

Transitioning MBAs Beyond The Classroom

MBA students who are exposed to real-life business scenarios are the ones who are getting the greatest value out of their degrees.

Classroom theory is no longer sufficient on its own to prepare MBA students for the real business world. Academic institutions are now expected to do more to integrate practice into their MBA curricula, enabling students to embrace an innovative and entrepreneurial ethos that they can bring into the workplace.

In the UK, a staggering 90% of leading employers surveyed by the Association of Business Schools (ABS) in 2014 agreed that embedding work experience within courses would make students more employable.

“A period of extended, meaningful work experience that is embedded in the course enables students to develop business skills (learn by doing), apply the theory that they learned in the classroom and reflect on it, and also to develop a more realistic view of the broader world of work,” according to ABS’s 21st Century Leaders report.

A SIGNATURE EXPERIENCE

Today, business schools all over the world are starting to include out-of-classroom experience and engage students with industry. In one such school, practical experience is not an option; it is a compulsory course.

According to Dr. Abdullah Abonamah, president of ADSM, the

school has embedded two aspects in the SLE: technology and sustainability. “We live in a highly digitized, information-rich world, a knowledge-based economy where technology is the enabler. So we need to instill in the students that technology is an integrated part of any business.”

“We are also very conscious of the environment and our carbon footprint, so whichever project the student decides to do in their MBA, they have to explain how sustainability is going to be addressed and what effect will their business have on the environment,” Dr. Abonamah added.

Abu Dhabi School of Management (ADSM), a subsidiary of the Abu Dhabi Chamber of Commerce and Industry, is the only academic institution in the GCC region that incorporates the Signature Learning Experience (SLE) into its MBA, which is delivered in association with London’s Imperial

College Business School. This 9-unit experiential course, embedded throughout the MBA program, gives students the opportunity to apply knowledge acquired in the classroom to develop an innovative business idea.

Sophia Korayim, who is the SLE advisor and the director of the Center of Innovation and Entrepreneurship at ADSM, commented: “We have enhanced the standard MBA curriculum with practical management experience to better equip graduates with skills that they need to become outstanding decision makers.”

“The SLE is a unique model offered at ADSM. It encourages MBA students to take action, solve real problems and reflect upon the outcomes, which helps them develop mental flexibility and resilience. Such skills do not come from textbooks, but from direct engagement with today’s complex business environment.”

ELECTRICITY USAGE APP

The SLE proved to be invaluable to Hamdan Al Mulla, who together with team members Ahmed Al Zaabi, Asmaa Yousef, and Abeer Al Mansoori proposed a mobile app that can detect a consumer’s real-time usage of water and electricity. Al Mulla was among 17 MBA students who showcased their early-stage projects in December 2015, after developing them over a period of 15 months through the SLE.



Hamad Dalmook,
an MBA student at ADSM



Abu Dhabi School of Management

“Our idea is for an app that would increase people’s awareness of their water and electricity consumption. This app would obtain data from Abu Dhabi Water and Electricity Authority, and we as a company would put it into a software that can inform customers about their daily usage,” explained Al Mulla.

“The UAE has one of the highest water consumption rates per capita, about 550 litres per day. Likewise, electricity usage per capita is very high, between 20 and 30 kilowatt-hours per day. By putting knowledge into consumers’ hands, we would encourage them to cut down on their consumption. Also, if they were traveling and saw activity on their app, they would be alerted of a potential leakage at home.”

To get feedback on their idea, the team visited the General Secretariat of the Executive Council, which is the authority entrusted with proposing Abu Dhabi’s general policies and strategies. The Council referred them

to the Regulation and Supervision Bureau (RSB), the independent regulatory body for the emirate’s water and electricity sector.

“The RSB liked our proposal and said they will look into it. Based on our studies and estimates, we can start the project with a capital of Dh100,000,” said Al Mulla, adding that the concept was considerably narrowed down over the course of the SLE. While originally, the team planned to cover the whole of Abu Dhabi with their app, as they researched, it became apparent that this would be unrealistic.

“We discovered that different tariffs apply for locals and expatriates and we cannot request data on people’s nationalities, so we redefined our project to focus on local residents.

We also found that industrial and commercial rates differed, so we agreed to concentrate on the residential sector. What I personally learnt from the SLE is that the more you plan and research, the higher your chances of success will be and the less likely you will face unexpected circumstances.”

MAKING USE OF PALM FIBRE

Meanwhile, a collection of eco-friendly items adorned one of the exhibits at ADSM. Unlike products made from date palms fronds, these items, which included baskets and bracelets, were made from a much tougher part of the tree – the fibre.

“We discovered that the UAE has about 40 million date palms. While fronds are reserved for companies

We want to recycle and reuse paper. Recycling one ton of paper can save around 682.5 gallons of oil, 26,500 litres of water, and 17 trees.



Muna Al Tamimi, an MBA student at ADSM

to make products out of, fibres are usually burnt, which heavily pollutes the air," explained team member Dalal Al Qubaisi.

"We want to recycle date palm fibre and utilize it, thereby reducing this pollution. In India, there is a machine that can produce ropes out of coconut palm, so we could use it in the same way but for date palm. We can also provide the material to entities such as the Family Development Foundation in the UAE, who could then give it to elderly women to create handmade products and make profit."

Al Qubaisi's team estimates the project would require Dh500,000 to cover the costs of a farm, machinery, and about 10 workers. Agreements would then have to be secured with the municipality in order to provide them with the palm trees.

