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**Breaking the MBA Delivery Mould: A Multi-Group International MBA / Practitioner  
Virtual Collaborative Project\***

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## **Breaking the MBA Delivery Mould: A Multi-Group International MBA / Practitioner Virtual Collaborative Project**

### **Abstract**

The marketing education project presented here brings together a major UK financial institution in the banking sector and a selection of its high value clients (B-to-B) via e-mail, telephone, video conferencing and other web-based technologies, with two geographically dispersed MBA classes in the UK and the US. Student groups were set up in virtual teams to target critical customer issues, analyzing gaps in the client-company interface. The two MBA courses included Customer Management & Quality Systems delivered at the University of Manchester, Manchester Business School (UK) and International Marketing, delivered at Missouri State University (US). The groups worked as a "think tank" collaborating to solve important customer service issues.

### **Introduction**

Most classroom based curricula designed for MBA students attempt to introduce an element of real world scenarios to produce business relevance from the interplay between participants' experiences. Additionally, many professors introduce some form of project based group learning exercise to emulate business-based teamwork settings. The two universities where this research was undertaken both adopt similar versions of project based student-centered forms of assessed work. Typically a range of assignments are employed from research papers and case study analysis to role play. However, even the most detailed case method is by definition a "snapshot" of the real world, and thus tends to lack important data and individual circumstances such as specific organizational politics and culture. Attempts to overcome the lack of real world application are sometimes surmounted by the inclusion of an occasional guest speaker or service-based learning exercises for contextual benefits. While this pedagogical style in classroom surroundings is highly suited to marketing and management programs, these methods tend to lack the immediacy of the day-to-day issues and priorities practitioners encounter in business operations, and are thus a compromise.

By far the greatest criticisms of MBA programs are that graduates are ill-equipped to meet the challenges of dynamic and global business requirements. A number of factors are blamed for this including: 1) Professors at business schools lack the necessary business experience; 2) many MBA courses are too theoretically inclined; 3) liaison between business schools and stakeholders is inadequate; 4) the development of people skills is neglected (Bickerstaffe 1996). In marketing, as with most disciplines, a stream of criticism has emerged in connection with the lack of flexible curriculum that espouses academically (and theoretically) focused program specifications. As Stanton (2006), Wind (2000), and Schibrowsky et al. (2002) have pointed out, marketing courses favor theory over application which does not adequately prepare students for their working lives. Of major importance here is the misconception that academic theories will invariably, and automatically, translate into commercially viable solutions with class interaction and use of examples. In reality, the success or failure of this approach tends to hinge on the instructor's background, vis-à-vis experience and close-to-market thinking. In general, however,

US and European MBA programs tend to lack a good underpinning of commercial relevance, which sadly reduces employers' expectations of candidates. Given the world-wide disparity in the delivery modes of MBA programs, international evidence has emerged over the last decade that suggest some business schools fail to meet the needs and expectations of business practice (Hofmeyr 1990; Neelankavil 1994, p. 39).

The need to reform marketing education at MBA and other levels to ensure educators establish a regime of commercial relevance and collaboration among academics and practitioners has and does remain a pressing issue for Business Schools. The ideals and goals surrounding "theory into practice" remain at the forefront of educational standards and benchmarking within the sector. Hence, there is undoubtedly a need for practical changes in widely adopted delivery methods. Some attempts to encapsulate commercial relevance have included interdisciplinary projects (Alden et al. 1991; Goel and Straight 2005) and the embedding of skills during a pre-stage (Cannon and Sheth 1994; Mitchell and Strauss 2001; Schibrowsky et al. 2002) to the development of marketing international business projects or tracks. These latter forms of instruction involve collaboration with clients via endorsement (see Linrud and Hall 1999) and a fuller integration with direct practitioner involvement in course delivery. Such approaches are by far the most popular as these develop learning through real world business project collaborations.

In general, business collaboration and communication effectiveness is becoming ever more elusive as a greater number of workers interact from dispersed locations (Hollis 2005). Globalization is also a driving force requiring firms to be capable of effective collaboration over vast distances. This global expansion has led to more organizations seeking forms of virtual technology to discuss major transactions and hold company meetings (Marquez 2006). Dawson and Clements (2004) advise that we need to "take advantage of new technologies that provide greater connectivity with each other and with information, regardless of location..." Matlay and Westhead (2007) would support this position suggesting that a substantial proportion of growth-oriented firms are actively pursuing a variety of innovative and international collaboration strategies.

