

Hong Kong Executive Business Students' Motivations for Pursuing an MBA

EDMUND R. THOMPSON

University of Hong Kong
Hong Kong, China

QIN GUI

Capital Normal University
Beijing, China

Because of a number of factors, it is imperative for management educators in both the East and West to understand clearly why Asian, particularly Chinese, executives decide to obtain a master's degree in business administration. First, demand for executive MBAs in Asia generally, and in China specifically, is set to grow enormously as governments marketize economies and investors realize the need for professional, indigenous managers (Johnstone, 1997; Kamis, 1996). By 1996, foreign joint ventures in China alone needed around a quarter of a million professionally trained managers—a thousand times more than the country's annual production of MBAs at that time (Chen & Martin, 1996; Micklethwait, 1996). As China and the rest of Asia attract increasing amounts of direct foreign investment and continue to liberalize their markets, demand for MBAs is likely to run into the millions (Frazer, 1999).

As demand for MBAs in Asia escalates, supply is also growing. Not only are more local universities offering MBA programs throughout the Asia-Pacific, but increasing numbers of Western business schools are seeking to tap the Asian market (Mansfield, 1996). Some schools have set up satellite operations in Asia, such as Richard Ivey School of Business, which in 1998 set up a Hong Kong executive MBA pro-

ABSTRACT. Using data gathered directly from over 100 executive MBA students in Hong Kong, this article reveals the reasons why executives decide to pursue an MBA and highlights significant differences in motivations by gender, age, educational background, and working experience that have important implications for MBA course and program developers.

gram (Tapp, 1998), or INSEAD, which is building its own campus in Singapore (INSEAD, 1999). Many more Western business schools now offer distance-learning MBAs in Asia, and more will do so as on-line, Web-based programs continue to develop (Davis, 1999; Gerencer, 1998; Murphy & Dunkin, 1999; Phillips, 1998; Pieterse, 1998; Stevens, 1999).

Some Asian and Western business schools might aspire to offering "Asian" MBAs, but this has seldom amounted to more than a few relatively superficial gestures of localization, such as case studies on regional firms. The MBAs offered in Asia are very much a Western import, and Western management education models have hitherto predominated (Whitely, 1995). However, the need to adapt teaching and learning approaches in management education to national and regional contexts has long been recognized (Cheung, 1998; Thanopoulos, 1986). This necessity applies particularly in Asia, where real

differences in learning styles have been documented that go beyond the Confucianist-derived, learn-by-rote stereotypes (Biggs, 1996; Cogan, 1984; Hofstede, 1980; Lee, 1996; Perotti & Bridges, 1993; Pratt, 1992; Redding, 1980; Watkins, 1998; Watkins, Reghi, & Astilla, 1991).

Given the need to make nonsuperficial adaptations in MBA programs to ensure their appropriateness for Asian students, the present trend of rethinking and restructuring MBAs should allow truly Asian MBAs to be formulated, too (Carpenter, 1998; Cudd, King, & O'Hara, 1995; Hancock, 1998). As educators set about designing specifically Asian programs, they will need to ensure, as Hattenhouse (1998) has observed, that new MBA contents and structures accurately reflect the attributes and demands of local and niche markets. Because in Asia it is very often the individual executive who decides to study, and generally pay, for an MBA, understanding the reasons why they decide to undertake a lengthy and expensive program of study is a vital starting point for planning and implementing the new Asian MBA.

This research pinpoints the important reasons why Asian executive students decide to undertake an MBA. Although Hong Kong, with a population of under seven million and a gross domestic

product per capita of around U.S.\$25,000, can hardly be regarded as representative of all Asia in its vast diversity, it does offer an especially compelling source of data, not just because the population is Chinese, but because Hong Kong has been described as a "window city" for Mainland China in educational terms (Lee & Postiglione, 1994). Hong Kong is a portal through which the mainland views and absorbs Western-derived educational methods and trends and may well form the basis for future executive MBA programs throughout China.

Method

First, 130 executive MBA students studying at the School of Business, University of Hong Kong, where the medium of instruction is English, were asked to respond in writing to an open-ended question about why they were studying for an MBA. Over a third responded. These qualitative responses were collated, and a scale of items was drawn up that covered all points raised by two or more respondents. An instrument was then administered asking the same 130 students to state on a 5-point Likert-type scale to what extent they either agreed or disagreed that various items were important in their decision to pursue an MBA. To enhance the response rate and control against nonresponse bias, we administered the instrument after 2 weeks, urging nonrespondents to reply. A total of 113 usable instrument returns was finally achieved, for a response rate of 87%.

