

SUCCESS WITH OFF-SHORE DBAs: EXPERIENCES FROM HONG KONG AND THAILAND

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ABSTRACT

Offering professional doctorates such as the DBA to off-shore students is inevitably complex, as dissertation-based doctorates are still based upon a master-apprentice relationship—something that is difficult to replicate in an off-shore setting. In addition, there can be problems in terms of the need for intensive teaching and insufficient local administrative support and facilities. This paper details the most significant problems inherent in offering off-shore DBAs on the basis of the Program Directors' experiences in the Graduate School of Business at Curtin University of Technology. For each identified problem, the solutions used by Curtin are detailed to provide an overall picture of possible problems and solutions in the areas of teaching, supervision and administration.

INTRODUCTION

Curtin University of Technology offers its DBA degree in three different locations—Perth (Australia), Bangkok (Thailand) and Hong Kong (P.R. China)—using three different models. As no Curtin faculty involved in the DBA reside overseas, alternative approaches have been developed to take off-shore students through the coursework and dissertation components of the degree. Off-shore research oriented degrees present administrators and faculty a range of challenges and this paper outlines the specific strategies that have been used in the areas of teaching, supervision and administration to overcome these challenges and make these off-shore programs a success.

BACKGROUND

The number of students undertaking doctoral degrees within Australian universities has exploded since the 1990s. Whilst much of the focus concerning Australian doctoral degrees has focussed upon the PhD, it is the professional doctorate that is growing most quickly with student numbers growing by over 70 percent between 1995 and 2001 (Maxwell & Shanahan 2001). However, professional doctorates—of which the DBA is just one—tend to lack a coherent structure in terms of what is required compared to the well-established PhD. To appreciate how Curtin has developed and implemented an off-shore DBA, it is necessary to consider the structure of our DBA and its aims as a research doctorate.

While it is possible to complete a DBA that is made up entirely of course-work, the traditional model is to include a significant research component. In the case of the Curtin DBA, the research component comprises approximately two-thirds of the program and the coursework makes up the other one-third. In this way, the Curtin DBA is recognised as a research doctorate.

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Offering a heavily research-oriented DBA brings its own set of problems. On one hand, it is desirable to support the research process by including in the course-work phase a number of research methods units. However, it is well recognised that research students in the social sciences are 'unlikely to embark upon careers in which they [will] continue to work in the narrow research areas of their theses' (Parry & Hayden 1994, p. 118). Instead, the degree is intended to provide students with advanced skills and a depth of experience that enables them to address problems in a wide range of areas (Parry & Hayden). As such, there are inevitably trade-offs in relation to breadth versus depth. At Curtin, we have provided a reasonable level of breadth through offering three functionally oriented units (covering philosophy and business, strategy, and a third unit that is seminar based and considers a range of theories pertaining to contemporary business issues). There are two methods units (covering quantitative and qualitative research methods). And there is an international business unit that includes both international business theory and methods issues that are relevant to international research—thus being both a methods and a functionally oriented unit simultaneously.

As the course-work component is a small part of the overall program, the Curtin DBA tends to be faculty intensive. This has made it particularly challenging to take the DBA product off-shore successfully, given the cost and complexity of involving many faculty, for relatively few students (primarily because of the need to engage in distance supervision). However, it is going to be necessary for more and more universities to find ways to make off-shore DBAs viable as the pressure to offer DBAs off-shore increases. The growing demand for higher education in Asia (and other regions) and the need for educational institutions to attain a greater percentage of their money from sources other than government grants makes it inevitable that many institutions will push for their professional doctorates to be offered off-shore in the same way that undergraduate and MBA degrees have also headed off-shore for many institutions. This paper details how the Graduate School of Business within Curtin University of Technology has established, and now runs, two off-shore versions of its DBA course.