Developing virtual teams is one method of dealing with the global dispersion of workers. Peters and Mantz (2007) describe virtual teams as being comprised of members located in more than one physical location. Majchrzak et. al. (2005) suggest that enterprises are using more and more distributed teams to leverage resources in various markets. They stress that team members need to develop their "collaboration know how." In a study of communication behavior in virtual teams, Gloor et al. (2008) brought together students from Helsinki University of Technology and the University of Cologne to collaborate in a multi-user computer game. They examined elements of the social network structure among team members and performance. Findings suggest that the number of communication links and balanced contribution were good predictors of team performance.

Ultimately, the application of these communication and collaboration theories must be viewed as relevant for today's eclectic mix of businesses. It therefore follows that establishing what broadly constitutes commercial relevance in classroom experiences is paramount, and may diverge considerably from traditional marketing program specifications. One way to establish relevance is to focus on a specific industry which has a particular marketing problem to solve.

Within such a scenario it is possible to identify marketing practice applications thereby creating as much transferability as possible for course participants. Above all, this type of project or assignment-based learning must be carefully managed and monitored to assist completion and success rates.

Integrating various forms of virtual communication, the research presented in this paper details a method which successfully transgressed the psychological barriers that prevent scholarly requirements from matching practitioner perceptions of commercial relevance. This cross-cultural collaboration utilizes virtual teams of MBA students in the US and UK, together with a major financial institution in the UK and allows the students to examine real world customer issues for the UK firm. Students are grouped in virtual teams spanning two continents and are required to work together to provide valuable outcomes for the firm and its clients.

### **Pedagogical Design**

From the outset, a close relationship existed between Manchester Business School in the UK, and Missouri State University in the US. This was of major importance as the relationship was already established and protocols in place. The MBA classes differed substantially with a mature executive full-time cohort in the UK and a mixed part-time and full-time group of students in the US. This difference was both an advantage and problematic as experiences varied and the extent to which relationships developed sometimes hinged on this factor. In addition, the modules entitled Customer Management & Quality Systems and International Marketing were different, however, the fact that one class was an international class allowed us to structure the project around almost any marketing topic pertinent to international business. The project adopted an ethos and scheduling that integrated and managed the student experience in a real-time business engagement. The project required students to:

- Establish various methods of virtual communication, including within group communication, group-firm communication, and group-instructor communication
- Communicate group goals to all stakeholders using multiple channels over long distances
- Analyze and develop academic, practitioner and student knowledge to specified goals
- Develop and produce a completed work with valuable outcomes remotely
- Understand the importance of knowledge transfer to all parties in a relationship

Teams were comprised of 9 separate groups, each with 2 students from the UK and 4 students from the US. The within group disparity was due to the numbers who had elected to take the courses, which totaled 18 in the UK and 36 in the US. The UK university had an established relationship with a major client and blue chip business in the financial services sector, the Halifax Bank of Scotland (HBOS), which provided services/products to business customers.

The nature of the project was determined by the host organization, HBOS, and as such their remit determined the approach and orientation both theoretically and practically. The company furnished an outline of the tasks to be undertaken and a set of their clients for the student groups to interview. The company also made a presentation via live web-cast which provided students in the UK and the US with the organization's profile and latest data regarding its client base. As

the primary issues under investigation dealt with the B2B relationships and the processes and systems that maintained them, it was towards this general area of the literature that MBA student groups on both sides of the Atlantic converged. The nature of the project required students to work flexibly to establish real time partnerships between their counterparts in Manchester Business School and Missouri State University, the HBOS Company and a small number of their high profile business clients. HBOS also provided the students with a brief which contained the tasks and objectives outlined in Figure 1.

