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Towards and **MBA** selection model: a South African case study

"MBA admission systems should be of the same high quality as the best systems used by the organisations hiring their graduates."

George F Dreher and Katherine C Ryan

The recent MBA reaccreditation process driven by the South African Council on Higher Education's Higher Education Quality Committee caused many institutions offering MBA programmes to re-evaluate their admission systems.

The admission systems used by South African business schools vary greatly. Some schools merely have stated minimum admission requirements – compliance to the requirements means automatic entry or registration on the MBA programme.

Other schools require applicants to comply with stated admission requirements and subsequently use the Graduate Management Admissions Tests (the so-called GMAT). The GMAT primarily evaluates the numeracy and verbal skills of the applicant.

For a South African applicant, sitting for the GMAT is relatively expensive. The test is contextualised for American applicants to graduate programmes and tends to be culturally biased.

Experience has shown that South African schools making use of the GMAT, rarely apply the same strict admission principles as those in the USA using the

GMAT. Evidence exists that applicants with scores well below accepted norms for admission to US MBA programmes are admitted to some South African MBA programmes although these schools use their insistence on applicants having taken the GMAT in their marketing.

In a recent article by George F Dreher and Katherine C Ryan entitled *A suspect MBA selection model: The case against the standard work experience requirement*, published in the *Academy of Management Learning and Education Journal*, an interesting statement on MBA admission systems is made: "MBA admission systems should be of the same high quality as the best systems used by the organisations hiring their graduates."

This statement echoes the approach developed by the University of Pretoria's Graduate School of Management (GSM) in 2001 for the selection of suitable candidates to admit to the MBA programme.

The rationale behind the approach of the GSM was first to determine the profile of the MBA graduate to be delivered to the market. This was achieved by consulting with various stakeholders of the GSM.

The MBA programme design was a derivative of the profile of the ideal graduate. Again stakeholder involvement was core to the design process. Subsequently, the ideal profile of entrants to the programme was compiled.

The profile included competencies such as management potential, information literacy, language proficiency, idea fluency and emotional intelligence. The challenge was to design an admission process and instruments that would select for these competencies.

The GSM consulted with SHL to develop an assessment strategy for the MBA admissions process. Founded over 25 years ago, SHL is the world leader in objective people assessment based on the science of occupational assessment.

The GSM ideal MBA competency profile was mapped onto the personality characteristics measured by the SHL occupational personality questionnaire (OPQ32i). The ipsative version of the instrument is used for the MBA selection process. The mapping is shown in Table 1 overleaf.

Although the GSM profile meant that only 10 of the 16 competencies assessed

by the OPQ32i were deemed to be crucial, a decision was made to take all 16 competencies into consideration when evaluating an applicant. This decision was based on the relevance of the other competencies from a business perspective – for example competencies such as strategic thinking, a quality orientation and personal motivation.

In addition to the OPQ32i instrument, two other SHL instruments were included in the selection tests, i.e. a numerical critical reasoning instrument (NMG3) and a verbal critical reasoning test (VMG3). The former measures the ability of the applicant to take correct decisions or inferences from numerical data whereas the latter measures the ability of the applicant to evaluate the logic of various kinds of argument.

The GSM took the decision to develop an in-house in tray type test as part of the selection process. The test was designed to give an indication of the English language proficiency (including writing skills), idea fluency and aspects of information literacy. The test is administered as part of the battery of tests and is graded in-house by an information specialist.

The final step in the selection process is a personal interview conducted with each applicant by an admissions panel. The panel consists of two to three panel mem-

GSM COMPETENCY	SHL COMPETENCY based on OPO32i
Management potential	Leadership
Aspects of information literacy	Planning & organising
Aspects of emotional intelligence	Persuasiveness
Aspects of information literacy	Problem solving & analysis
Aspects of language proficiency	Verbal communication
Aspects of language proficiency	Written communication
Idea fluency	Creativity & innovation
Aspects of emotional intelligence	Interpersonal sensitivity
Aspects of emotional intelligence	Flexibility
Aspects of emotional intelligence	Resilience

Table 1.

bers, typically a staff member of the GSM, a lecturer on the MBA and/or an Alumnus of the School.

The decision on whether to admit an applicant is based on the weighted average of the scores achieved by the candidate.

The GSM has conducted studies to determine the correlation between the scores on the admission tests taken by successful applicants and their subsequent academic performance on the MBA. To date, only a limited sample of students (50) has completed the full MBA programme since the introduction of the selection process.

Nevertheless, the ability of the selection process to predict success on the MBA seems to be impressive. Anecdotal evi-

dence obtained from lecturers who have taught on the GSM MBA for many years, points to a vast improvement in the quality of students admitted to the programme.

In the same vein, lecturers teaching on the GSM MBA as well as other highly regarded MBA programmes in South Africa as well as internationally, have commented on the quality of the GSM MBA students.

One comment from one of the gypsy professors teaching on the GSM MBA, refers to “the willingness and ability of the GSM MBA students to explore the fuzzy boundaries of new management thinking.” This correlates well with what has been described in information science literature as typical behaviour of information literate people. ■