TEACHING

Of all the different components of an off-shore DBA, the teaching component is probably the easiest to master. At Curtin, on-shore units are traditionally taught on Saturdays, spaced out over a number of weeks. Off-shore the teaching tends to occur in more intensive blocks whereby an entire unit may be taught in as little as a Friday evening and then all day Saturday and all day Sunday, over two consecutive weekends. Pre-readings and some activities need to be completed in advance of the classes for this to work effectively. However, intensive offerings of courses tend to be the norm for most off-shore programs due to the cost of maintaining faculty at an off-shore location for any extended period of time.

This highly intensive mode reveals two major problems. Firstly, the speed of the unit makes it difficult to help students catch-up with any aspects of the material that they did not grasp and, secondly, the opportunities for tacit knowledge regarding academic matters to develop are more limited, as university life tends to occur via intensive blocks rather than regular attendance at the university (which allows for corridor discussions, attendance at staff/student seminars, etc.) and is important in assisting completion (McWilliam & Taylor 2001).

To counter these two problems some different strategies have been developed. To help students who are struggling, faculty make themselves available in the block of time (Monday through to Thursday before teaching starts again) for intensive, one-on-one remedial tutorials. In the case of the Hong Kong program, this is supplemented by working with a local partner (Lingnan University) that teaches almost half of the coursework. This allows for local support to be provided—even in those units where the lecturer is from Curtin. The other strategy to minimise this problem is to make sure it does not happen in the first place—in essence, select students that are unlikely to struggle through the program. While getting the right students is always important, getting the right students when the program is off-shore is absolutely critical as the potential to provide intensive assistance to help them through the program is very limited. For this reason, Curtin has set high entry requirements into the DBA which include an appropriate Masters degree (such as an MBA) from a recognised institution, a Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL) score of 580 or above where the language of instruction for this degree was not English, and a minimum of six years work experience (including some at a managerial level). In addition, interviews are held with all potential candidates to assess their potential and to ensure that they have a clear understanding of what a Curtin DBA degree involves. In this interview a considerable portion of the time is devoted to making sure there are clear expectations as to just how much work will be required to complete the DBA.

The tacit knowledge issue is more difficult to address. For example, what are considered appropriate journals, what is the appropriate balance in regards to a theoretical versus practical orientation in the dissertation, what is the appropriate model for a business-based dissertation and how do you develop your academic writing style (Webster 1998)? In some respects these types of issues are best dealt with during the dissertation component where the supervisors can provide highly specific recommendations. However, resolving at least some of these issues early on make it easier for the supervisors once candidacy has been achieved and allow students to start mulling over possible research topics from day one. It is therefore efficient to cover at least some of these issues when all students are together and developing their knowledge in these early units.

One strategy has been to run an extensive orientation session (taking an entire day) right at the start of the program. In addition, for the Bangkok program, there is a compulsory one-month residential that is held for all students in Perth during the coursework period. While it may only be one month, this time purposefully includes at least two staff seminars, as well as time away from formal instruction to literally engage in corridor discussions. Also, as the residential is in Perth and not Bangkok, the students cannot continue to work on their day jobs and are able to immerse themselves in academic life all day every day—without distraction.

There is no residential component for the Hong Kong program, but staff seminars and other activities are conducted by our partner institution in Hong Kong, and in all off-shore programs more wrap-around components are being added. For example, specific sessions are now held on academic writing and preparing for candidacy. In many ways it is the non-functionally oriented knowledge that creates the greatest value amongst graduate students (Brabazon 2002) and, if we wish to remain successful, we will need to continue to develop more add-on components that create value amongst our students. Certainly to create the type of DBA graduates that we desire, it is important that all students do more than simply complete the course-work and write a thesis. Rather, we must expose them to some of the breadth of business research such that they are not just well trained researchers, but that also

learn to think and integrate knowledge and not simply engage in surface learning (Biggs 1999). In summary, these strategies, or something similar, are likely to be required by most programs, as fly in- fly out approaches without additional support are unlikely to be sufficient at the doctoral level.

