

Enhancing Indian MBA students' employability through an experiential and inclusive learning residential: an accessible and inclusive approach

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Background

This case study reports on the preliminary findings of a research project investigating the impact of a three-day residential learning experience on postgraduate MBA students' employability at the University of Central Lancashire (UCLan). The research design draws from the Career Edge Model developed by Sewell and Dacre Pool (2010), to explore students' perceived development across recognised graduate attributes.

In recent years, UCLan has seen a marked increase in the numbers of international students joining the University's MBA, a programme which embeds a professional placement element. In 2014, 14 students registered on the programme, rising to 522 enrolments (over two intakes) in the 2019-20 academic year, the majority of which are Indian nationals. This is in line with national sector trends, whereby UK universities have seen a growth in international recruitment, specifically postgraduate programmes offering practical training or work opportunities (Dutttagupta, 2018). The number of international students studying at UK HEIs is set to grow further, with the UK government aiming to have 600,000 international students enrolled by 2030 (Department for Education, 2019). This, coupled with the new post-study work visa coming into effect from September 2020, forms the UK's international education strategy to make the UK more attractive to international students (ICEF Monitor, 2019).

However, recent studies suggest that the main aspect attracting international students to the UK is rather the availability of work experience and employability-enhancing opportunities (Dutttagupta, 2018; British Council, 2020) and accordingly, policymakers stress that more needs to be done to develop work-ready attributes (CIHE, 2010; Universities UK International, 2020). Additionally, the Migration Advisory Committee (2018) stresses that if the post-study work visa is introduced widely, international students should be supported through their course to be able to secure skilled work upon graduation. Concerns over the supply of employment opportunities, such as internships, placements and graduate roles, have been exacerbated by the global health pandemic of 2020 and early reports anticipate up to a 61% reduction in the availability of employment roles (Weale, 2020).

The MBA course is two years in duration. In the first semester of study, in groups of approximately 20, the students attend a three-day experiential learning residential off-campus. The students engage in exercises on the residential, including role play, business simulations and team-building activities. Students also complete structured debriefing sessions after each activity. Overall, the residential provides an opportunity for students to practise their skills (including leadership, teamwork, problem-solving, time-management and communication skills) in a safe and supportive environment.

The residential encourages students to draw from their wider life experiences, previous education, individual cultures, personality traits and characteristics to explain their behaviours and actions on the residential. By thus helping students realise how and why they all respond differently to the same experience, the residential operates on principles of inclusive curriculum design, recognising that “students have multiple identities that are shaped by their previous experiences and that a diverse range of personal circumstances influence how they study” (Morgan and Houghton, 2011, 8).

Approach

This research aimed to evaluate the residential as an intervention for enhancing the employability of UCLan's MBA students (all of whom are international). To achieve this, an online questionnaire was created based on the Employability Development Profile (EDP) devised by Sewell and Dacre Pool (2010). The EDP draws from the CareerEDGE model of graduate employability created by the same authors (Dacre Pool and Sewell, 2007). One of the salient features of the CareerEDGE framework is its inclusion of emotional intelligence (EI) as a component of graduate employability (Dacre Pool, 2017), as emotional intelligence and emotional self-efficacy are increasingly considered to be strong predictors of employability (Dacre Pool and Qualter, 2013). The EDP offers a series of employability aspects to discuss with students, including generic skills and EI, which were the two main components incorporated into our questionnaire. Considering the economic disruption caused by the 2020 global health pandemic, our questionnaire also asked students if the residential had helped to develop skills that they considered would mitigate these impacts.

The online questionnaire was distributed in July 2020 to all 600 MBA students, across four intakes. As the research only included MBA students studying at one institution, this design adopts a case study methodology. While case study research findings are not usually generalisable to whole populations (Hammersley et al, 2011), case study research can provide valuable and rich data for illuminating a particular phenomenon (Flyvbjerg, 2006). The case study findings from this research will provide an opportunity for us, and others, to learn about international student perspectives on enhancing employability.

