

## ULSTER UNIVERSITY

### REPORT OF A MEETING OF THE REVALIDATION PANEL FOR UNIT 5Gi MBA/MANAGEMENT

25 January 2018

PRESENT: Professor Ian Montgomery, Pro-Vice-Chancellor (Global Engagement), Ulster University [Chair]  
Dr Maneesh Kumar, Reader in Service Operations/Program Director Executive MBA, Cardiff Business School, Cardiff University  
Ms Shamim Warwick, Senior Lecturer in Business Systems, University of Bedfordshire  
Mr Aodhan O'Donnell, Managing Director, Insight Solutions, Belfast  
Mr Gareth Alexander, Lecturer in Architectural Technology, Belfast School of Architecture and the Built Environment, Ulster University

IN ATTENDANCE: Ms D Troy, Academic Policy and Standards Officer, Academic Office, Ulster University

#### 1 BACKGROUND/INTRODUCTION

The panel was convened to consider the following provision.

- MSc Management (with PgCert/PgDip exit awards) (FT/PT) (JN/ME)
- Master of Business Administration (with PgCert/PgDip exit awards) (FT/PT - JN) (PT - ME) (*Executive version*)
- Master of Business Administration (FT – JN) (*non-Executive version*)
- MSc Sport Management (with PgCert/PgDip exit awards) (FT/PT) (JN)

##### MBA (executive)

The entry criteria for the executive MBA includes that applicants must have gained at least three years' relevant work experience in a supervisory or managerial capacity.

The MBA is delivered full-time and part-time at the Jordanstown campus and part-time at the Magee campus. It comprises ten 15 credit point modules and a 30 credit point Management Project. All modules are compulsory.

A new addition to the programme is the inclusion of the *International Competitiveness* module which is closely based on the Harvard Business School *Microeconomics of Competitiveness* (MOC) module. Ulster University is the only UK university to be part of the Harvard Business School of Microeconomics of Competitiveness network. This adds value in helping to internationalise the offering further as well as to the promotion of the course going forward (page B1/23 refers).

##### MBA (non-executive)

The criteria for the non-executive MBA includes that applicants should normally have two years' relevant work experience.

The course was first introduced for intake in September 2016. It is offered full-time at the Jordanstown campus although no intake to the 'home' course is anticipated at this time. The course is also franchised at QAHE, London. It comprises ten 15 credit point modules and a

30 credit point Management Research Project. This module replaced the work-based Management Project which is part of the executive programme to reflect the typically non-experiential profile of international students undertaking the non-executive programme at QAHE and who will often have no direct access to organisations during their time in the UK. All modules are compulsory.

The 15 credit point module structure has been retained in both MBA programmes due to the generalised nature of the provision and the requirement for breadth across a range of business skills (the rationale on page B2/4 refers).

### MSc Management

The MSc Management is offered full-time and part-time at the Jordanstown and Magee campuses. It comprises seven 20 credit point modules and a 40 credit point Internship and Management Project. All modules are compulsory.

### MSc Sport Management

The MSc Sport Management is offered full-time and part-time at the Jordanstown campus. It comprises seven 20 credit point modules and a 40 credit point Sports Management Internship. All modules are compulsory. It is a tailored version of the MSc Management to provide students with a thorough grounding in general business and management principals as well as specifics relating to the field of sports management.

It is proposed to introduce a January intake to both MSc courses in addition to the existing one in September.

## 2 DOCUMENTATION

The Panel received the following documentation:

1. Course submission;
2. Guidelines for Evaluation and Revalidation Panels;
3. QAA subject benchmark statement for Business and Management (2015), and Master's degree characteristics (2015);
4. Preliminary comments from Panel members.

## 3 MEETING WITH SENIOR MANAGEMENT TEAM

The Panel met with senior staff including Professor Mark Durkin (Executive Dean), Professor Heather Farley (Associate Dean (Education)), Dr Darryl Cummings (Acting Head of Department), Dr Trevor Cadden (Revalidation Unit Co-ordinator) and course directors Mr Mark McCrory, Dr Robert Kerr and Ms Edel Griffin.

