

Blending a Postgraduate Diploma in Business Management Administration

Faculty of Economic and Management Sciences | University of Stellenbosch Business School

Programme: Postgraduate Diploma (PGDip) in Business Management and Administration

Coordinator: Mr Martin Butler mbutler@sun.ac.za

E-Learning Activities Manager: Ms Marsunet Horn marsunet@sun.ac.za

Learning activity:
Student engagement enhancement

Learning technology:
Adobe Connect
Google Hangouts on air

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Context

Background

The Postgraduate Diploma in Business Management and Administration was presented to 72 students in a blended approach. The programme consisted of 15 modules: 12 core modules and 3 choice modules). The students spent two block weeks on campus: one at the start of the programme and one towards the end.

The programme was developed to address the need to produce graduates for employment at a general management level and higher. It allows graduates admission to the MBA programme and it caters for a broader target audience both from outside the Western Cape and from outside South Africa due to the blended nature of the programme.

Subject area

The subject area focuses on Business Management Administration. The University of Stellenbosch Business School (USB) forms part of the Faculty of Economic and Management Sciences and focuses on postgraduate programmes and diplomas. It is situated on the Bellville campus.

Intended learning outcomes

The programme level outcomes are defined as given below.

On completion of the programme, successful participants will:

- understand general business areas in context;
- have basic theoretical knowledge about the various management disciplines in the business environment;
- be able to define and develop an enterprise's value proposition in an increasingly competitive and volatile environment;
- have critical insight into the operating model of organisations and be able to articulate the value of innovation and technology in changing operating models;
- be able to use analytical skills to deal with business problems;
- be able to relate their knowledge to a particular business context through work-based assignments within the particular social system

within which the enterprise operates;

- be able to demonstrate self-direction and originality in tackling and solving problems, act autonomously in planning and implementing tasks and continue to advance their knowledge, understanding and skills relevant to the business environment; and
- be able to undertake development through a systematic survey of current thinking and practice and continue to learn through application in their work environment.

Challenges and advantages associated with the integration of technology

The USB identified the need for a programme with low opportunity cost to participants. The best working students have the highest opportunity costs, since they usually have higher job titles. These are the students that the USB wants to recruit. It is also very expensive to travel to Stellenbosch from various African locations. The flexible mode of delivery mentioned previously allowed participants to choose between residence learning and blended learning for each module.

The USB actively wants to target Africa, wishing to do business in Africa with support structures in Africa and therefore teaching content devised for Africa. This can be achieved by enrolling students from various African destinations. Diversity in the student population also leads to a better learning experience for the students.

Student overview

Two thirds of the 72 students were off-campus and resided in South Africa, Mozambique, Namibia, Angola and the United Arab Emirates. There was wide diversity in terms of student demographics, with ages ranging from 26 to 55 years and work experience ranging from recognition of prior learning students with a minimum of 3 years' experience to managers with 10 years' experience.

The USB focuses on a specific target market when enrolling students. This includes students wishing to complete an MBA who do not qualify for direct admission to a master's degree programme (according to 2016 regulations). It also includes students wishing to broaden their management skills but not necessarily through an MBA with its significant research component (the MBA research assignment). Lastly, it includes students who cannot



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complete lengthy residency periods at the USB, preferring to do the majority of their learning off-campus, and who therefore have a lower opportunity cost to complete the programme.

Other relevant role-players

As is the practice at the USB, the best experts in the field were engaged as lecturers for the various modules in this programme. Many lecturers were recruited from outside Stellenbosch University (SU) but most were already involved in USB activities. The Blended Learning Coordinator, who bore a great deal of responsibility, played a major part in the success of the programme.

Learning and assessment activities

Educational approach

People, by their very nature, are inquisitive and the business school's postgraduate students probably more so, having made the decision to extend their functional knowledge to general management. The goal of education should thus be to encourage the seeking of answers, as it is in this way that people advance both themselves and society. The USB believes that students value learning and that a stimulating and relevant learning environment requires less governance and fewer regulations, as students then assume responsibility for their own learning.

For students to embed learning and expand their tacit knowledge, they need to be able to make discoveries for themselves and apply their skills in real-world situations, mostly in their own work environments. Providing the students with the opportunity to apply theory and observe the impact of their application, reinforcing the module outcomes, creates such a space for individual discovery and the expansion of knowledge. Practical application that requires the implementation but also the critique of theoretical models in the work environments of the students should be incorporated into every module.

In spite of the (potential) limited traditional face-to-face contact in this programme, the richness of synchronous interaction over the internet provided unique opportunities for learning to be facilitated in a very stimulating manner through the appropriate use of technology. In addition, the ability to consume module content on demand (asynchronous delivery)

also provided the opportunity for learning to take place at the pace of the individual learner.

