

The Forward-Thinking MBA

Amadeus Finlay talks to Susan Balint »

Q The Westminster MBA is divided into three phases, 'The Fundamentals', 'Integration and Application' and a dissertation. Kindly expand upon these academic approaches.

Well, as you know, the MBA is designed to give experienced middle-managers the skills, knowledge and confidence needed to operate at the highest levels of business. On our MBA, as with most, students come from a variety of backgrounds. Therefore, we must ensure, and very quickly, that there is a common level. This is achieved in the Fundamental Phase. The term 'fundamental' itself means that we have looked at the fundamentals of business, i.e. accounting, marketing, the economy etc. in order to provide a thorough grounding in each of these disciplines. We also ensure that students have the vocabulary and confidence to speak with senior professionals.

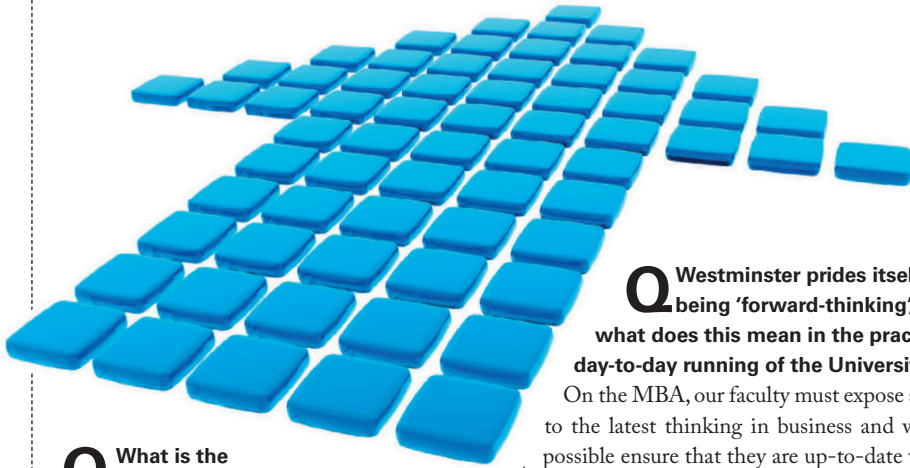
We then move onto 'Integration and Application' where our students are introduced to complex problems they will encounter in their actual working lives. In this section, therefore, we take real-life case-studies and analyse them from different perspectives. The students are then required to come up with realistic business decisions - senior managers, to a large degree, have to make decisions on the spot, often with inadequate information and time constraints. It is designed, essentially, to demonstrate to our students the trade-offs and multi-dimensional issues that constitute the modern workplace.

These two areas really cover the entire teaching structure of the MBA, but the third part, the dissertation, is a substantial piece of individual work that each of our students will complete towards the end of their time at Westminster. We encourage them to select a work-related priority, such as a management issue or a strategic objective, and to come up with a fully costed solution or set of recommendations.

It is important to note, however, that as part of the AMBA accreditation, we are expected to fulfil certain academic objectives and course stipulations, hence the layout of the programme as highlighted above. »

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Q What is the purpose behind including a week-long international trip?

Because business is global, we include a study-trip to encourage students to question stereotypes of different countries and to recognise there are different ways of doing business, different philosophies and approaches other than ‘the Western way.’ Thus, to be successful in global business, students need to recognise the importance of understanding different cultures.

The international study trip offers students a choice of different destinations. This way the students can focus on those elements they would like to discover about other cultures and expand their horizons as they feel fit.

On the trip we visit companies, dissect problems and meet with senior executives and consultants. There’s also an academic element that explores the cultural and historical side of the trip in order to provide further depth to the experience. It is not a holiday, but a very demanding international exercise. Saying that, our students like to work hard and play hard too!

Q What is the ‘Westminster Advantage’ and what benefits does this bring to students?

It is our philosophy and underpins the objective of the MBA and how we deliver it. We have very small cohorts and we deliberately keep them small in order to attract only the highest quality students and to encourage peer-learning. At Westminster we feel that peer-learning is incredibly useful for several reasons. Firstly, each individual learns from his or her own successes and, secondly, each individual can learn from the successes of others in their social and academic networks.

We distance ourselves from the lecture-seminar format at Westminster. Consequently, the course has been designed to be very interactive. In addition, we want the faculty to be viewed as ‘facilitators’ rather than seniors of the educational hierarchy.

Q Westminster prides itself on being ‘forward-thinking’, but what does this mean in the practical day-to-day running of the University?

On the MBA, our faculty must expose students to the latest thinking in business and wherever possible ensure that they are up-to-date with the most current events in the world of business. As faculty, we are always seeking to improve our programme and make our interactions with students more relevant. As a result, we meet as a unit on a frequent basis to ensure that our thinking and practices are up-to-date.

Q With respect to the successes of previous graduates, what does the future hold for an MBA student at Westminster?

Well, if the successes of previous graduates are anything to go by, then the answer would be a full realisation of one’s career aspirations. Obviously, anybody who enrolls in the MBA at Westminster has aspirations of working in business at a senior level and a whole host of our alumni have progressed to such heights.

Q What is the objective behind the residential weekend?

It is an integral part of our leadership and professional development module and there are a number of objectives behind it.

- An opportunity for students to spend more time with their cohort members.
- To undertake and become involved in activities like, assessment centres, leadership activities and outdoor pursuits.
- To tax and stretch the limits of the students in a variety of areas.
- To practice social skills and practical ideas that will help our students become successful senior executives.

Q The modern business world is becoming increasingly focused on the value of Corporate Social Responsibility. What is Westminster’s perspective on this essential element of contemporary business?
We have taken CSR and evolved it. We now study the areas of social, corporate and ethical

responsibility under the umbrella of the traditional CSR model. At Westminster we believe that CSR is an essential part of any company’s business model as well as one of the most important up-to-date elements of modern business. Thus, we stress the importance of incorporating CSR within an MBA programme as well as dissecting it into its smaller component parts.

We also encourage our students to get first-hand experience in CSR and the way we achieve this is through the module, ‘Social Corporate Entrepreneurship’. As part of this module our students go to Kampala, Uganda, for two weeks where they work as management consultants with charities there. This ensures that a term that is so easily banded around becomes a striking reality in a place that demands attention to what CSR actually entails.

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Q Westminster is a truly international university and has a host of international partners. Kindly expand upon these connections and the advantages that they bring to the MBA student.

We are actively developing collaborative partnerships with other AMBA institutions across the globe. One is with Mirbis in Moscow and the other is with Guangdong University, China. We work with these institutions in order to develop common modules which can be offered at both institutions as well as engaging in student exchanges and visits. We are particularly proud of our links with China as it is arguably the new power on the global stage and can teach students things not available in text books. As for Moscow, we are seeking to establish a Consortium MBA in order to maximise the learning opportunities for our students. □

Biography:

★ **Susan Balint** is the Director of the MBA programme at The University of Westminster’s Westminster Business School.