### 3.1 Background and Rationale

The Senior Team provided the Panel with some background information in relation to the provision and its position with the Ulster University Business School (UUBS) portfolio. The UUBS was striving to become the leading centre for entrepreneurship by 2021 and as part of this the opportunities with the Northern Ireland context were of key importance. It was about thinking and acting as well as the application and drawing value from that knowledge. Ulster University was the only UK university to be part of the Harvard Business School of Microeconomics of Competitiveness network and benefitted from strong links with Babson College. Such links also helped to internationalise the provision. Considerable work had been undertaken around how this provision undergoing revalidation fitted within the

available, and very competitive, markets and a unique selling point, particularly within the local market, was the practical nature of the programmes. This differential was extremely important in attracting potential students. It was recognised that the courses on offer needed to be appealing both locally and internationally and students had to be incentivised to choose to study at Ulster rather than elsewhere. The Senior Team was confident of its differential and in the very committed staff team to deliver the provision.

### 3.2 Professional Accreditation

The Panel enquired if any professional accreditation had been sought for the programmes. The Senior Team acknowledged that professional accreditation was an important aspect but this was a process that took time. Stage one of the accreditation process for EPAS (accreditation for international programmes in business and management) had already been completed and the process for the Small Business Charter had also commenced. It was anticipated the latter would be secured by September 2018.

The Panel further enquired if any other professional accreditation was being sought, for example, CMI and it was noted by the Senior Team that perhaps this had not been clearly articulated in the course document but that a number of modules were accredited in terms of being mapped to professional exemptions. In addition, on completion of the MBA, students were equipped to start the process to gain Chartered Manager status. There were a number of linkages with other professional bodies across the Department, including ACCA, and these linkages extended to the MBA.

### 3.3 Cross Faculty Collaboration

In relation to the MSc Sport Management, the Panel enquired how the two faculties worked together but also noted that only one member of staff from the School of Sport was a member of the course team. The Senior Team advised that this member of staff delivered three sport specific modules but that delivery was also augmented by a number of guest lecturers. Other staff within the team provided support in relation to supporting students and supervising projects.

The risks of only one member of staff responsible for delivery of the sport modules was noted and the team was asked what contingencies were in place to cover absence, for example. The Senior Team advised that other staff from the School of Sport delivered modules at undergraduate level within the Department and that going forward would be able to assist in the delivery of postgraduate programmes. In addition, some 44 visiting professors provided valuable expertise from which they could draw.

### 3.4 Fee Structure

The Panel asked if the fee structure for the different courses was under review or at a premium to take account of the UUBS's differential product. The Senior Team advised that a pricing review was currently being undertaken at an institution level but that the UUBS was more concerned with value for the student rather than pricing. The markets in which the Department operated were indeed very price sensitive and work was needed to convince the NI market in particular that education was not about cost but investment.

The Panel understood how the courses were marketed to prospective students but asked how employers were targeted and made aware of the courses on offer. The Senior Team advised that they would soon be holding a 'soft' launch of other programmes with a number of professional bodies and corporates of all sizes to highlight that the Ulster offerings were not only about an individual's own personal development but also the benefits that this would bring to the business as a whole. The Senior Team highlighted the importance of the

stratification of the Department's provision across all industry sectors, from SMEs to large corporations. A flexible framework was essential and this also fed into the CPD environment. As a Faculty, they were endeavouring to pioneer the lifetime value approach and this value needed to be communicated very clearly.

### 3.5 Links with QAHE

The Panel noted the existing links with QAHE in terms of the franchised non-executive MBA and enquired if there were any future plans to extend linkages with any other courses, or indeed other institutions. The Course Team noted that in recent times provision at QAHE had moved predominantly to postgraduate level and consideration would be given to where the best locations were as well the best programmes to be delivered at those locations. The Senior Team recognised the potential future opportunities in the relationship with QAHE in London and Birmingham and these would be investigated and maximised accordingly.

Internationally, the Senior Team highlighted its links with Harvard and Babson College and the opportunities going forward to bring US students to Ulster. Other links, including in China, drew students to the Accounting and Finance courses in particular rather than the MBS but it was important that the Department undertook customer profiling in order to match all of its courses internationally.