Learning activities

There were two different modes of delivery – residential and blended – but the students could customise their own mode of delivery by mixing the two modes. The duration of the programme was one year for all the possible modes of delivery.

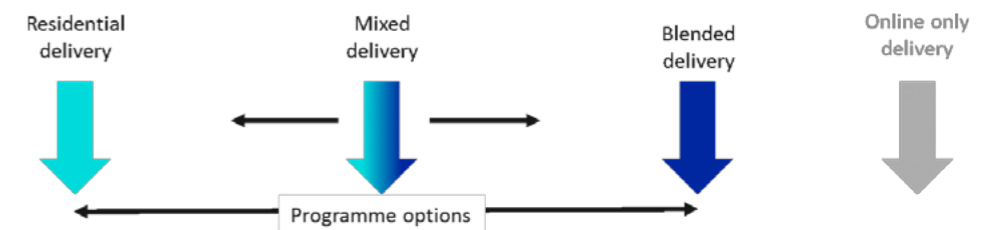


Figure 1: Possible programme modes of delivery

Figure 1 indicates the two extremes: full residence, with all classes on campus, and fully blended, with the maximum number of modules taken online only. For this programme, however, a pure online mode of delivery was not an option. As indicated, the students could otherwise mix their consumption of modules by selecting a combination of modes of delivery. For all the modes of delivery, initial contact, orientation, final contact and the elective modules were resident on campus, as indicated in Figure 2.

Table 1: Programme modes and residence or online options

	Initial block (6 days)	Wednesday evening classes from 16:00–22:00	Elective block (6 days)
Residence	On-campus	On-campus	On-campus
Mixed	On-campus	Selection of on-campus and online learning	On-campus
Blended	On-campus	Online learning only	On-campus

All the modes of delivery required an on-campus residence period (initial block), during which induction took place and some of the initial modules started. All the modes of delivery also concluded with a final compulsory campus period (elective block), during which the electives were presented.

- The residence mode of delivery entailed lectures on Wednesday evenings in a classroom on campus from 16:00 to 20:00.



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- The blended mode of delivery entailed lectures on Wednesday evenings via broadband internet connection to a device of the students' choice (browser-based delivery).
- The mixed mode of delivery was a selection by the students between the two modes of delivery.

Although the students could attend classes online and classes were available for offline consumption, class attendance remained compulsory and was tracked as "attend online" via the chosen platform.

Assessment activities and feedback practices

All the modules were assessed by a written assessment on the Monday following the final scheduled session. A final assignment had to be submitted three weeks later. No assessment of a module's work was done within current or subsequent weeks, with the exception of Entrepreneurship, which, as the capstone course, needed to show the integration of the different modules and could require the presentation of a business plan during the final block.



Figure 2: Module assessment

The following three assessments were done for each module:

- **Online formative assessment (pre-module, textbook theory):** Self-tuition components done online tested the pre-reading of compulsory reading material. (Online assessments by the textbook authors could be used.) Concepts to be discussed in class were tested online to ensure sufficient preparation. **The online formative assessments took the form of multiple-choice questions.** The students had one attempt at completing the quiz within a time limit. After the quiz was completed, the students received a mark but not the correct answers. This counted as 20% of the module's assessment.

- **Online formative assessment (post-module, learning outcomes):** The application of concepts discussed in class leading to the specific learning outcomes defined for each module was tested online. These online tests are also used to test MBA learning assumed to be in place for students admitted to MBA studies. The tests were not limited to multiple choice and the lecturer had the option of designing a final assessment to contain a written component as well. A critical enabler of this assessment model was the ability for tests to be written and verified on location. This counted as 40% of the module's assessment.
- **Normative assessment (post-module):** This entailed the submission of a single assignment for the module according to the discretion of the individual facilitator. The assignments were marked online and the students received feedback. This counted as 40% of the module's assessment.

Students had to obtain at least 50% for each core module (96 credits) and 50% for 24 credits through elective modules to graduate.

Student self-regulation

Dealing with adult learners places special emphasis on content that is meaningful and relevant. Developing a curriculum around student interests and modern business challenges fosters motivation and stimulates the passion to learn. The value of student dialogue and the opportunity for students to generate ideas and set goals furthermore allow for a richer learning experience. Graduate students who have ownership of their curriculum of relevant material are motivated to work hard and master the skills necessary to reach their goals.

Learning environment

Learning setting

Learning took place both online and face-to-face in the USB lecture halls. For the online streaming of lecturers, Adobe Connect was used. Other streaming software was also explored but the biggest challenge was the time delay between the action and it being streamed to the students. In the experience of the coordinators, Google Hangouts on Air had a delay of five seconds. This short delay made a huge difference when a student asked a question and it arrived only five seconds later when the lecturer



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had already moved on to another section.

