



## education & training

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**FEARGAL LEONARD**

### A Masters degree in Business Administration by distance learning

There is a recognition that doctors require management skills and many are now studying for formal qualifications in management. This article describes a Masters degree in Business Administration (MBA) with the Open University.

There has been an emphasis on the training of clinical skills and research during higher specialist training, with the result that management training has been relatively neglected. A survey of newly appointed consultants in old age psychiatry found that while most aspects of their training were adequate, the training in management was insufficient (Loane & Barker, 1996). Structural changes within the NHS have made it more necessary than ever for clinicians to have expertise in management. The College outlines the aims for higher training in management (Royal College of Psychiatrists Higher Specialist Training Committee, 1998). It is expected that the trainee will gain knowledge of time management, knowledge of management structures in the NHS and the ability to develop new services and training through involvement in the setting and monitoring of contracts. The methods that have been suggested to attain this knowledge include attendance at a management course, shadowing a manager or undertaking a management project. Is this sufficient or is there a need for more formal management training that goes beyond that which can be achieved in a short management course? The increasing numbers of doctors who are pursuing an MBA (Leung, 2000) indicate the realisation that more advanced skills and knowledge are now needed.

#### Which MBA?

An MBA is a general qualification in business administration that is open to anyone who has a first degree, although some institutions offer specialist degrees in health care administration. There are a large number of courses available that differ in three important parameters; cost, accreditation by the Association of MBAs (AMBA) and the method of study (full-time, part-time or distance learning). Cost varies immensely between different institutions and in some the cost is prohibitive for most people without sponsorship. Accreditation with

AMBA is an important indicator of the quality of the course offered. The different methods of study suit the varied needs of MBA students. The advantages of distance learning are that there is no time commitment during working hours, the student is allowed to pursue the programme while in full-time employment and the cost of the course is spread out over a number of years, thus easing the financial burden. The disadvantage is that it will take longer to complete and some may find it hard to maintain motivation without regular face to face contact with fellow students and tutors. Information technology has gone a long way towards relieving this isolation. The use of e-mail, the internet and computer conferencing has added considerably to the attraction of distance learning as a means of study.

#### Studying with the Open University Business School

The Open University MBA has AMBA accreditation. The degree can be completed over 3 or 4 years. The cost is in the region of £8000 and this can be paid by monthly direct debits if desired. There are two stages towards an MBA qualification.

##### Stage 1

Professional Diploma in management (2 years) or 'Foundations of senior management' (B800 – 1 year).

##### Stage 2

'Strategy' (B820 – 6 months) and three courses (each 6 months) from the following elective list: 'Financial strategy' (B821); 'Creativity, innovation and change' (B822); 'Managing knowledge' (B823); 'Managing human resources' (B824); 'The management project' (B826); 'The challenge of the external environment' (B885); and 'International enterprise' (B890).

The advantage of the 4-year route is that it provides a slow introduction into what, for most, doctors is a new discipline. It also gives the option of terminating study after 1 or 2 years and receiving a basic qualification (Certificate or Diploma). The basic Certificate qualification



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has previously been described and reviewed as a mostly enjoyable course (O'Brien & Sullivan 1997).

Stage two of the MBA consists of four modules, each of 6 months duration. The strategy module is compulsory and the student can choose three elective modules from the choices provided. This allows flexibility with the option of taking time out from study between modules. The Open University provides the necessary basic material in the form of specially prepared authored texts, set books, a course reader and audio-visual materials. Computing is an important part of the masters course and access to a suitable computer and telecommunications hardware and software is required. This allows the use of the internet to research available databases and industry sources as well as access to study group discussion. A tutor is allocated to each student, who is available by e-mail or telephone for advice and support. The tutor is also available at a number of 2-hour group tutorials that take place regularly throughout the course. A compulsory residential school (2–4 days) takes place towards the end of each module, which involves group work and the analysis of case studies while also giving the opportunity to meet managers from different backgrounds.

## Assessment

Each module is assessed by a mixture of continuous assessment and an end of course 3-hour exam. The tutor marked assignments contribute 50% of the final mark. These involve the writing of a report with application of the course concepts and models to analyse either a case study or the organisation where the student works. The end of course exam is in an essay format. The pass mark is 40% and the continuous assessment component must be passed. A resit of the examinable component of the course is allowed.

## Comment

The Open University has been a pioneer in distance learning and the high calibre of the courses provided by the business school is a result of their experience in this

area. The MBA programme is a well-presented and stimulating course. Worthy of particular praise are the specially prepared texts and audiovisual material, the innovative use of information technology and the residential school, which serves to bring together course concepts in a congenial and enjoyable learning environment. Every effort is made to apply the principles of management to non-profit making organisations such as the NHS, making it relevant for mental health professionals.

There is, of course, a substantial financial and time commitment. The University recommends 8–10 hours study per week for most of its business courses, but for anyone who has studied medicine it is unlikely that this amount of time is required, particularly for stage one on the programme. However, the academic standard moves up considerably in stage two of the programme.

The major problem that I have found is that the MBA is primarily aimed at people who already hold a management position and it can be difficult for people such as specialist registrars who do not have management experience or responsibilities to apply the principles of the course in an effective way. Whether the attainment of a degree like an MBA will make consultants better at their job is open to debate. At the very least it should give us the theoretical framework to analyse our service and plan strategically. Our increased understanding of the NHS as a whole and our own services should allow us to exercise our influence over management decisions and lead ultimately to an NHS that has more input from clinicians.

## References

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**Feargal Leonard** Specialist Registrar, The Maudsley Hospital, Denmark Hill, London SE5 8AZ