

ABCs OF IEMBA

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INTRODUCTION

MBA programs have continually evolved over time to meet customer expectations concerning course content and delivery. One of the fastest changing segments of MBA programs is the Executive MBA, where individuals with significant work histories return to school in specially tailored courses. One particularly interesting subset of the EMBA is the version that focuses on international students and experience, or the IEMBA.

International Executive MBA programs share similar design characteristics. They are premium priced, are conducted on an accelerated schedule, involve travel, and build on experiential learning. By their design, these programs limit their enrollment to students with work experience, substantial means, the ability to travel internationally, and who would like to obtain the American business seal of approval – the MBA..

The combination of program characteristics and student participants create an environment which challenges administrators, faculty and staff. Over the past decade there has been explosive growth in the number of these programs. Our experience with the design, start-up, and maintenance of an IEMBA prompted us to attempt to share our collective insights regarding the successful planning and implementation of such programs. As we generated guidelines and suggestions, we ended up with lists. In an attempt to organize those lists we decided to add to the alphabet soup of the IEMBA, hence, the ABCs of IEMBA.

THE ABCs OF IEMBA

- **Attractive package.** The single greatest key to success in developing an International Executive MBA program is to provide an attractive package which integrates coursework with experiential learning and travel. This educational package should be distinct from competitors in some specific way. For example one program might focus on Latin America, while another might specialize in global financial institutions. Deciding on your niche and tailoring your program to fit it will lead to long term customer satisfaction.
- **Big Picture.** Students, faculty, staff, and anyone associated with the program need to be aware of the current and future goals of the program, as well as the courses and events that take place in the program. A detailed schedule of who, what, when, and where is essential to recruiting participants and keeping the program on course. The why part of the equation will become evident through faculty instruction and their active involvement in the program.
- **Cash Cow.** There is usually a strong temptation to run these programs as a resource generating unit. If following this strategy, make sure that the income and expense streams are properly aligned so that the program does not get

derailed by cash flow problems. Ensure that enough resources are returned to the operation to maintain program integrity.

- **Diversity.** Diversity in the student population, including their personal cultures, work experience and academic backgrounds, sets the stage for appreciating and accepting differences. This theme of diversity should continue in the methods of instruction used, the types of visits made (both country and corporate), and the corporate cultures to which the students are exposed. This will ensure that the participants' appreciation of diversity is expanded from a personal to a professional level.
- **Expectations.** Special programs have special participants with special expectations. Students, faculty, administrators, and staff all have preconceived notions about the program particulars and deliverables. Manage these expectations.
- **Faculty.** Faculty who teach in the program must mimic the program values in terms of expertise, experience, and level of engagement. Ultimately it is the level of the faculty's commitment to the program that determines the program's quality.
- **Gremlins.** From misspelled names on placards to lost passports on a trip, glitches will occur. Problems need a solution and not a scapegoat. Solve the problem, review why it happened, and keep it solved.
- **Homework is for the birds.** This does not mean that you should eliminate homework. On the contrary, homework is clearly necessary. An effort should be made to tie homework to applications and experiences. Rigor in the assignments and the way in which they are integrated into the classroom and visits is essential in conveying to the students (and their non-executive peers in the MBA) that the IEMBA is not watered down but rather a more experiential education, focused on a different audience.
- **Integration.** All business educators are familiar with the push to integrate academic disciplines by tearing down the silos separating them. In an IEMBA program this push to integrate goes beyond the classroom topics. The goal of your program should be fine dining. Fine dining combines superior ingredients with superior preparation in a superior setting that is accompanied by superior service. Individual aspects of the event are specifically designed to work in harmony with the each other to generate a superior and unique experience. That is integration at its best. Integrating classroom material across disciplines and tying it to corporate and country visits defines a quality IEMBA program.
- **Journal of events, experiences and growth.** Students should maintain a journal of their experiences and reflections as they progress through the program. Journals will help students assimilate wide arrays of information, and help them identify changes and learning over time. If done in conjunction with program assessment, the journals can provide a wealth of information on areas that could be improved as well as serve as documentation that the program is achieving its stated goals.
- **Kudos.** Some of the strongest motivators are non-monetary rewards. Acknowledging clearly superior performance by anyone involved with the program (students, faculty, staff, support personnel) serves as both a public reward and as a motivator.