With Adobe Connect, the students received a link for their online classroom, also referred to as a Glocal classroom. In 2015, the USB had three of these Glocal classrooms available (therefore three links). In the same way that a student physically attends a class in a specific lecture hall, the online learners attended a lecture in a specific Glocal classroom by clicking on the link provided.

For the online student, the Glocal classroom consisted of what was shared on screen, a video of the front of the class and the lecturer, and a chat box to engage in discussion (Figure 4).

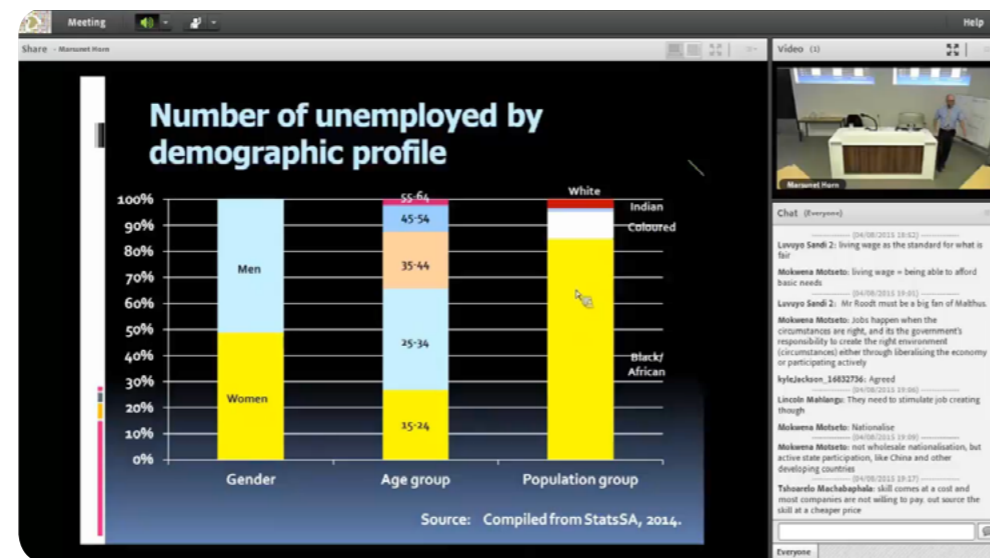


Figure 3: The online student's view of the Glocal classroom

Collaborative setting

No group work was done during the first year of this module. This decision, although not ideal, allowed for flexibility for both assessment and delivery. It made it easier for content to be delivered online and for students to repeat a module if not successful. Group work could furthermore be an entrance barrier to some candidates and makes scheduling more complex, since time should be allowed for group work to be completed.

Students did form informal groups and then used Google Hangouts on Air as a discussion platform.

Content resources

All content was available in the form of e-textbooks. Students were required to purchase the books themselves and then had the choice between either an electronic format or a hard copy. This lowered administrative costs and the perceived costs of the programme.

Technology resources

Since the programme relied heavily on technology, requirements were set before the students were allowed to enrol for the programme. All the students were required to have access to a computer with broadband internet access, the relevant software (Microsoft Office or a compatible product, a web browser that supports HTML5 and a PDF reader) and the USB's platform of choice for the use of e-textbooks.

During the first block, all the students were introduced to the USB systems and processes to ensure seamless online delivery. This introductory session included information on the following:

- SU and USB systems (e.g. the Learning Hub and Call Desk)
- Adobe Connect as the platform for delivery
- The library, with emphasis on online research and academic articles
- Plagiarism, Turnitin and the acknowledgement of others' work and one's own prior work
- Online interaction, internet research, social media usage and online collaboration tools

From the instructional side, various technological resources were employed to deliver a blended mode programme. As discussed previously, Adobe Connect was used as a streaming service for the online students. The USB learning management system, Learning Hub (Moodle), was used as a platform for learning activities, lectures and block sessions. The lecturers also used microphones, video cameras installed in the lecture halls and digitised whiteboards.



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Support challenges

A technical support officer was available during the lectures. A special arrangement was made with the USB service desk to stay open later on the nights that lectures were presented for this programme. The biggest concern was challenges with bandwidth. Since the lecturers were streamed between 16:00 and 20:00, some areas experienced a peak in bandwidth use by 18:00, which meant that the quality of the streaming went down.

Sound was also a consideration. The lecturers had to be recorded but the microphones also had to be sensitive enough to detect a student's voice when there was a question but not to the extent that it disturbed the online students. The microphone settings also had to be adjusted for individual voices. Various microphones were therefore used to remedy these issues. The lecturers wore portable microphones to enable them to walk around in the lecture halls; there were also five microphones in the first row of chairs and a roaming microphone. When a student asked a question that none of the microphones picked up, the lecturers repeated the question.

