

ULSTER UNIVERSITY

REPORT OF A MEETING OF THE EVALUATION PANEL: MSc STRATEGIC GROWTH

25 January 2019

PANEL:

Dr D Barr, Head of School of Education, Faculty of Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences, Ulster University (Chair)

Ms E Greer, Lecturer in Diagnostic Radiography, School of Health Sciences, Ulster University

Professor G Maas, Director of the International Centre for Transformational Entrepreneurship, Faculty of Business and Law, Coventry University

Professor K Trehan, Professor of Leadership and Enterprise Development, Department of Management, University of Birmingham Business School

CHAIR OF THE COURSE PLANNING COMMITTEE:

Professor P McGowan, Department of Management, Leadership and Marketing

HEAD OF SCHOOL:

Dr D Cummins, Department of Management, Leadership and Marketing

IN ATTENDANCE

Mr B McArthur, Academic Office, Ulster University

1 INTRODUCTION

The Panel met to consider approval of new proposal, MSc Strategic Growth, brought forward by the Department of Management, Leadership and Marketing.

The programme would be delivered in part-time mode only on the Jordanstown campus. It comprises five compulsory modules, four 30-credit point modules and a final 60-credit point project module. A Postgraduate Diploma Strategic Growth exit award would be available. The programme would be delivered over six semesters across two calendar years with one 30-credit point module delivered per semester and the 60-credit point project module delivered over the final two semesters.

The first four 'taught' modules would be delivered by way of 4-day teaching blocks. A company-based half-day workshop designed to "enhance, reinforce and apply the participants' learning to their business context" would be scheduled to follow each teaching block. At the outset of the programme, students would be organised into small action learning sets averaging four members. The group would remain together

throughout the taught element of the programme. Where possible, each workshop would be held at a group member's business premises. The first module, *Strategic Orientation*, would be undertaken at Babson College, Massachusetts.

2 DOCUMENTATION

The Panel received the following documentation:

- Agenda and programme of the meeting
- Guidelines for revalidation panels
- QAA Characteristics Statement for Master's Degree (2015)
- QAA benchmark statement for Master's Degrees in Business and Management (2015)
- QAA Enterprise and Entrepreneurship Education: Guidance for UK Higher Education Providers (2018)
- Central University department reports on Library and IT resource matters
- Preliminary comments from panel members
- Programme documentation

The panel met initially with the Ulster University Business School senior management team comprising, Professor M Durkin, Executive Dean, Professor H Farley, Associate Dean (Education), Dr D Cummins, Head of Department of Management, Leadership and Marketing and Professor P McGowan, Chair of the Course Planning Committee. The panel then met with the course team.

The following report is a summary of responses to panel questions provided by each of the groups that the Panel met with during the meeting.

3 MEETING WITH SENIOR MANAGEMENT TEAM

Introduction

The proposal speaks to the entrepreneurship credentials of the Business School and its content to what and how to teach and inculcate appropriate core behaviours and competencies. Two years ago, an independent review of the Business School's postgraduate provision had identified this as an area where there was insufficient focus. This provided an opportunity to develop a programme that would be markedly different and highly innovative which would both meet market needs and provide significant benefits for the regional economy. The link with Babson College, Massachusetts, was an added benefit given its status as a leading centre for entrepreneurial learning in the United States. While the programme would be notionally based within the Department of Management, Leadership and Marketing, contributors would include experts from other Departments across the Business School.

Stakeholder input to programme design

In developing the curriculum, there had been engagement with a number of stakeholders including Invest NI, the Institute of Directors and the Federation for Small Business. Business people had "road tested" the programme before a final draft had been approved. Their initial concern had been the degree to which the programme would bring forward leaders. Moreover, they opined that it should not be overly academic otherwise it would not be of interest or value to the small/medium sized business sector at which it was aimed. However, they recognised that a model that combined academic learning with practical outworking would be an attractive proposition that would be welcomed by the sector. The next step had been to enter into discussions with Babson College. The discussions had focused on the three key learning themes within the entrepreneurial process, namely, entrepreneurial thought and leadership, competitiveness and the management of resources, and how these themes overlay the conduct of business.

Marketing - programme fee

The programme had been developed alongside a robust business case. It was a premium programme that would deliver a high value experience. With a fee of £20k, it would be at the top end of the pricing range. However, those who would be attracted to the programme would not regard the fee as a cost but as an investment in their future. An applicant would need to "buy in" to the programme recognising how it could help grow their companies to where they wanted them to be in the knowledge that by doing so, the cost would be repaid many times over. Potential also lay in the international market where the flexibility of the block-teaching delivery model would appeal to a wide market.