Certainly the issues of fast-paced teaching and the need to engage students more in general academic life have been the two most complex issues that we at Curtin have had to face. However, it is also worth briefly reviewing some of the other issues to consider in taking a DBA degree off-shore. Firstly, there is the issue of whether to replicate the content entirely or make some changes. In our case, we have made small changes—primarily to better align the content with the local environment. For example, for the Hong Kong program in the philosophy unit, there is greater coverage of ‘Eastern’ philosophy as opposed to letting ‘Western’ philosophy dominate. Similarly, the international business unit contains some specific recommendations regarding translating and other issues that may be important in collecting data from China. In the strategy unit, I have found that the readings have remained the same, though I have had to become far more conscious of the North American (and Australian to a certain extent) focus that I unconsciously employ in my teaching. Simple changes such as the examples used are sometimes all that is required to contextualise the teaching materials.

On a related note of being culturally sensitive, it is worthwhile ensuring that all faculty teaching on the program are culturally aware of the do’s and do not’s. Some reading, a briefing by an appropriate person in a university’s international programs office or someone that is familiar with the culture, may be all that is required. It is often not the obvious issues, but often minor points such as the appropriate dress-codes for different events, or business card etiquette, that may be problematic. Staff in partner institutions, and students, are likely to overlook cultural oversights, however, cultural sensitivity can be just another way of demonstrating commitment to the program.

The spacing of units will be dependent upon the number of units in the program and the workload involved. We try to schedule units to take place two to three months apart, but what is likely to be more important is that the program is set well in advance and that they are locally appropriate (i.e. they do not clash with Chinese New Year or other major holidays). As the students tend to be relatively senior managers and, therefore, very busy, it is critical that they can plan up to a year in advance and take annual leave at appropriate points.

Finally, one approach that has worked well in the context of the Curtin DBA is to allow students to audit the appropriate methods unit once they start work on their dissertation. The students learn a lot when they undertake the unit initially, but once they have their research topic selected, they often like to take the qualitative or quantitative research methods unit a second time to refresh their memory concerning some of the methods issues that will be particularly pertinent to their research project.

SUPERVISION

Supervision is probably the most difficult of all areas to manage in an off-shore setting. The fundamental problems are a lack of face-to-face communication (at least on a regular basis) and for various reasons (not constantly being motivated by interactive sessions, less frequent contact, etc.) completion rates are both lower and the time taken is greater with off-shore

programs. Doctoral research degrees are inherently faculty intensive and it is not appropriate for off-shore students to provide copies of their work and for supervisors to provide written comments on this work as the only medium of interaction for the length of the entire program.

To counter this problem, there are a number of possible solutions. The first is to simply maximise the amount of face-to-face contact—even if it is in intensive blocks. Luckily, in Hong Kong, Curtin has almost 2,000 students studying for various business degrees and this necessitates regular travel to service these students (in other programs) for a number of faculty. Almost all faculty involved in the DBA program get to travel to Hong Kong on a semi-regular basis and can therefore meet with their DBA students whilst in Hong Kong. Most universities will not be able to replicate this model and we certainly needed an alternative approach for our Thailand program (where there are no other Curtin programs). To allow for some regular contact, there is a much smaller team involved in the Thai program so that all supervisors get some face-to-face contact with students. Thus far, the small number of students involved has meant that only some of those who teach on the program are presently supervising students.

Having faculty travel off-shore is one way to ensure face-to-face contact. The other approach is to get the student to come to the faculty member. To do this we encourage all off-shore students to take some holidays and travel to Perth for some intensive research and regular contact with their supervisor. We are able to provide the student with a computer, office space in our building, and basic facilities. Sometimes a couple of weeks working on their dissertation with their supervisor is all that is required for a student to re-motivate themselves and ‘break the back’ of a particular section.

When face-to-face communication is not possible, alternative forms of supervision are required. In terms of communicating with students, some technology that holds great promise, but is only starting to get off the ground, is real-time audio and video links via broadband. Student and supervisor can see each other via basic web-cam. The picture is not great, but a \$20 camera allows for each person to see the other’s facial expressions and other motions. The audio is very clear. And the majority of the computer screen is taken up with a document that both parties can see. For example, a supervisor may scroll through a student’s submission and highlight a section and then talk about the changes that need to be made. The document and the highlighted section will also show on the student’s screen and this can be a much better way of reviewing work as opposed to simply writing comments all over it. This technology is web-based, cheap to install and requires relatively little bandwidth (anything better than a 56k modem is normally sufficient). While this technology is only being experimented with by a couple of supervisors, meetings between supervisors and students on a fortnightly, or even monthly, basis using this technology is likely to improve our supervisory process.