### 3.6 Student Cohorts and intakes

The Senior Team advised the Panel that a very eclectic mix of students applied to the executive MBA programme and on average applicants entered with eight to ten years industry experience rather than the required three. The front loaded group work, however, proved very useful for those with fewer years' experience from the aspect of peer-to-peer learning. For the non-executive programme, two years' experience was required and this could be the total from a number of different work based learning experiences. The course at the Magee campus was also a very mixed student cohort and the fusion of knowledge amongst students was always excellent.

In relation to the MSc Management, previously referred to as a pre-experience MBA, was aimed at students coming straight from undergraduate study and normally from non-cognate areas.

The Panel noted that course numbers appeared to fluctuate and asked if there were any ambitions for future growth. The Senior Team advised that the Faculty never stood still and real time opportunities came about every day. This was how the UUBS conducted its business by both necessity and desire and every opportunity was taken to capitalise on these opportunities. The Faculty's Innovation Group also contributed in this respect. It was noted that a global advisor on disruptive innovation had recently been appointed. He had also agreed to join this group which was noted should prove extremely beneficial going forward.

## 4 MEETING WITH STUDENTS

The Panel met with a representative group of eleven current and former students from across the four courses. The student group came from a very mixed range of backgrounds and each had their own experiences both during and after the course and all of which were very positive.

### 4.1 Key points noted during discussions included the following:

- Two current students on the Sports Management course were of the view that the sports content of modules was insufficient with only three teaching hours specifically on sport. They had received general information on the course content prior to starting but had expected more sport specific content. They did recognise the importance of the business aspects but still would have liked more sport content.
- All students noted the excellent support provided by lecturers who were always very approachable and helpful. This also included the level of additional support provided for particular student physical needs. Support provided by library staff including a library induction and training on the use of BlackBoard Learn had been excellent. Library staff were also willing to provide one to one assistance as required.
- The VLE had been easy to use and navigate in terms of accessing course material and for electronic assessment and feedback.
- Additional opportunities to go over how to use some of the available software other than solely at the start of the course would be viewed as a welcome addition to the programme.
- Many students noted a previous affiliation to Ulster at undergraduate level and this had greatly assisted in informing their decision to undertake a course here.
- The practical and applied focus of the MBA had been a key factor in choosing the Ulster course including the module content and application of this in the real world.
- The networking opportunities of which students were able to avail during and after their course due to the strong industry links and the broad range of backgrounds of the student group.
- The excellent e-business module which had allowed students to connect with industry leaders in Dublin on a consultancy basis which related academic theory and practice to real life.
- Previous opportunities to undertake additional optional modules which enabled students to tailor the programme to their own particular interests or job role, although this did bring an additional workload.
- The MBA curriculum had been a challenge from the outset but the mix of technical (accounting) and other (marketing) at the start of the course had complemented each other from a workload perspective.
- Academic writing had been a challenge for many students as some did not come from an academic background. Group work was used very early in the course and peer-to-peer learning had been really beneficial aspect of this.
- The lack of difference in effort required to undertake a 10, 15 or 20 credit module.
- The use of block teaching had been really useful and had enabled some students to be able to undertake the course in the first place.
- At the Magee campus, the student cohort had comprised students from NI as well as ROI and this had added an additional dynamic.
- The peer-to-peer learning for all students at both campuses had been extremely useful in providing different viewpoints and perspectives on different issues.

- The interactive and very informative open day in advance of the course at the Magee campus.
- Some of the techniques and models used in the Operations Management module were somewhat outdated but the students expected that this would be reviewed as part of the revalidation. Students also noted that an increased interaction with industry as part of this module would be useful.
- Students noted the benefits beyond the course in career progression and their own professional development as being the key driver for undertaking the MBA.
- The rich mix of visiting lecturers who had introduced students to a very broad range of areas and expertise.
- The availability of internships and the excellent links with industry and of which the students were able to avail. One student was able to gain full-time employment after a three-month internship in the field of motor sport.
- The use of real life case studies and live projects with which all students were able to engage as well as the many benefits that group work brought in developing knowledge and skills in different areas.
- The availability of Studiosity, the online facility for students to submit drafts and receive feedback. This was an excellent service for current students.
- The low level of understanding, particularly in Northern Ireland, in relation to what an MBA was. This lack of understanding amongst employers needed to be significantly improved.

