would your advice be to others thinking of adopting your approach? Do you have any evidence of colleagues adopting your approach?

Reflection

Reflecting on the successful creation and delivery and ongoing development of the Mini MBA has been a number of team collaborative efforts:

1. Inter-faculty collaboration between the School of Law and UUBS to identify a prospect
2. Collaboration between Axiom and UUBS to establish organisational need
3. Inter-faculty collaboration to develop the idea
4. Inter-UUBS department and course team (with Axiom) collaboration to build curriculum
5. Inter-University department collaboration to ensure the course is administered and managed effectively
6. Inter-course team collaboration to deliver the course

This model of collaboration and co-creation has since been used for the development and delivery of other courses for clients, for example work with InvestNI to develop a series of modules on Clusters, First Derivatives to develop an MSc in Global Capital Markets and Kainos to develop a PgCert in Executive Leadership.

The ability to identify potential business and work flexibly with subject experts and support staff from the wider university allows the team to meet the needs of clients that were not met through traditional 'off the shelf' course offerings and we envisage that this approach will continue to be used to develop new business.

Further information:

e.g. links to website or publications, materials used, presentation slides, screen shots, testimonials; a couple of quotes from students or staff illustrating the case study would be particularly useful

Please see above narrative for links and quotes from students

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Coverage in Belfast Telegraph

UU Business School and Axiom pilot mini-MBA

Ulster University Business School has launched a 'Mini MBA' programme in partnership with American legal firm Axiom.

Designed to complement the company's "Developing Leaders" curriculum the first cohort will comprise 15 of Axiom's 'talent pool' from the local office in Belfast as well as their offices in Poland and Chicago.

"We are already engaged with Axiom in Belfast providing financial and legal 'continuing professional development' training," said senior lecturer, Dr Trevor Cadden.

"This concept began with a blank page where we co-designed a programme that focused around Axiom's key talent and how they could be equipped with the requisite



Dr Trevor Cadden, left, with Jean Mashalla, director of US projects, Axiom Chicago and UU Business School executive dean, Prof Mark Durkin

skills to lead and manage the exponential growth the company is undergoing. From these joint design discussions, the 'mini MBA' concept was borne.

Davy McAlinden, Axiom talent and leadership development director added, "Axiom Law is the leading provider of

tech-enabled legal services to some of the largest companies in the world. Our Belfast Centre of Excellence has grown from 6 to 250 staff in the last five years, and is now a market leader attracting some of the brightest, most innovative and creative minds in the legal industry."

Coverage in the Newsletter

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Upskilling future business leaders

ULSTER University Business School has launched a programme to help develop the skills of future leaders.

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Davy McAlinden, Axiom Talent and Leadership Development Director added, "Axiom Law is the leading provider of tech-enabled legal services to some of the largest companies in the world.



Dr Trevor Cadden, Senior Lecturer in Operations Management, Ulster University Business School; Jean Mashalla, Director of US Projects, Axiom Chicago; and Professor Mark Durkin, Executive Dean, Ulster University Business School announce the Ulster University Business School and Axiom pilot Mini MBA.

15 on-line interventions and 6 management and leadership programmes. The Ulster University/Axiom mini MBA is our flagship programme.

"Axiom is very committed to developing our future leaders, but like all businesses realise that not everyone has the time to complete a full Executive MBA. We discussed this challenge with Dr Trevor Cadden and his team in the University's Business School, and key topics across around leadership, strategy, finance and innovation. The mini MBA will give our leaders the skills, attitudes and behaviours to succeed in this environment and will ensure we have the best leaders who will help us enhance the growth of Axiom and prepare for the future in what is a fast-changing environment."

Our Belfast Centre of Excellence has grown from 6 to 250 staff in the last five years, and is now a

market leader attracting some of the brightest, most innovative and creative minds in the legal

industry. "Axiom's Global Learning and Development is based in Belfast.

We offer our employees a sector leading training curriculum which has over 25 short courses,

Coverage in Sunday Life



Design Thinking with the key stakeholders



The 'inaugural' Mini MBA cohort (from 3 continents).

Ulster University | The Library

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Mini-MBA (Axiom): Welcome

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Library Support for Mini-MBA (Axiom)

axiom

The Library offers a wide range of services and resources to support you in your studies. Some of the most important ones are described on this dedicated library website.

Most importantly though, if you need any help or assistance in finding, accessing or using our electronic information sources then please contact your subject librarians:

Gerard McFall: tel. 02890-068144; g.mcfall@ulster.ac.uk

Sarah Smyth: tel. 02890-066111; s.smyth2@ulster.ac.uk

Ulster University Business School Subject Librarians

Ulster University Business School Subject Team

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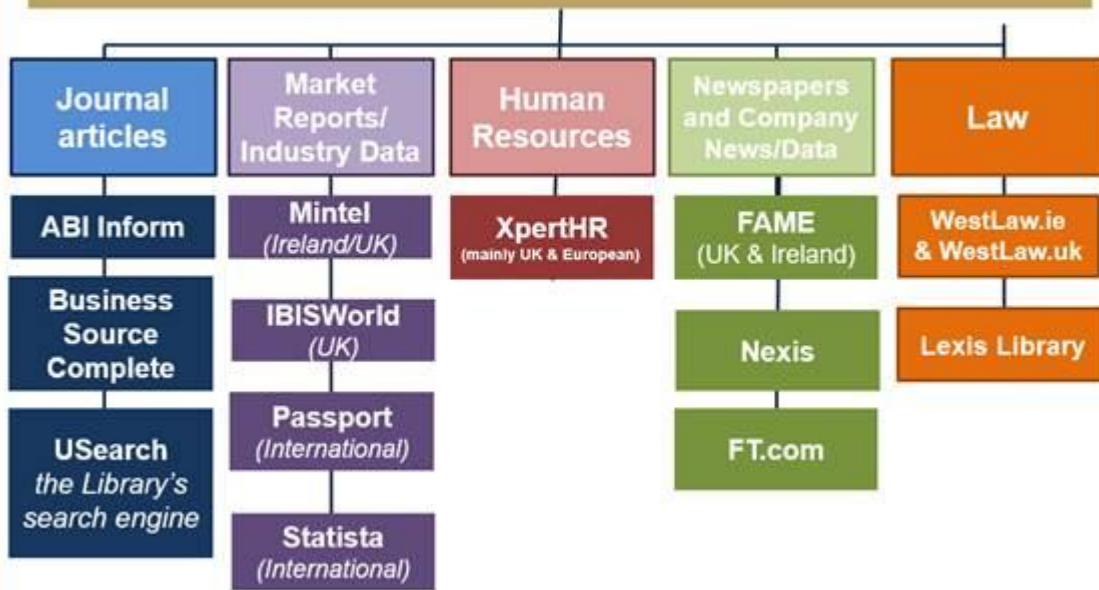
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Useful Business/Law databases – Axiom Research



Learning Resource Centre technologies employed