The final sample of 113 responses represented a reasonable cross section of the surveyed population of 130 MBA students (see Table 1). The population comprised four different classes of part-time students. Testing for nonresponse bias was rendered more or less redundant by the 87% response rate. However, comparison of first- and second-wave respondents revealed no significant bias, so the results could be regarded as highly representative of the overall population. Though a population of part-time MBA students in Hong Kong cannot be taken as a completely reliable indicator for all of Asia, it can be regarded as perhaps at least a reasonable proxy for Chinese executive MBA students.

TABLE 1. Sample Profile

	Population (no.)	Returns (no.)	Response rate (%)
Females	61	51	84
Males	69	61	88
< 35 yrs.	Not known	76	N/A
≥ 35 yrs.	Not known	31	N/A
Degree holders	84	68	81
Without degree	46	45	98
Total	130	113	87

TABLE 2. Motivations for Pursuing an MBA

<i>The following are very, very strong reasons why you decided to pursue an MBA:</i>	No.	M	Variance
To improve your analytical ability	112	4.5	0.57
To learn more about business management	113	4.4	0.35
To get an MBA degree qualification	113	4.4	0.43
To learn practical approaches to business management	112	4.3	0.42
To make you better at your job	113	4.3	0.50
To obtain better prospects of switching career path	111	4.2	0.77
To learn theoretical approaches to business management	111	4.0	0.56
To improve your own self-esteem/image	112	3.9	0.78
To make new business contacts	113	3.7	0.88
To make new friends	112	3.7	0.85
To make more money	111	3.5	1.22
To gain the respect of others	112	3.4	0.74
Good way to use spare time	111	3.0	1.32

Note. Scale ranged through 1 (*strongly agree*), 2 (*disagree*), 3 (*neutral*), 4 (*agree*), and 5 (*strongly agree*). Items are listed in order of mean score and not by the order in which they originally appeared in the survey instrument.

Results

The written reasons respondents gave for deciding to pursue an MBA related to a number of areas. Most mentioned general and specific learning goals, from better powers of analysis to certain functional managerial skills. Many also mentioned job- and career-related objectives, ranging from improved work efficiency to making business contacts. Also mentioned were personal objectives such as enhancement of self- and public image. A minority stated what might be termed social reasons for undertaking study, such as making friends and, perhaps most surprisingly, passing spare time.

Overall motivations relating directly to learning objectives scored the highest means, 4.0 and above (see Table 2). Students appeared genuinely to want to

learn more about management and how to analyze business situations from a practical and, to a slightly lesser extent, theoretical perspective. All the items relating to learning goals had relatively low variances, suggesting considerable unanimity among the sample about the high importance of these objectives. With improvement of analytical ability scoring the highest mean, 4.5, apparently respondents were not interested in simply memorizing "management by rote," even if such a thing were possible. The high means accorded to learning both practical and theoretical approaches to management indicate a strong desire to use conceptually oriented analysis on which to base workable management solutions rather than perhaps generic or stylized ones. This suggests that there may be little need to alter the core, quan-

titative aspects of the traditional MBA that provide analytical tools. However, in applying theory, especially in the “softer” areas of MBA programs, such as human resource management, local context and cultural mores may need to be considered more thoroughly.

Career Qualification

Respondents also decided to pursue an MBA simply for qualification—the piece of paper and initials after their names—for career purposes. In the written responses, many students had straightforwardly written that they just “wanted to get an MBA,” an item receiving a high mean of 4.4. Items concerning the enhanced ability to change career direction and the development of business contacts received means of 4.2 and 3.7, respectively. Perhaps most curious in a city where the inhabitants like to joke openly about their obsession with becoming wealthier, the item relating to making more money scored only a mean of 3.5. However, the relatively high variance for this item, at 1.22, indicates a wide difference in its importance among respondents.