Student experience

Student feedback on the learning experience

Twitter was used as a backchannel for immediate student feedback. It was agreed that #PGDipBMA would be used as a twitter hashtag for the programme. The most positive feedback was received from the students who were located far away from the business school.

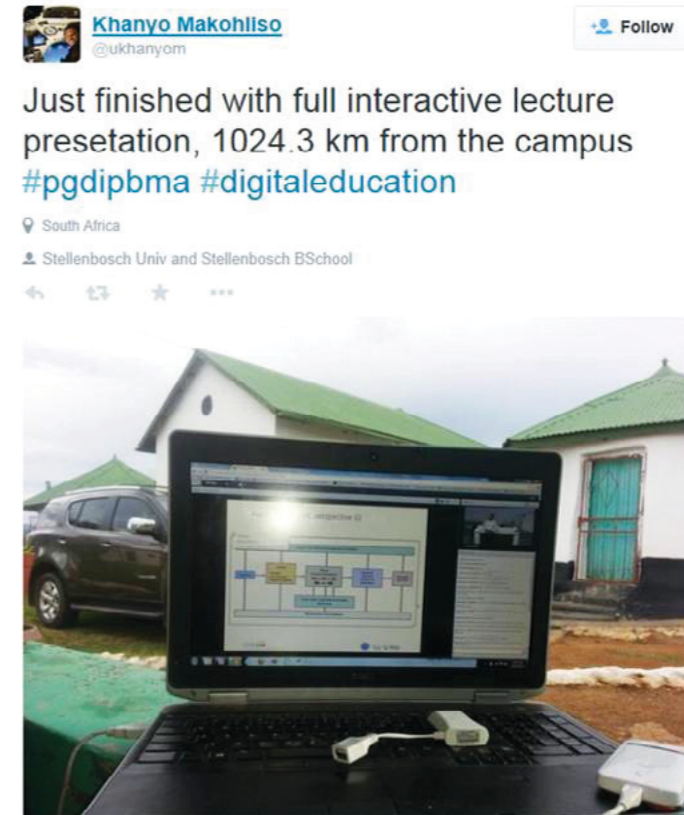
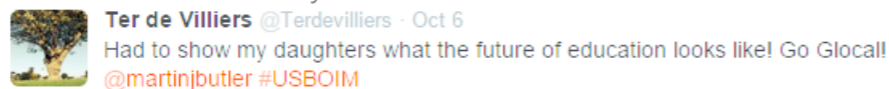


Figure 4: Informal student feedback on Twitter

General Opportunities

Although the programme functioned well with the Blended Learning Coordinator functioning as the main e-learning advisor, it was not sustainable from a capacity point of view. An opportunity was therefore identified to employ a graduate teaching assistant. The assistant's work would include ensuring that both the physical classrooms and the Glocal classrooms were set up, the hardware was working, the online learning tools were ready and more.

Although there was initial scepticism about group work for the first



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implementation of the programme, this was identified as an opportunity for the future. Making use of Google Hangouts on Air was a suitable platform for this.

From the beginning, it was expected that ongoing learning would also be required from the programme lecturers. The use of technology to create a rich learning environment that differs from what most faculties use also required continuous learning from the Faculty. In this respect, sharing best practices among faculties and conducting student feedback sessions were not viewed as a secondary activity but as part of the core activities of the learning and teaching of this programme. As the programme continues to evolve to make the maximum use of technological capabilities, the Faculty's ability to evolve with the changing environment is critical to its success.

All the lecturers who taught in this programme were required to complete a condensed Blended Teaching and Learning short course (similar to that presented by the Centre for Learning Technologies). Dr JP Bosman, Head of the Centre for Learning Technologies, worked with the coordinator of the programme to develop this structured training session. Before presenting their first classes, the lecturers were also asked to arrive 15 minutes early. This provided the opportunity for in-time teaching as a form of refresher to make the lecturers more comfortable with the technology that they were required to use during their classes.

Advice

When it comes to preparing participants for taking part in a blended learning course, one should focus more on lecturer preparation than on student preparation. One should not forget about the in-time teaching just before a lecture; this puts lecturers who are unfamiliar or unsure of the technology to be used more at ease.

In a programme as reliant on the use of technology as this one, it is important not only to focus on the things that can go wrong. Everyone knows that a lot of things can go wrong with technology behind the scenes and it is therefore important to recognise what goes right as well. Giving the people who make things go right positive support and recognition is crucial. The coordinator of the programme believes that the negative

narrative will become the main narrative if the positive narrative is not reinforced.

Other concluding thoughts

Never tell yourself that something is not possible. What is not possible today will be possible tomorrow.

Keep pushing the boundaries in education with technology.