In relation to the forthcoming move from the Jordanstown campus to the new campus in Belfast, the majority of students were of the view that this would have no impact on the courses. It was important not to lose sight of the MBA qualification and the quality of teaching and this was what would attract students to the Ulster course. Where the course would be delivered was of no consequence. It was noted, however, that students did not want to be party to any negative messages or comments in relation to the move. This was of no relevance to them.

Overall, the students reported a very positive experience in terms of the course and the lecturing staff. The MBA graduates were very positive about the benefits that the course had provided in terms of career progression and gaining leadership and management skills.

The Chair thanked the students for their time and wished everyone well in their studies and career.

## 5 MEETING WITH COURSE TEAMS

### 5.1 Rationale for the provision and overlapping curriculum

The Course Team advised the Panel that there was considerable overlap between the programmes in terms of shared modules and the staff delivering the curriculum. The profile of prospective MBA and MSc Management students differed in relation to the level of work experience gained for the former and those coming straight from undergraduate study in mainly non-cognate areas for the latter. Course Directors worked closely in relation to course design to ensure that every aspect was covered or every student profile. The Course

Teams were also very closely aligned to ensure that the courses fitted within the Department's overall portfolio. Part of this revalidation process was about integration and rationalisation of provision.

## 5.2 Mode of Delivery

The Panel asked for clarification on how the EMBA would be delivered. The Course Team advised that the programme had been designed through engagement and collaboration with key stakeholders. The course would be delivered with 36 hours of face-to-face contact per semester for 11 modules in total. Stakeholder feedback had confirmed that this mode of delivery was well received. The technical subjects followed by a number of weeks in between provided the students with time to digest the topic in question. The summer modules in the programme were block taught which allowed students to complete the course part-time over two years.

## 5.3 Assessment

It was noted the assessment method for the Operations Management module in the executive MBA was 100% written examination but 100% coursework in the non-executive course. The Panel queried the rationale for this one module to be assessed by examination. The Course Team advised that this assessment had deliberately been designed differently for part-time students who were normally practising managers. The examination better facilitated the assessment of the module learning outcomes for this cohort who, from experience, tended to be at a lower skill level in terms of qualitative operations management techniques. The examination allowed for these skills to be covered in more depth and delivered a broader skill set at the outcome.

The bunching of assessment submissions in week 12 was noted by the Panel. The Course Team advised that discussions had been undertaken in this regard and it was the view that they needed to ensure that topics were adequately covered and students equipped to undertake the assessment. Although the majority of assessments were submitted in week 12, students would be working continually for the whole semester with the lecturer checking progress on an ongoing basis. It was also important that students were given time for reflection on, for example, a presentation before they had to write the related report.

In relation to parity of assessment across modules, the Course Team were cognisant of the new curriculum design principles alongside ensuring that students were meeting the intended learning outcomes. The Course Team provided assurance that the level of effort between modules was equitable. In relation to cross-campus collaboration, the Course Teams confirmed that all staff were involved in the development of course content and regular review of the assessment strategy. The Planning and Standardisation meetings at the beginning of each semester also facilitated this.

## 5.4 Internationalisation

The Panel enquired if the team had any aspirations beyond the non-executive MBA within existing links with QAHE. This course currently had no 'home' intake and the executive programme tended to be more applicable to the local market so there were no plans at present to extend this to QAHE.

In relation to international students, the Course Team advised the Panel that they encouraged students to mix and engage with one another from the beginning. The two-day residential at the start of the executive MBA was a very useful and supportive way to encourage students to engage with the rest of the group from the outset.

When asked, the Course Team advised the Panel that academic writing was not only a challenge for international students but for all those students who did not come from an academic background. These skills were continually developed across all modules, including those of a technical nature. The Studiosity online feedback facility was also very useful in terms of academic writing development.

It was also noted that the campus Provosts had introduced a Welcome Week for all students at the beginning of the academic year. This was part of the strategy for full integration of all students at all levels on each campus.

### 5.5 Links with Industry

The Course Team advised the Panel that links were constantly being developed and they strived to ensure that these links encompassed all types of organisation from SMEs to large corporations. Formal and informal networks existed with the latter including an Employers' Forum from across the sector. The Alumni Steering Group also provided insight into future developments. A 'mini' MBA taster programme delivered over one week allowed prospective students to get an introduction to the course with a view to progressing to the full programme.