Personal and Social Motivations

Personal and social reasons generally received lower means, with the exception of self-esteem, which scored 3.9. Respondents saw an MBA qualification and what they learn from it as increasing their confidence both in themselves and about their jobs and careers. The development of personal confidence was more important than the approval of others, which obtained a mean of only 3.4. The mean score for making new friends was the same as for making new business contacts, 3.7, suggesting that these may be regarded as equivalent. The fairly high importance of this factor suggests that distance-learning and Web-based MBA programs, which involve very little, if any, interstudent contacts, may not be as useful or successful as class-based programs.

Gender Differences

A comparison by gender revealed a number of differences that MBA pro-

TABLE 3. Motivations by Gender

<i>The following are very, very strong reasons why you decided to pursue an MBA:</i>	Females (M)	Males (M)	F statistic
To improve your analytical ability	4.5	4.5	0.060
To learn more about business management	4.5	4.4	0.138
To get an MBA degree qualification	4.4	4.3	1.021
To learn practical approaches to business management	4.4	4.2	0.975
To make you better at your job	4.4	4.2	2.082**
To obtain better prospects of switching career path	4.4	4.0	2.124**
To learn theoretical approaches to business management	3.9	4.1	1.269
To improve your own self-esteem/image	4.0	3.9	0.757
To make new business contacts	3.7	3.7	0.140
To make new friends	3.6	3.7	0.617
To make more money	3.7	3.4	1.194
To gain the respect of others	3.4	3.4	0.004
Good way to use spare time	3.0	2.9	0.200

Note. Scale ranged through 1 (*strongly agree*), 2 (*disagree*), 3 (*neutral*), 4 (*agree*), and 5 (*strongly agree*).

*Significant at the 10% level.

**Significant at the 5% level.

***Significant at the 1% level.

TABLE 4. Motivations by Age

<i>The following are very, very strong reasons why you decided to pursue an MBA:</i>	< 35 yrs. (M)	≥ 35 yrs. (M)	F statistic
To improve your analytical ability	4.3	4.7	2.932***
To learn more about business management	4.5	4.5	0.069
To get an MBA degree qualification	4.4	4.3	0.622
To learn practical approaches to business management	4.3	4.2	0.659
To make you better at your job	4.3	4.3	0.553
To obtain better prospects of switching career path	4.3	3.9	2.719***
To learn theoretical approaches to business management	4.0	4.1	0.721
To improve your own self-esteem/image	3.9	4.0	0.931
To make new business contacts	3.7	3.6	0.482
To make new friends	3.7	3.7	0.016
To make more money	3.6	3.3	1.261
To gain the respect of others	3.4	3.4	0.141
Good way to use spare time	3.0	2.8	0.851

Note. Scale ranged through 1 (*strongly agree*), 2 (*disagree*), 3 (*neutral*), 4 (*agree*), and 5 (*strongly agree*).

*Significant at the 10% level.

**Significant at the 5% level.

***Significant at the 1% level.

gram and course developers might usefully bear in mind (see Table 3). Female respondents were more highly motivated than males to learn practical as opposed to theoretical approaches to management, and females were also significantly more driven to do better at their jobs and secure improved career-switching prospects. Both items relating to these issues show a statistically significant difference at the 5% level. The

explanation for this might be women's stronger desire to make more money, as the item relating to money showed a score of 3.7 for women compared with 3.4 for men.

Age Differences

Significant differences dependent on the age of executive MBA students also turned up (see Table 4). Those who

TABLE 5. Motivations by Work Experience

<i>The following are very, very strong reasons why you decided to pursue an MBA:</i>	< 8 yrs. work experience (M)	≥ 8 yrs. work experience (M)	F statistic
To improve your analytical ability	4.2	4.6	2.607***
To learn more about business management	4.6	4.4	1.730*
To get an MBA degree qualification	4.4	4.4	0.032
To learn practical approaches to business management	4.3	4.3	0.602
To make you better at your job	4.2	4.4	1.449
To obtain better prospects of switching career path	4.3	4.1	1.345
To learn theoretical approaches to business management	3.9	4.0	0.473
To improve your own self-esteem/image	3.9	4.0	0.311
To make new business contacts	4.0	3.5	2.745***
To make new friends	3.8	3.6	1.419
To make more money	3.6	3.4	1.062
To gain the respect of others	3.6	3.4	1.136
Good way to use spare time	3.0	2.9	0.253

Note. Scale ranged through 1 (*strongly agree*), 2 (*disagree*), 3 (*neutral*), 4 (*agree*), and 5 (*strongly agree*).

*Significant at the 10% level.