**Figure 1**  
**HBOS Brief**

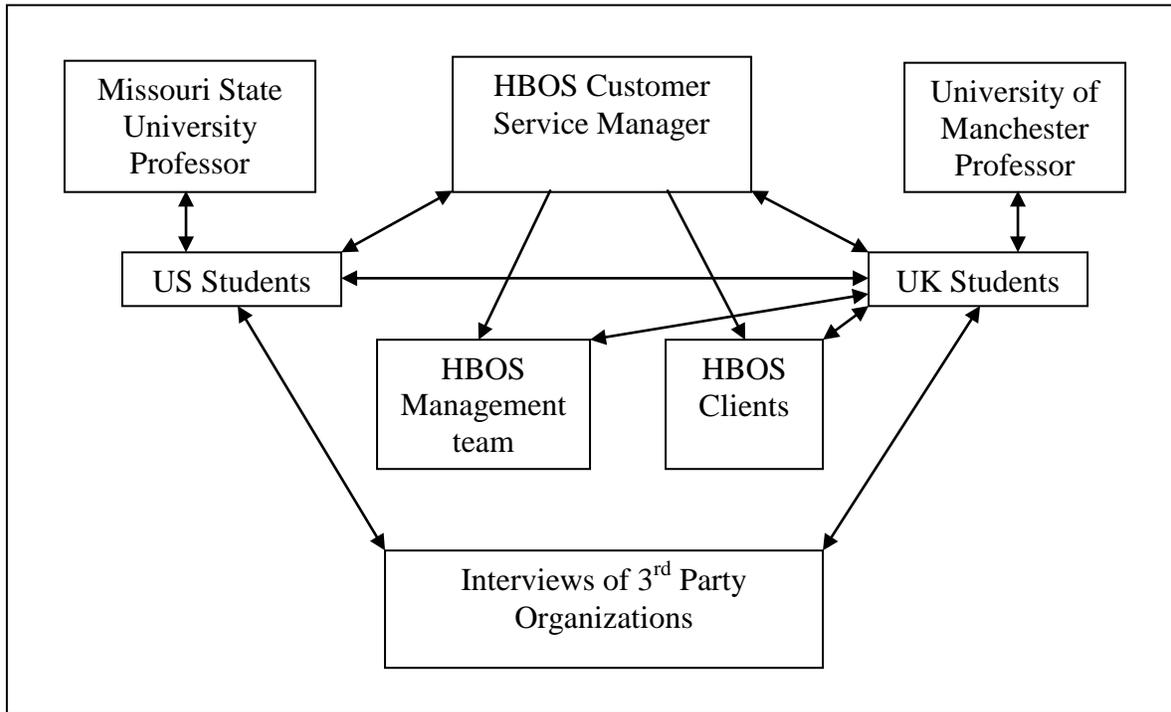
**Project Objectives**

- Perform a detailed audit of the systems and processes, ensuring you identify or highlight possible leakages and leverages that may influence the client partnership arrangements, and how each of these substantially serve the needs of the client.
- Investigate other industry sectors with a view to establishing the differences in systems and processes and/or relationships that have emerged or have been developed for B2B client management.
- Critically review and compare the HBOS partnerships and exchanges with best practice in other organizations, and organize these facts into a benchmarking matrix.
- Review the client measurement system and suggest potential alternatives and methodologies for focusing and reviewing what you believe or understand to be key service measures in B2B markets.
- Prepare an interim concise verbal report and deliver this in groups at a mid way point in the course. US group members will be present and may be required by their UK partners to respond, subject to communication limitations.
- Jointly in groups, prepare and deliver a final report which will contain the audit of your selected industry, process mapping, benchmarking of practices and your detailed recommendations to HBOS.

To generate the required outcomes, collaborative research and the frequent exchange of ideas took place between student groups (UK-US) throughout the course. Participants were required to interface in real time via Windows Live Messenger, which has a web cam video function and other electronic means such as e-mail and conference calls. For each of the groups, one of the members based in the UK had the opportunity to interface directly with the Company, and visited HBOS to arrange and prepare interviews and discussions with account managers, executive officers and several high-profile clients. This formed a major part of the research substance for the end-of-project report. To assist with this, direct contact was arranged by the company's representative with a small number of HBOS (B2B) clients to gather perspectives and expectations. The US segment of students also provided a quantity of data in the form of academic articles and personal interviews of third party US practitioners related to their relationships with their best clients. This provided an alternative perspective for both HBOS

and the UK members of the team. Figure 2 illustrates the various required contacts in the communication process graphically.

**Figure 2**  
**Communication Framework**



The technology used to facilitate the live web cast was straightforward and consisted of a Panasonic DV100 digital video camera connected via Firewire to a standard PC laptop running Windows XP. The use of Windows Media Encoder version 9 configured to stream a live feed via Windows Media Services was installed on a Microsoft 2003 Server. The IT team created an .htm file with embedded .asx viewer for the stream. The live feed was initiated at 14:30 hours GMT from the UK on the day of the presentation for ease of access for both groups. This was ultimately picked up by the US students (and some MSU academics) in their workplaces at 9:30 am CST.