Ethics statement: the ethical considerations associated with our research mainly include the power dynamic between us as academic staff and our students, alongside GDPR considerations. We were granted the relevant approval by our institution's own research ethics committee before proceeding with the administration and analysis of the questionnaire.

Outcomes

Of the 600 MBA students approached, a total of 182 responded to our questionnaire, equating to a 27.6% response rate. The responses suggest that students overall felt the residential had helped to develop employability skills, as well as gain a better understanding of themselves through self-reflection. The results revealed three key areas in employability enhancement, as follows:

+ Increased confidence

A total of 89% of respondents stated they felt the residential had developed 'well' or 'superbly' their self-confidence. This increases to 99% if we also include the 'developed ok' responses. Reasons attributed for this increase in self-confidence are connected to the arrangement of the residential, which is perceived as a safe and supportive environment in which to practise skills and reflect:

"Before my residential I was somewhat timid and shy, but after the residential I have gained confidence in my skills and learnt that skills can be developed with practice and the feedback was very helpful to understand from an expert point of view."

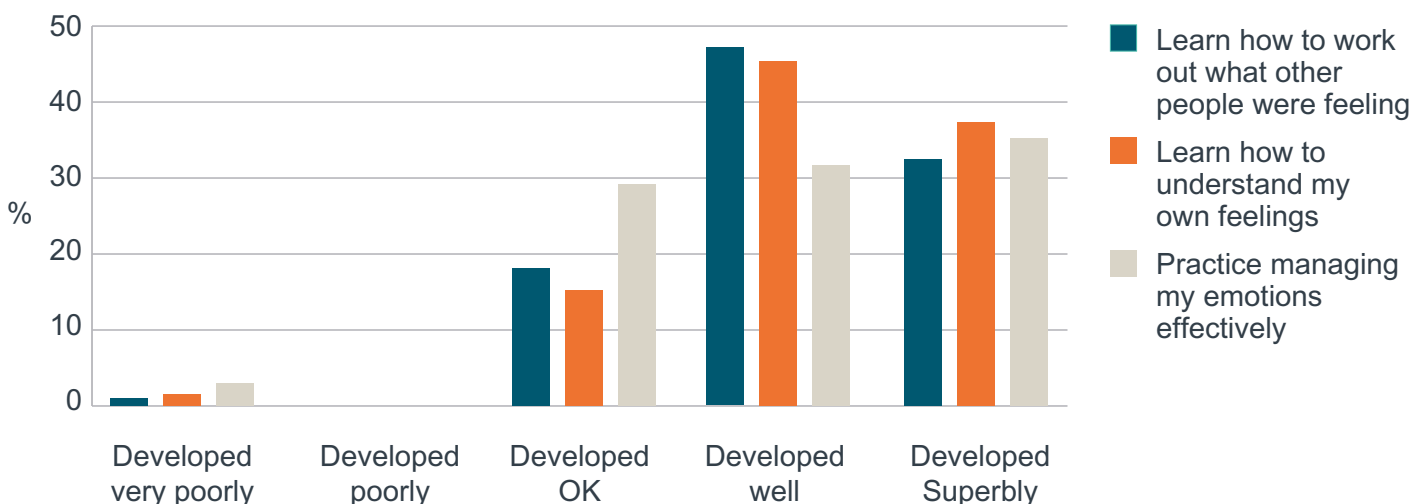
(Respondent 1).

Overall, the responses support that international students felt that the residential alone had increased their self-confidence.

+ Enhanced emotional intelligence

Of the 174 MBA students who responded to the three emotional intelligence (EI) questions, an average of 77% of students felt that the residential had developed their EI either 'well' or 'superbly'. The chart below shows the responses for each of the three EI questions:

Chart 1: How MBA students felt the residential developed their Emotional Intelligence skills (%)



Student quotes support that they gained insights into their EI abilities via the immersive team working environment on residential:

“Residential helped me about being empathetic and I got to know that individuals have different feelings and emotions.”