**Significant at the 5% level.

***Significant at the 1% level.

TABLE 6. Motivations by Educational Background

<i>The following are very, very strong reasons why you decided to pursue an MBA:</i>	Degree holders (M)	Without degree (M)	F statistic
To improve your analytical ability	4.4	4.6	1.925*
To learn more about business management	4.5	4.4	0.432
To get an MBA degree qualification	4.3	4.5	2.019**
To learn practical approaches to business management	4.3	4.3	0.769
To make you better at your job	4.3	4.3	0.484
To obtain better prospects of switching career path	4.3	4.1	1.303
To learn theoretical approaches to business management	4.0	4.0	0.463
To improve your own self-esteem/image	3.8	4.2	2.203**
To make new business contacts	3.8	3.5	1.934*
To make new friends	3.8	3.5	1.185
To make more money	3.6	3.5	0.553
To gain the respect of others	3.4	3.4	0.026
Good way to use spare time	2.9	3.1	0.793

Note. Scale ranged through 1 (*strongly agree*), 2 (*disagree*), 3 (*neutral*), 4 (*agree*), and 5 (*strongly agree*).

*Significant at the 10% level.

**Significant at the 5% level.

***Significant at the 1% level.

were 35 or more years of age were significantly, at the 1% level, more motivated to improve their analytical ability than those under 35 years of age. Older students were also significantly less motivated, at the 1% level, by the desire to obtain career-switching prospects through an MBA. The prospect of mak-

ing more money was a less-important deciding factor for older executive students than for younger ones.

Work Experience Differences

A similar pattern of differences emerged for length of work experience

(see Table 5). However, those students who had worked for less than 8 years indicated that simply learning more about business management was a significantly more important reason in their decision to pursue an MBA than it was for those with more work experience. Students with less work experience were also significantly (at a 1% level) more motivated to make new business contacts, suggesting that younger, less-experienced executives might be less receptive to distance learning than to methods involving considerable fellow student contacts in pursuing an MBA.

Educational Background Differences

Many executives in Asia have had relatively little formal education, so tests for differences in means between degree and nondegree holders were undertaken (see Table 6). Those without a previous degree were significantly more motivated to improve their analytical ability than those who already had a degree, and indicated more strongly that "getting an MBA" was an important factor in their decision to study for it. The reason for this could be personal desire to improve their own self-image and self-esteem, as students with a degree gave a mean of 3.8 for the self-esteem item, compared with 4.2 for nondegree holders, a difference significant at the 5% level. However, both degree and nondegree holders gave the item relating to respect from others exactly the same mean of 3.4, with very similar variances. Though such differences relating to self-esteem may not have implications for the structure of MBA programs or the design of courses, they can usefully be taken into account by instructors in their course delivery.

Conclusions

As demand for MBA degrees in Asia continues to grow, the comparative trickle of programs offered will undoubtedly turn into a flood as Eastern and Western universities begin to crowd the market. Only those programs that develop reputations for delivering what Asian students really want will be able to achieve the continuing success of

particular graduate schools of management throughout Europe and North America. Moreover, only if Asian MBA programs satisfy Asian students' demands will the degree itself be able to maintain its currency.

The starting point for satisfying Asian demand for MBA programs must be an understanding of why Asian students decide to undertake an MBA in the first place. Not only are the motivations for undertaking graduate management study likely to be different in the East compared with those prevailing in the West, but they are also likely to differ within Asia. Clearly, comparative research is needed to establish what these differences are. Moreover, as has been shown to be the case in Hong Kong, motivations for pursuing MBAs differ significantly by gender, age, work experience, and educational background. Finding out these differences is relatively easy, and account should be taken of them when the patterns of intake composition are known and as they change over time.