Until these new technologies become more common, we are still forced to communicate via email and telephone, with larger documents—such as chapters—being sent via the post such that the supervisor can write notes all over the document. However, the ability to supervise students primarily through the use of email should not be discounted. While we do everything possible to try and increase the amount of face-to-face contact between student and supervisor, the reality is that most of the communications between the parties at present is via email. Interestingly, in reviewing different forms of supervision from students’ perspectives, Cullen et al. (1994) provide case examples of successful outcomes where almost all

supervision was email-based (and these were not with off-shore students). Our approach is that while this will work for some students, the greater the options are in terms of student and supervisor interaction, the greater the success rate is likely to be.

Given that the supervisor cannot take quite such an active role in many off-shore programs, an alternative strategy to assist students in the research phase of their degree is to help with the creation of study groups. In the Curtin DBA off-shore programs, the different intakes tend to stay together, as all students are part-time. As the students progress through their research the ability to share functional academic content diminishes, however, discussions about response rates (and how to maximise them), different data analysis tools, structure of the thesis, etc. can be very valuable. We have used some different approaches to try to maintain operational study groups for all intakes, however, our success rate has seen only about half of the groups continue past the coursework phase of the program.

Choosing supervisors for off-shore students can be problematic. In theory, the best supervisor is the faculty member whose research interests and knowledge of the field (including the proposed methodology) correlates most closely with the student's proposed project—though this approach is less dominant in the social sciences (Parry & Hayden 1994). However, this tends to take a very content-oriented perspective, and it is also necessary to consider the process—especially as the student-supervisor relationships is still presently based around an apprentice-master notion (Cryer 2000). Because of the complexities of off-shore supervision, we try and balance the content and process issues regarding supervision and at least initially tried to appoint supervisors that had considerable experience. While every new doctoral qualified faculty member needs to take on their first doctoral student at some stage, doing this in an off-shore setting (especially as the primary supervisor) is probably not the optimal first assignment. To this extent, we still have approximately three-quarters of our off-shore DBA students supervised by one of five experienced supervisors.

To provide a balance to the supervisory team, each student must now have a panel of three faculty members. These are the Chair of the Committee, the primary supervisor and at least one co- or associate supervisor (who does not have to be a member of Curtin). In the case of Hong Kong, the primary supervisor is from Curtin and the co-supervisor comes from our partner university—Lingnan University. We make sure that if the Curtin supervisor is not as close to the content as we might like that the co-supervisor is a content expert. Having a local supervisor (through Lingnan) has worked very well, especially for students who do like a lot of face-to-face contact. For the Thai program, both the primary and co- or associate supervisors come from Curtin. Again, the primary supervisor has to this point always been a highly experienced supervisor and additional skills (be these in methods or aspects of the theoretical base) can be provided by the co- or associate supervisor. Ensuring that the supervisor is experienced, and in most cases is part of the team that teaches on the DBA, has an additional benefit—it ensures that faculty do not come to the process with the concept that the DBA is nothing more than a slightly scaled down PhD. While the exact content and orientation of the DBA varies between universities, a DBA is different to a PhD in that it is designed so that students make a contribution to knowledge in relation to professional practice (as opposed to simply a contribution to knowledge).

Given the increasing numbers of students in the DBA program, both in Perth and through our off-shore programs, the supervisory load on particular members of staff is now very high. To counter this, considerable discussion has been held regarding trying to get students to work on

similar projects so that they can work with each other more and create economies of scale on the part of the supervisor. This model is often used in some of the hard sciences and also in the social sciences in some of the large PhD programs in the United States (Cullen et al. 1994). As the DBA is designed to build and extend business professionals' knowledge of the field (both theoretically and practically), this more prescriptive approach to finalising topics and selecting supervisors has not been used.