(Respondent 2)

“My team members mostly spoke in their native language all the time which rendered the learning experience more frustrating than I expected. Due to this main frustration, I learnt how to control my emotions and most importantly I cultivated a lot of self-control.”

(Respondent 3)

As highlighted earlier, EI is increasingly believed to be a strong predictor of employability (Dacre Pool and Qualter, 2013), so the high level of perceived development of emotional intelligence skills on the residential is a reassuring result, supporting the suggestion that the residential experience enhances employability.

Furthermore, 40% of the respondents stated the skills and experience gained on the residential had directly helped them to better cope with the job uncertainty as a result of the 2020 global health pandemic, largely attributing this to their EI development:

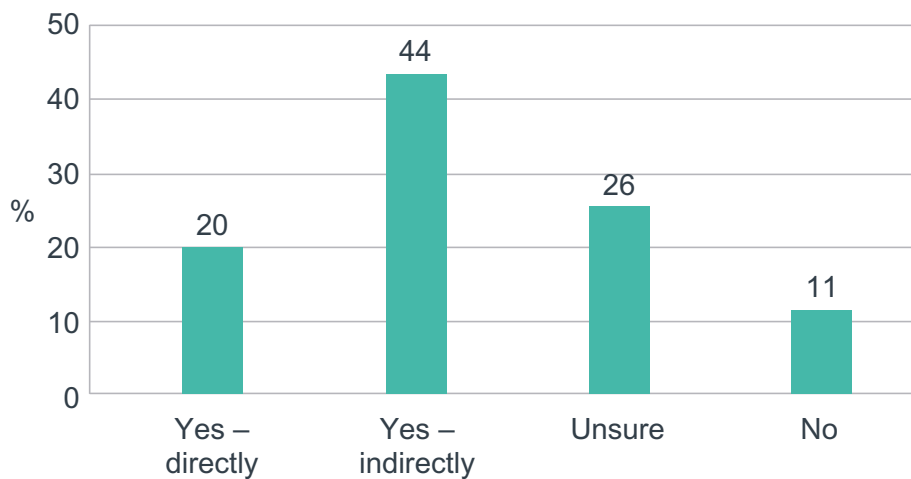
“My residential experience impacted my ability to cope with difficult situations, and also developed a strong emotional stability to discover opportunities in difficult situations.”

(Respondent 4)

+ Job-seeking Benefits

Despite 71% of the sample having work experience prior to starting their MBA, the results indicate a trend that the residential is beneficial for job-seeking. Of the respondents, 53% stated that they had used examples from their residential in job application forms and 56% declared they had drawn upon experiences gained in the residential during job interviews. When asked whether respondents felt that the residential has helped them to obtain employment, 66% said 'yes' that the residential had either directly helped them obtain a job or had indirectly helped by developing certain skills employers seek:

Chart 2: Has the residential experience helped you to obtain employment?



Indicative questionnaire responses on this question were as follows:

“It actually helped me realise who I am and what my strengths and weakness are. That actually helped me in interviews.”
(Respondent 5)

“I added my experience of residential in my CV and explained it in some of my interviews. My experiences were about teamwork, time-management, decision-making, leadership. Those are the basics that every MBA candidate should have experience in, hence I believe these experiences helped me get an internship.”
(Respondent 6)

“[The] residential actually helped me to crack two of my interviews for my part-time job. The HR was very much impressed by the way I expressed my views very effectively because of the skills I enhanced during residential.”
(Respondent 7)

Overall, this research aimed to understand how an immersive and experiential learning experience helped international MBA students to enhance and understand their own employability. These early findings give indications of promise that this initiative is an effective way to enhance international students' EI skills and employability in an inclusive way. This research project focused upon the MBA students as a whole and did not fully explore how aspects such as age, gender and prior work experience levels influenced the specific benefits obtained from the residential. As a result, the next stage of this research will involve a deeper level of analysis of these key areas, to further understand MBA international student employability development.

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