REFERENCES

- Biggs, J. (1996). Western misperceptions of the Confucian-heritage learning culture. In D. Watkins & J. Biggs (Eds.), *The Chinese learner: Cultural, psychological and contextual influences* (pp. 45-68). Hong Kong: Comparative Education Research Centre.
- Biggs, J., & Watkins, D. (1995). *Classroom learning: Educational psychology for the Asian teacher*. Singapore: Prentice Hall.
- Carpenter, R. (1998, October 30). The (your specialty here) MBA. *Canadian Business*, pp. 48-50.
- Chen, M., & Martin, D. W. (1996). Mountains of gold. *China Business Review*, 23(3), 26-29.
- Cheung, C. K. (1998). Business education in Hong Kong after 1997. *Journal of Education for Business*, 73(6), 333-335.
- Cogan, J. J. (1984). *The Japanese-U.S. Global Awareness Survey: Implications for training social studies teachers*. Presentation paper for the 10th Annual Conference of the Eastern Economic Association. Global Education Center, University of Minnesota, 110 Pattee Hall, Minneapolis, MN.
- Cudd, M., King, J. O., & O'Hara, B. (Eds.). (1995). Assessment of the nature and status of the MBA restructuring trend. *Journal of Education for Business*, 71(1), 44-48.
- Davis, J. (1999, February 8). Duke finds virtual classrooms teach communication. *InfoWorld*, p. 66.
- Frazer, A. J. (1999). A scouting report on training options. *China Business Review*, 26(1), 44-47.
- Gerencher, K. (1998, December 21). MBA programs go online. *InfoWorld*, pp. 71-72.
- Hancock, T. (1998). The new MBA: Flies in the paradigm. *Business Horizons*, 41(4), 41-44.
- Hettenhouse, G. W. (1998). The new MBA: A journey just begun. *Business Horizons*, 41(4), 45-48.
- Hofstede, G. (1980). Motivation, leadership and organisation: Do American theories apply abroad? *Organisational Dynamics*, Summer, pp. 42-62.
- INSEAD. (1999). *INSEAD Euro-Asian Centre programmes*. [On-line]. Available: <http://www.insead.fr/EAC/programs.htm>
- Lee, W. O. (1996). The cultural context for Chinese learners: Conceptions of learning in the Confucian tradition. In D. Watkins & J. Biggs (Eds.), *The Chinese learner: Cultural, psychological and contextual influences* (pp. 25-42). Hong Kong: Comparative Education Research Centre.
- Lee, W. O., & Postiglione, G. A. (1994). The "window effect" on education and development in South China. *Chinese University Education Journal*, 21(2), 111-121.
- Johnstone, H. (1997). Lesson in supply and demand. *Asian Business*, 33(6), 58-59.
- Kamis, T. L. (1996). Education for the PRC executive. *China Business Review*, 23(4), 36-39.
- Mansfield, D. (1996, January 29). U.S. business schools look to new markets overseas. *Marketing News*, p. 8.
- Micklethwait, J. (1996, March 9). The search for the Asian manager. *Economist*, pp. S3-S5.
- Murphy, K., & Dunkin, A. (1999, April 5). Welcome to the world of MBA.com. *Business Week*, p. 120.
- Perotti, V. S., & Bridges, C. R. (1993). A comparison of the business correspondence of Hong Kong and Ohio business students. *Bulletin of the Association for Business Communication*, 56(4), 16-21.
- Phillips, V. (1998). Online universities teach knowledge beyond the books. *HRMagazine*, 43(8), 120-128.
- Pieterse, J. (1998, October 16). Web-based training in a nutshell. *Finance Week*, pp. 35-36.
- Pratt, D. D. (1992). Conceptions of teaching. *Adult Education Quarterly*, 42(4), 203-220.
- Redding, S. G. (1980). Management education for Orientals. In B. Garratt & J. Stopford (Eds.), *Breaking down barriers: Practice and priorities for international management education* (pp. 193-214). Franborough, UK: Westmead.
- Stevens, L. (1999, April 19). Online MBA makes the grade. *InternetWeek*, pp. 31-34.
- Tapp, L. G. (1998). Keeping Canada competitive. *Ivey Business Quarterly*, 63(1), 9-10.
- Thanopoulos, J. (Ed.). (1986). *International business curriculum: A global survey*. Cleveland: Academy of International Business.
- Watkins, D. (1998). A cross-cultural look at perceptions of good teaching: Asia and the West. In J. J. F. Forest (Ed.), *University teaching: International perspectives*, pp. 19-34.
- Watkins, D., Reghi, M., & Astilla, E. (1991). The Asian-learner-as-a-rote-learner stereotype: Myth or reality? *Educational Psychology: An International Journal of Experimental Educational Psychology*, 11(1), 21-34.
- Whitely, A. M. (1995). The hegemony of Western business management literature in non-Western settings: A Hong Kong study. *Journal of Teaching in International Business*, 7(4), 65-89.