A natural cultural match existed between the Ulster and Babson College. The Business School had a long-standing strategic collaboration with Babson dating back to 2004 when there were partnership agreements in respect of some of the School's postgraduate provision. Unfortunately, the funding had eventually dried up. However, over the last two years, the relationship had been reinvigorated.

The University has had a substantial reduction in funding over the last five years and, in light of that, has had to readjust. It had now to challenge what is 'normal' in terms of pricing and programmes. Key to success was an enhanced curriculum design in collaboration with external stakeholders in the development of products that were fit for purpose and met market needs. This was what the School was attempting to do in the development of this programme.

Entry criteria

The entry criteria mirrored the University's standard requirements for a Master's degree but included an additional option where considered necessary to interview an applicant as to their suitability to undertake the programme. Applicants would already be owners or managers of a successful business comprising typically at least 15 to 20

employees and an annual turnover of at least £2 million. Whilst applicants' businesses would have achieved a degree of organic growth, a realisation would have developed that for those who wished to grow their businesses going forward, a strategic approach was required. This programme was designed specifically to help entrepreneurial business owners to achieve such growth. In short, the programme would attract those who were already successful but perhaps lacked the confidence to go that step further through employment of a more strategic approach in achieving the desired organisational growth.

The interview would be employed in respect of those applicants demonstrating a nervousness or lack of confidence in returning to formal education after a long period. In these circumstances, a conversation would be helpful to explain fully the benefits of the programme in achieving personal and professional development leading to the success of their business. Generally, applicants to this programme would be self-motivated and would regard the programme as an investment in their future.

Why a Master's programme?

The development of a *Master's* programme had resulted from the recent independent review of the Business School's postgraduate provision. Feedback had indicated that a gap in the market existed for a course that was not purely academic. Furthermore, it was clear that the sector would welcome the kudos of a *Master's* degree. Moreover, the unique content of the programme was specific to a particular area of need and consequently required to be pitched at this academic level. Added value would be the opportunity to establish contact networks not only with fellow students but also with executive colleagues registered on other management programmes within the Business School. Given their specialist content, linkages between and academic progression through the programme, the modules were not suitable to be offered as standalone short courses.

4 MEETING WITH THE COURSE TEAM

External support

Present at the meeting were two practitioners who had collaborated in development of the programme, Ms Tina McKenzie, Managing Director, Staffline Group and Chair of the Federation of Small Businesses, and Mr Gordon Milligan, Deputy Chief Executive of Translink and Chairman of the Institute of Directors. Both Ms McKenzie and Mr Milligan were supportive of the programme. They opined that there would be demand from the small and medium enterprise sector that accounted for over 90% of businesses in Northern Ireland. The flexible delivery model and the programme's unique content would meet the needs of the sector, as would the balance of academic and practice content. Moreover, the Babson College link was an important and welcome feature of the proposal. Students' experience would complement the programme's academic component, a combination that would be attractive to established business people within the sector.

Programme development

The final project had been the starting point of programme development. This had been followed by consideration and reflection on what entrepreneurial practitioners would need to learn in order to achieve success. The overall approach had been to meet students' needs through the design of a programme that was practice-based with an emphasis on developing students' core behaviours, competencies and entrepreneurial effectiveness. Underpinning this would be the application, acquisition and creation of new knowledge. Running through the curriculum would be the three key learning themes that were the key constituents of the entrepreneurial process, entrepreneurial thought and leadership, competitiveness and the management of resources. These themes would inform the content and activities within the programme's first four modules and would create an integrated programme of learning which would feed into the final project module.

Collaboration between internal academics, visiting professors, practitioners and Babson College had led to an integrated approach whereby everyone learned from everyone else. Each group had been involved at every stage of development. Student needs had always been to the forefront in the development of the learning and teaching strategies. The flexibility of the delivery model together with the ongoing stakeholder feedback facilitated a tailored approach in developing strategies around knowledge acquisition and its application.

The panel suggested that given the practical experience that students would bring to the programme that perhaps they could play a part in shaping their learning by taking more of a lead. The team replied that such an approach was possible if they thought that students would be able to manage. They pointed out however that there was already "a fair bit" of that in the programme. While the content was already loaded with what students would need, in the latter stages of the programme in particular, there would be opportunities to discuss this type of approach as issues cropped up. Generally, there would be more flexibility in the learning and teaching strategy than would traditionally be the case.

When working on the programme design, an aim had been to focus on the entrepreneurial skills within the QAA framework. The learning and teaching strategy was enquiry-based and the modules would have a problem-based focus that would require thinking, discussion and problem solving. The breadth of the teaching team's research and scholarship together with the relatively small cohort sizes would enable a more tailored, flexible approach to delivery that would facilitate more one-to-one interaction with students that would in turn instil confidence. The small-group action learning sets would be maintained throughout the programme facilitating peer support and learning.