Regular standardisation and planning meetings involving Jordanstown and Magee staff and students also developed and maintained links. On the Magee campus, staff were very much involved in skills development and were working with local Chambers of Commerce and the City Council in developing leadership and management skills in the region. An 'MBAs Give Back' scheme was also being piloted where graduates would pass on their experience to undergraduate students.

The extensive bank of guest lecturers, range of student backgrounds and live case studies provided students with a very rich experience outside of their own fields.

### 5.6 Group Work

Group work was introduced early in the programmes with the rationale being that this allowed students to integrate from the outset. Peer assessment was also an important aspect of group work activity. Feedback from students was generally positive and, in particular, from mature students who found that it worked well. In the Student learning logs students frequently noted the strengths of others and what they had learned from one another.

### 5.7 Modules

The Panel questioned the rationale for a *Management Research Project* in the non-executive MBA rather than a business project as would be expected in an MBA programme. The Course Team explained that this had previously been a management dissertation where students were required to investigate a business or management issue which could be in an individual organisation or on a wider business issue. Many of the students on the non-executive course would be international students who would not have the flexibility to work with a specific company. It was necessary to differentiate between this and the Management Project (i.e. the applied project) in the executive course.

The Panel was of the view that consideration should be given to re-naming this module as an alternative title might be more appropriate from the perspective of selling the course to international students in particular. It was not currently clear that this piece of work was of MBA and not MSc standard in that it must be of an applied nature. The Course Team stated

that the marking criteria for the module clearly emphasised the assessment should be based on practical application and provided assurance that it was of MBA standard.

In relation to the availability of optional modules and the fact that some of the previously available specialisms, such as Human Resource Management were no longer available, the Panel asked if there was any intention to reintroduce these to the course. The Course Team advised that this had been discussed at length during course development. Student views had also been sought. With small student numbers it was not possible from a resourcing perspective to timetable every student's chosen option but students could tailor their final project on their own preferred career direction. Taking everything into consideration, and with the students accepting that the staff were the experts in deciding what comprised the best course, it was felt that this was the most appropriate way forward.

During the meeting with students, the level of Sports Management had been raised. The Course Team stated that the sports element comprised half the course but that this feedback was a perennial issue. The Course Team informed the Panel that the knowledge deficit tended to be in the business and management aspects and these areas were some of the most important to be covered to make students more employable. From experience, once students had graduated, they had noted that they were able to see why the content of the Sports Management course had been as it was.

The Course Team advised that the Sports Management focus generally was not much different from general management but with the assessments tailored to a sport or general management theme depending on the course.

Staff clearly understood the linkages between modules and were constantly signposting students as to how the modules fitted together. The level of accounting coverage and its importance in the course was discussed and it was agreed that this provided students with what they needed.

## 5.8 Industry Links

The Panel enquired how the Course Team maintained and encouraged links with industry. The Team advised that individual modules were developed jointly with business partners and indeed some would approach staff with a particular management or strategy issue that needed to be addressed. It was very much a two-way process whilst working to the benefit of both the student and the business. Links with visiting professors also informed the development of the curriculum and it was these real world experiences that really added value.

## 5.9 Proposed January intake

When asked about the proposed January intake and how this would work in practice, the Course Team advised that this was the first time they would have a January intake in any of their programmes and they expected initial numbers to be small. They were not proposing to run a separate full induction, rather they would run a student get together. They were currently considering how they would integrate and support students on a module to module basis. Support, however, would be provided in relation to an induction to the library and BlackBoard Learn as well as the availability of ongoing support from the International Office. It was noted that the course structure allowed for modules to be undertaken in any order.

In relation to block teaching, the Panel enquired if there was an induction at the beginning of each teaching block. This was currently not the case but something that could be considered in the future to ensure that all students were integrated and did not miss any aspects of an induction regardless of when they came onto the course.

## 5.10 Course Enhancements

The Panel noted the activities available for students outside of the timetable and enquired if many students availed of these. The Course Team stated that students really enjoyed and took advantage of any networking opportunities and uptake was generally good. Such events were mainly on a first come first served basis and feedback on such activities was very positive and the students' commitment to learning clearly evident.