All students worked with their overseas counterparts in the preparation of reports, which were required to contain both UK and US contributions to the project. Furthermore, each group was tasked with the documentation of all communication exchanges and contributions, which were logged and dated for the final report. Academic work and articles were required to theoretically support each group's recommendations, vis-à-vis the importance of the service encounter and the reinvention of a B2B service culture across the business. In addition, groups were told to consider the leveraging of technology if these measures significantly advanced the profitability of the business via customer satisfaction. Finally, the opportunities for other institutions to

collaborate in similar ventures are reviewed with audience participation. Further opportunities to roll out hybrids and the creation of publishable output are discussed with guidance for interested collaborators. Finally where expenditures could be identified the project requirements called for an outline of a business model with cost estimations and expected improvements. To measure the effectiveness of this project, we conducted student evaluations after the completion of the project.

### **Research Instrument**

A questionnaire was developed, in which the students participating in this project were asked questions related to their program of study, work and management skills, and the enhanced communication skills attained after completing the project. With reference to the project, students were asked to indicate how valuable and intellectually stimulating they found the work. A second stage measured relevance to the course and course objectives. Later stages measured communications, or the degree to which the project enhanced their individual skills, and learning from a personal and practitioner standpoint. Other questions sought to derive some indication of the practitioner relevance attainable with this type of group project and the extent to which the project contributed to students' personal development. Two later stages of the questionnaire introduced a series of qualitative statements which solicited a critique of the delivery methods and/or timelines.

### **Results**

The students completed the questionnaires (N=39) which included demographic information and Likert scale items related to measure the student's goal orientations, the value of the project, and communication effectiveness. The Likert scale items were measured on a 5-point scale with anchors of "strongly agree" to "strongly disagree." Several interesting findings resulted.

Male students ( $\mu = 4.3$ ) more than female ( $\mu = 3.7$ ) students felt they gained insights from this project which would be useful in their careers ( $p > .014$ ). US students ( $\mu = 4.0$ ) more than UK students ( $\mu = 3.3$ ) felt they learned how to better include everyone in group communications ( $p > .030$ ).

Students who said they are driven to succeed felt the project was intellectually stimulating (Pearson's correlation = .483) and agreed that they learned how to use different types of communication technologies (Pearson's correlation = .374). Students who said they are goal oriented agreed with all of the questions related to real life application of the project (Pearson's correlation = .449, .428, .401 respectively) and to the overall satisfaction question (Pearson's correlation = .497). Students who said they think of themselves as being self-sufficient also agreed with 2 of the statements related to the project's value (Pearson's correlation = .348, .412 respectively, see below).

Effective communication was a key to the success of the project. Students who said they learned how to communicate with other group members felt the project was a valuable learning

experience (Pearson's correlation = .402). They also felt the project was a good addition to the course (Pearson's correlation = .718). These students further indicated they were more goal oriented (Pearson's correlation = .388) felt they learned things they could apply (Pearson's correlation = .434), felt the project was relevant from a practitioner viewpoint (Pearson's correlation = .461), and were also satisfied with the learning experience from this project (Pearson's correlation = .579). The two groups that had difficulties in the communication aspects of the project rated lower on these measures than the groups that had successful communications.

### **Student Qualitative Comments**

We asked the students several qualitative questions related to the project to assess their experiences. When we asked students what they thought we could have done differently they said: 1) "I would allocate more time for the project...maybe whole semester...also more time for presentations"; 2) "More guidance as to what needed to be accomplished"; and 3) "I think this was a learning experience for all of us including the tutors."

When we asked students what they thought the best thing about this project was they said:

1) "Learning how not to be in charge of (in control) of everything"; 2) "The best thing ... is that people that work for HBOS management [are] really serious [about] the project"; 3) "Working directly with people from another country and learning/using webcam meetings for real time communication"; 4) "Working with group members from another country was a once in a lifetime experience"; 5) "Improved communication skills and learning the importance of flexibility when working with diverse members"; 6) "Do it again, make it just as "ambiguous", but try to shrink group size or increase time to complete the project"; 7) "It was difficult, but as was pointed out in class that is a good thing - good practice for real world situations"8) "Unique approach to teaching!"; 9) "Really cool project idea and great opportunity to work with international students"; 10) "I thought it was a good project relating to the business world and they might be able to utilize some of our findings"

### **Discussion**

From the outset, the intention of this project was to create a meaningful and pedagogically sound assignment that crossed the boundaries and, as Stanton (2006), Wind (2000), and Schibrowsky et al. (2002) have argued, produced a marketing module that prepared our students for work in a manner that logically and selectively applied theory to applications in the real world. In this sense, we wished to break the mould in terms of the learning that would take place, and maximize the number of parties that truly benefited from the results and mode of delivery. The innovativeness arose, therefore, in the way in which the academic foci were chosen, the partners selected, and the communications between them managed. In the case of the latter, the geographic locations of the various partners became as important for the creation of knowledge as the participants' contributions.