Module overlap

During development, efforts had been made to guard against overlap across the modules. Since it would be the same teaching team in each module, tutors would be

able to minimise this. Each module would emphasise one of the underpinning key themes. For example, in the first module, *Strategic Orientation*, the focus would be on 'entrepreneurial thought and leadership' alongside some aspects of the other themes. The second module, *Strategic Development*, would focus more on 'competitiveness'. In this manner, all three themes would be threaded throughout all the modules with each module having a specific focus on one.

Because of the integrated nature of the curriculum whereby one module flowed into the next, together with establishment of the action learning sets at the outset of the programme, should a student drop out at any stage, they would have to wait until the following year to re-join the programme. For the same reasons, offer of the modules as standalone modules was not an option.

Assessment Strategy

The assessment strategy had been developed with students' needs in mind. Since the programme was based on the acquisition of knowledge, competencies and attributes and their application in the workplace, each module's assessment strategy was work-based. This lent itself to the development of a range of alternative coursework types to the norm such as essays and were designed to inculcate entrepreneurial thinking and skills. A range of oral assessments was included; a professional conversation, interim presentations and a public viva, all designed to build confidence. Written assessments included various types of business reports such as briefing documents, strategic development reports and feasibility reports, the importance of which was that they were all *applied* documents.

Early in the programme, in the first module, *Strategic Orientation*, students would encounter a 'professional conversation' with a member of the teaching team as part of the module's assessment strategy. This assessment would enable students to verbally articulate their entrepreneurial experience as opposed to the production of a lengthy report. This would encourage confidence, self-esteem and self-motivation for those students returning to learning.

Each of the first four modules would include as an assessment an 'Entrepreneurial Learning Portfolio' designed to develop students' capacity for critical reflection. Students would be challenged to critically reflect upon, and continually learn from, their actions using failure to inform progress. The portfolio would capture the students' actions and reflections through the four stages of business growth and by this means would be "working to learn" using workplace scenarios. Students would have the option of presenting their reflective statement in written form or as a video presentation.

Although there were a variety of assessment types within the programme, the University's 'Assessment Workload Equivalence Guide' was adhered to within its upper and lower limits. The overall aim had been to design an assessment strategy reflecting the "peculiarity of the constituency" and not simply to adopt the traditional methods

of assessment. An important feature was the critical reflection process that would run throughout the programme.

In module, *Strategic Implementation*, the first assessment would be an interim presentation within the students' learning sets facilitated by a member of the teaching team. This was not a normal *academic* assessment and was designed to encourage students' to interact as a group, to talk to each other about particular problems within their own organisation. One student would raise a particular issue or problem from their workplace and the other group members would contribute to the discussion. Importantly, this approach avoided 'free-riding' by students; each group member would have to contribute equally. The assessment would bring to the fore each group member's experience. Since this would be the third module in the sequence, by this time, group members would be more comfortable with each other, would therefore function better as a group, and would be more confident about sharing experiences and defending their positions. The facilitator would get an insight into how the learning set interacted with each other and overall, the assessment would be a test of students' critical awareness of other organisations and provide a rich learning experience for the participants.

Babson College

The first module in the programme, *Strategic Orientation*, would be undertaken at Babson College. The costs of flights, accommodation etc. would be included in the programme fee. This residential would help instil a cohesiveness and "community of learning" within the cohort from the outset as well as facilitating access to a wider learner community through the 'Babson Collaborative for Entrepreneurial Education', an organisation driving action through the global exchange of best practices in entrepreneurship education. The Babson College element of the programme would provide added value for students.

Student cohort sizes

The team indicated that the projected intake figure for the programme would initially be 12 students rising to 16 students per annum by the third year. At this stage, 16 students was the maximum number contemplated mainly because of the demands of managing the action learning sets throughout the programme.

5 CONCLUSIONS

The Panel commended the Course Team on the following.

- Meeting the needs of small and medium sized enterprises
- Application of theory to practice in the curriculum
- Capacity to work across institution and disciplinary boundaries with a vision to create a sustainable impact

The Panel agreed to recommend to the Academic Standards and Quality Enhancement Committee that the MSc Strategic Growth be approved for a period of five years (intakes 2019/20 – 2023/24 inclusive), subject to the condition and recommendations of the Panel being addressed, and a satisfactory response and a revised submission being forwarded to the Academic Office by 8 March 2019 for approval by the Chair of the Panel.

Conditions

- 1) Address all issues identified in the appendix to the panel report.

Recommendations

- 1) Make more explicit the knowledge, experience and expertise in action learning that informs learning within the assessment strategy.
- 2) Articulate the Babson College link in the module, Strategic Orientation.

6 APPRECIATION

The Chair thanked the Panel members and, in particular, the external members, for their valuable contribution to the revalidation process.

Ref: BMCA/panelreport/7/2/19