ADMINISTRATION

The administration of off-shore DBA programs is far more involved than on-shore programs. In our experience, problems have emerged in two main areas. The first of these is in relation to facilities/support materials. Teaching venues are relatively easy to access, and partnering with a local university can be a good way to ensure that these are appropriate. Access to appropriate library facilities can be more problematic. Hong Kong universities (being well funded and based on the British model) are excellent. However, there are many Asian countries where alternative arrangements need to be made (especially when some articles and books cannot be accessed via the electronic databases). Even providing access to electronic databases can be complex due to copyright legislation and whether students residing outside of the country for which the database was purchased can legally use the facility (this is something that is changing constantly and it is important that library staff keep program managers updated).

We have got around the library access problem by partnering with a local institution that can provide adequate library facilities and, if necessary, we will send hard copies of materials from our own collection to the student once they get to the dissertation writing stage. Thus, even in Thailand, where we teach the entire program and take on all of the supervisory responsibilities, we still partner with a local university for the purposes of accessing teaching facilities and, most importantly, their library facilities.

The final major problem area is software access. Students need bibliographic software (and we now provide copies of Endnote as a matter of course) and data analysis software (such as SPSS, NUD*IST). Beyond Endnote, we arrange access to appropriate software on a case by case basis.

One of the significant changes that has occurred in relation to doctoral research over the last decade is the establishment of departmental and institutional structures and initiatives to support what can otherwise be a relatively isolated process (Cullen et al. 1994). At the Graduate School of Business, one of our more successful initiatives has been the creation of a doctoral conference. The conference allows for students to present work in progress, and contains theoretical, methodological and empirical streams. Papers are limited to 10 pages (plus references) and are reviewed by faculty members. Reviews are designed to be constructive, rather than critical. The doctoral conference is now in its fourth year and continues to grow each year. Not only does it provide students with a particular goal to work towards and an opportunity to share knowledge amongst one's peers, it is also an important networking event. For this reason the program has been designed to have longer than standard lunch, morning and afternoon teas breaks. It also includes a cocktail reception on the first evening. As the majority of our students are part-time and many of them reside overseas, the doctoral conference represents an important avenue for interaction. One of our doctoral conferences has been held in Hong Kong (with the others being in Perth) and we

encourage our off-shore students to try and attend. A limited number of them do attend and present some of their work.

At the institutional level, considerable efforts have been made to improve and standardise the supervision process. Training sessions are now run regularly within Curtin and attendance of a limited number of these is required to remain on the doctoral supervisors register. Considerable efforts have also been made in terms of specifying the responsibilities of both students and supervisors and these documents are provided to all supervisors and students. In an off-shore setting, this documentation can be particularly useful in giving students a clear understanding of what is expected and, for them, and what they can expect from their supervisor.

Finally, there needs to be some sort of local partner or representation for on-site administration for day-to-day issues/problems (e.g. distribution of course materials). Feeling isolated seems to be one of the major problems for off-shore students and so the better the local representative and the more regular they (and we in Australia) are in contact with the students, the better they perform and the more satisfied they are with the program. Overall, the students want to know that we care, and if we show this commitment (e.g. local representatives, a dedicated program manager, quick responses to student queries) then they are far more likely to forgive us and stay with the program when we do inevitably make mistakes (Simpson 2000). From our experience, students want a program as similar to what we offer in Perth as possible and any programs that do not provide adequate on-site support tend to be viewed as money making exercises and they very quickly get a bad reputation.

CONCLUSION

There is a large demand for professional doctorates in many countries through Asia, the Middle East and other regions that are not traditionally seen as major educational centres, but the best faculty in the world will not overcome a poorly designed program that does not adequately support the student in terms of the teaching program, provide supervision that minimises the 'distance education' feel and provide appropriate facilities and support services. To this effect, on the basis of Curtin's experience in taking our DBA into two off-shore markets, I would recommend carefully considering the nature and content of the teaching component, the organisation of supervision and what administrative support is required before simply taking an existing DBA and hoping that it will be effective in this new context.

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