Pre-project scoping exercises for the module contents had revealed dissimilar module objectives, content and delivery methods. However, rather than obstructing project goals this in many ways enhanced the value of the project to all parties. In essence, the additional real and oftentimes impossible challenges our MBA students faced the greater the *perceived* and actual benefit. We wish to point out that this is by no means a unique occurrence; however it does serve as an indicator for future marketing curriculum development and the selection of delivery modes.

In terms of the challenges faced, participants encountered greatest difficulty with communications between clients and their individual group members, and agreeing on the identification of cross-culturally suitable theories and their possible application to the marketing scenarios defined by HBOS. In general, companies in the UK fall short of acknowledging the use of academic theories. In many cases the same can be said for US businesses which follow a similar albeit more open-minded stance on the value of academic work. This is especially so in marketing where theoretical framework dimensions connect clearly and relevantly to business practice. Notwithstanding this, the large majority of service organizations use consultancy solutions and market research findings to drive managerial decisions and change. When transposed into actual business settings and environments we believe communication challenges to be the most likely reasons for breakdown in cross-national (and global) team collaboration and (inevitably) task accomplishment. Indeed, many of the UK teams stated that they routinely undertook such tasks in financial services contexts and had experienced the types of communication problems we grasped and dealt with in the project. The different career stages of the US participants placed them to benefit most from this learning curve. Academically, this takes into account Hofmeyr (1990) and Neelankavil's (1994) assertions regarding the international aspects of business practice, and the business school's preparedness to deal with and face these issues head on. We believe that the innovative project that this paper reports produced a wide range of real situations almost identical to those found in global business environments.

One of the primary techniques employed by the student groups was Servqual (Zeithaml, et al. 1990). The collaborating organization HBOS was an exception to the rule and had (reservedly) employed Servqual techniques in the past and was thus more open to the application of other academic theories. As discussed above, student groups were required where possible to select literature that dealt with financial services applications (see for example, Mangold and Babakus 1991; Lam 1995; Cronin and Taylor 1992; Teas 1993; Avkiran 1999; and Bahia and Nantel 2000). Here, the use of Servqual and gap analysis provided not only a way to examine the various client- provider interactions, but also highlighted previously unknown aspects of these exchanges. These exchanges were identified in direct and indirect terms within the B2B relationships, and students sought to identify dimensions which represented '*robust indicators*' of service quality (see Woo and Ennew 2005). Other contributions from the academic literature and the benchmarking exercise with US companies revealed the developed use of performance indicators (e.g. Six Sigma) and customer advocacy. A significant amount of the detailed recommendations provided by the student groups is currently under consideration by the HBOS Company. In particular, the use of the IMP model (Wilson 1995) and indicators of service quality which provided the company with a directly relevant series of measures that assist with, via the removal of leakages, client partnership arrangements and interactions. The company

further intends to run a 2008 MBA project to explicate and refine the degree to which they should engage with the global consumer market issues that impact directly on their B2B clients.

### **Conclusion**

The multifaceted characteristics of the project also created concerns for the authors who naturally hope for a positive response from the student groups. End of module evaluation suggested that for the most part, students appreciated the opportunity to be exposed to a real-time business situation. Most of the responses to Likert scale items and qualitative responses related to the project were very positive. Interestingly, the more positive responses emanated from (US and UK) students who were statistically more goal oriented or driven to succeed. The practitioner response has also been extremely positive and the company has contributed funds for additional research and virtual communications equipment.

While the overwhelming response was positive, some students commented negatively about the project. They indicated that the project was too complex, that there wasn't enough time, and that the project was too ambiguous. However, these comments were limited primarily among 2 of the groups which had some difficulties in achieving regular group communications. One of the most common communication problems for these 2 groups was the failure to include everyone in all communications (i.e. replying to an individual with an e-mail rather than replying to all). The most successful groups were able to communicate across multiple channels and include everyone in some form of virtual conferencing on a weekly basis.

The two universities have also formed a much stronger bond as a result of this project. We expect to have a great deal of cross-institutional collaboration in the future. The university has also benefited in their ability to establish IT links and streaming video feeds. Overall the project turned out to be a win-win-win!

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