## 5.11 Staff/Student Consultation

It was noted that student cohorts would be a mix of full-time, part-time, 'home' and international students. The Panel asked how the Course Team ensured that students' views were sought and channels of communication kept open. The Panel was advised that there was a student representative on each course and each cohort through which feedback was provided and issues raised. Given that cohorts were relatively small, there was considerable ongoing informal communication with students as well as regular open-forum discussions.

A student mentor system was also in place which from experience worked very well. Individual module co-ordinators as well as course directors were also available to discuss issues with students as required. Once again, the small numbers effectively facilitated this as well as the ability for staff to build strong relationships with individual students.

## 5.12 APEL/APCL

The Course Team informed the Panel that formal internal APEL and APCL processes were in place within the Department and through which individual applicants had to demonstrate how they had met the learning outcomes of whichever part of the course from which they were seeking exemption. Applications would be considered on a case-by-case basis. Generally, however, it was preferred not to exempt students from any part of the programme as it was the view that the MBA was a course that needed to be completed in its entirety for a student to gain the full benefits and take the opportunities to refresh their existing skills.

## 5.13 MBA Qualification

Issues around a lack of industry understanding, particularly in the Northern Ireland market, had been raised both during the meeting with students and senior staff. The Course Team recognised this issue, adding that an MBA qualification had a very strong presence internationally but not so much locally. It was the view, however, that this situation was improving. The Team acknowledged the importance of continually promoting the brand in order to change perceptions. This was being done through ongoing work with Chambers of Commerce and raising awareness in industry of succession planning and through this work there was a growing appetite for management and leadership qualifications.

## 5.14 Staff Resources

The block teaching mode of delivery was raised by the Panel. They enquired what contingencies were in place in the event of staff or student illness. The Course Team advised that provision would be made for any student who had missed a block through illness or other extenuating circumstances. Furthermore, MBA students tended to work as a team and would assist each other when they could. There was also the option for a student to undertake a module at another time during the year or on another campus. In relation to staff contingencies, the Course Team confirmed that there was sufficient expertise within the team to provide cover, as required. The Panel noted what it viewed as an exemplary Course Team.

## 5.15 Staff Development

The Course Team advised the Panel that all staff were research active and supervised doctoral and other students. Staff development was continual and their knowledge and skills were constantly being refreshed – this was through immersion in the classroom with the MBA students themselves and their range of backgrounds, from the expertise of guest lecturers and through their own professional body membership and CPD.

## 6 CONCLUSIONS

The Panel commended the programmes on the following:

- i) The strong industry partnership approach and support for students in relation to ongoing engagement with industry, including the availability of internships;
- ii) The use of live projects and relevant case studies, as well as the use of group work early in the programmes;
- iii) The new modules in the programmes which are relevant to current industry requirements;
- iv) The review of the curriculum which has been based on a range of inputs from all stakeholders, in particular external engagement and internal team working;
- v) The range of networking activities for students;
- vi) The methods of assessment used instead of examinations which more effectively assess student knowledge rather than memory;
- vii) The availability of the online Studiosity facility to provide online feedback on draft work;
- viii) The strong and cohesive team working ethic of staff across all course teams.

The Panel agreed to recommend to the Academic Standards and Quality Enhancement Committee that the programmes be approved for a period of five years (intakes 2018/19 to 2022/23 inclusive) subject to the conditions and recommendations of the Panel being addressed and a satisfactory response and a revised submission being forwarded to the Academic Office **by 23 March 2018** for approval by the Chair of the Panel.

### Conditions

- i) That all issues identified by the Academic Office and detailed in the appendix to the panel report are addressed;

### Recommendations

- i) That consideration is given to reviewing the title of the Management Research Project in the non-executive MBA (section 5.7 refers);
- ii) To investigate a campaign to educate industry in Northern Ireland in relation to what an MBA qualification is (sections 3.4, 4 and 5.13 refer);
- iii) To keep under review the availability of options for students within the MBA (sections 4 and 5.7 refer);
- iv) To review the use of written examination in the Operations Management module in the Executive MBA as this does not fit comfortably with the remaining suite of modules (section 5.3 refers).

## 7 APPRECIATION

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