- **Life experience.** Most higher education is billed as staying with a person all of his/her life, and an IEMBA should be designed to do that, and more. Learning and living with a set of people, both students and faculty, who hail from different countries and have different backgrounds, is a unique educational opportunity. Not only will the participants gain subject knowledge, but also a deeper appreciation of other perspectives which should be vivid enough to change the way they view the world both now and in the future. To say the IEMBA can be life changing should be an understatement.
- **Manners.** When pursuing a degree in a cohort group, an individual is involved in a series of interactions with the same people, day after day. The proper display of courtesy eases possible conflicts that may occur based on differences in background and experience of the students. These courtesies include being on time for classes and appointments, and being aware of and sensitive to differences in international manners, both personal and professional. Manners should be discussed with students early in the program.
- **Networking.** All cohort groups are encouraged to network. The key differentiator in the IEMBA is that students are exposed to students and business professionals all around the world through the travel part of the program. This networking of students over time can also help to build the student body. Using the student participants themselves for recruiting is one of the best ways to ensure that the quality and values you desire in your program are maintained.
- **Online.** Online sessions and workgroups are great ways to keep things flexible and empower students to manage their own time resources the way they want. Too much online activity, however, makes the program a distance learning endeavor and defeats the positive aspects of cross cultural interaction that occur in face-to-face encounters with group members and faculty.
- **Passports and visas.** For international students, multiple entry visas are imperative. At a minimum, passport and visa expiration dates should fall outside of the program dates. Visas for internationals to different countries follow different rules and timelines so it is imperative that the logistics coordinator is aware of everyone's circumstances, including faculty trip takers.
- **Quality.** Continuous communication among all involved in the program is key to quality. Student, faculty and staff desires, complaints and suggestions should be shared with all. Complete, timely knowledge is the only way to accomplish needed changes quickly and efficiently, and to prevent repetition of undesired behaviors and outcomes.
- **Recruiting.** This has to be one of the program administrator's biggest nightmares but also one of the biggest opportunities. There are many ways to generate contacts, from advertising in flight magazines to contracting with educational agents through international graduate expositions. All require prompt follow up to inquiries, building a personal relationship with potential student participants and sponsors, and an unshakable belief that the program will provide the benefits that it proclaims.
- **Stay on schedule.** When dealing with different peoples from different cultures, what constitutes 'on schedule' and 'on time' varies widely. Make your definitions clear, known, and stick with them.

- **Trips, Tours, Travel and Trinkets.** These four can form the backbone of a participative international program. Proper preparation by students and faculty for all visits, corporate and country, expands the value of the experience. Similarly, building on the information gained outside the classroom inside the classroom after the fact reinforces the integrative nature of these experiences. Do not let 'where the classroom meets the boardroom' become 'where the classroom meets the bored room.'
- **University partnerships.** In life, it has been said, "you can't have too many friends." So it is with institutions. Develop and nurture numerous relationships with other universities around the world. For many schools based in the United States, there are already numerous staff members of foreign origin. Take advantage of their connections, find ways to make trips to arrange future tours, and even when on vacation, try to make new contacts. They will pay off in the long run.
- **Vegetarian is not salad.** Different dietary needs mean that you have to pay attention to your student and faculty differences. Just as speaking a different language in a different country is appreciated, though perhaps flawed, learning about and trying to meet your participants' different dietary needs will also be appreciated.
- **Wallflowers.** Active student participation in all activities is critical to each obtaining all the benefits that the program can deliver. No wallflowers permitted (and this applies to faculty as well).
- **Xenophobia vanquished.** While American organizations regularly implement diversity training programs, there is little planned exchange on global levels. Stereotypes and discrimination can be much more pronounced among international students than among typical American students. Spending dedicated time with members of different groups, and in foreign lands, broadens horizons, changes perspectives, and creates true international bonds.
- **Yearly program appraisals.** Gather all key program players (faculty and administrators) together in a comfortable environment and review the lessons learned over the past year. Create a non-threatening atmosphere with continual improvement of the program as the objective. Opinions will differ on needed changes, but as long as all feel that their thoughts were heard, you will not only get valuable ideas for future improvements, but obtain support and buy-in from the players as well.
- **Zero tolerance for rules broken.** While each participant, be they student or faculty, is special in these programs, the rules must be adhered to. When they are not, it is easy to generate a feeling that "I am indispensable" to the program, and that is never the case for anyone.

CONCLUSIONS

In this paper we have attempted to consolidate the knowledge gleaned from our personal experience in participating in an IEMBA program as faculty and administrators. Some of the points were intentionally made humorous, but all of them reflect mistakes we made, or narrowly avoided making, and successes we have realized. It is our hope

that should you embark on such an undertaking you can avoid these pitfalls, realize your own successes, and tune the A-Z list appropriately for your organization and program.

Participating in an IEMBA program has been an enriching experience for each of us. We have expanded and improved the methods we use to teach and interact with students. Administratively, we have discovered new ways of recruiting students, and learned to appreciate and acknowledge different background qualifications. We are sure that your experience in this area, while perhaps not exactly mimicking ours, will prove equally rewarding.