"At first, we didn't even realize we could make products out of this material, but through the SLE, we carried out research and visited the

UAE's older generation, who informed us that they used to make many things out of date palm fibre." The team also visited several relevant events and exhibitions, such as Al Dhafra Festival, which is dedicated to the protection of the country's historical heritage.

A PLACE FOR PAPER WASTE

For Hamad Dalbook, an MBA student at ADSM, the SLE was a journey that helped him understand how to turn an idea into a promising endeavour. "Our project proposes the collection of paper waste from firms, schools, and universities, recycling it, and then using it to manufacture things like home accessories, handbags, artwork and even small furniture," he said.

The four-member team, which included Nisreen Ahnish, Arar Ateeq, and Saoud Ateeq, found that 50% of waste generated by businesses consisted of paper. "We want to recycle and reuse paper. Recycling one

ton of paper can save around 682.5 gallons of oil, 26,500 litres of water, and 17 trees."

At first, Dalbook's team was interested in reusing plastic, but through the SLE, they discovered that commercial plastic recycling was far too common; hence their switch to paper. They also reconsidered the logistics— while initially the idea was to collect the paper waste themselves, they eventually concluded it would be more cost-effective for businesses to drop off their unwanted paper.

"To start the project, we would require Dh740,000, which would cover marketing, labour and machinery. We expect to break even in the second year if things go as planned," explained Dalbook. "Through the SLE, we've learnt how to start our own business, from shaping an idea and identifying market demand, to transforming the concept into something you can actually do."

HEALTH-CONSCIOUS COMMUNITY

Similar dedication was shown by Muna Al Tamimi, who led a team of four to develop a concept for a holistic wellbeing centre in Abu Dhabi. According to her, the late Sheikh Zayed Al Nahyan, the first UAE president, tasked his government with building capabilities in health and social welfare, seeing UAE citizens as instrumental to the nation's collective success. "

"That's why he established Zayed Sports City," she said. "But today, it has become more of a leisurely destination than a health-oriented one. Our project – Aura Wellbeing Centre – aims to nurture the mind, body and soul. I have undertaken numerous courses in meditation, yoga, reiki, and hypnotherapy throughout India, Malaysia and Dubai, and feel confident about this project's success."

What I learnt from the Signature Learning Experience is that the more you plan and research, the higher your chances of success will be.

I was very distant from financial planning; now I know how to prepare a feasibility study.

As part of the SLE, the team interviewed therapists in the UAE and overseas, gathered information about the approvals they would need, and worked out ways to market the new venue. Their research revealed that the majority of today's physical problems stem from psychological issues, including obesity and addictions. Moreover, they found that the local medical tourism industry was worth around \$100 billion, indicating huge potential for their project.

Al Tamimi admitted that the concept was initially much larger and perhaps unrealistic. 'About one year ago, we envisioned it as a complete island, but that would require a significant investment. So we changed the idea to a centre, which led to a massive reduction in capital costs, from Dh25 million to Dh620,000,' she explained. 'We will still give the island proposal and associated feasibility study to the government as a social contribution.'

An entrepreneur at heart, Al Tamimi already runs her own fashion and beauty businesses, yet her commercial awareness remarkably improved after the SLE. 'I was distant from financial planning; now I know how to prepare a feasibility study. Even the modules we covered in the MBA helped, because we had to think about how

to apply every subject to our project, be it accounting, strategy, or decision analysis.'

FOOD DEHYDRATION

Another health-conscious project invited attendants to sample a colourful selection of snacks, including potatoes and orange slices, which had been dried using a food dehydrator. This device uses a heat source – electric, solar or biomass – and air flow to reduce the water content of food and aid in its preservation.

Removing moisture restrains various bacteria from growing and spoiling food, thereby extending their shelf life. However, the biggest advantage of food dehydration is that it retains nearly 100% of the vitamins and minerals in fresh food in a remarkable array of concentrated flavours, while inhibiting the growth of bacteria.

'Food dehydrators exist in places such as the UK and the U.S. but mostly in India. We want to establish a local project, by UAE nationals, using a larger version of this device,' said Sarah Al Matrooshi, one of the team members behind the project. 'We conducted a survey of 100 people and found that oranges, apples and berries were the most popular dried foods. There is also high demand for nutritious food because people have become more health conscious.'

Dehydrated potatoes seemed like a bizarre choice for a healthy snack. However, Hilal Al Junaibi, another team member, explained that the product would be used in a different way, by adding water onto it to create instant mashed potatoes.

'We experimented with a variety of fruits and vegetables, and tried to dehydrate kiwi but it didn't work. Although you can find it on the market, they apparently retain its shape by using preservatives,' said Al Junaibi. 'On the other hand, we succeeded in dehydrating jalapenos. The end product can live up to 30 years and is very nutritious; we found scientific evidence to support that.'

To get the idea off the ground, the team would need to purchase a large-scale food dehydrator, available on western markets. They estimate the start-up capital to be Dh7 million, of which Dh1.5 million would be invested in machinery and the rest in infrastructure and labour. 'The SLE took us through the entire project step by step,' commented Al Matrooshi. 'For example, we initially wanted to market the products in magazines, but were advised to use social media channels as they would be faster. We were also advised to create a strategy for manufacturing and distribution.'

ADSM's graduate students represent a variety of industries from both the private and government sector, and the MBA approach is helping them develop entrepreneurial skills that they can use whether they continue in their current occupations or set up their businesses one day.

'Our vision is to become the hub for entrepreneurship and innovation in the UAE and the Middle East,' concludes Dr. Abonamah. 'The majority of our students at ADSM are Emirati, nearly 99 percent, so we are committed to Emiratization and will continue to be a major contributor to the development of UAE nationals.'

- Heba Hashem

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