

FACTORS AFFECTING STUDENTS' ENROLMENT INTO THE EXECUTIVE MBA PROGRAMME AT AFRICA UNIVERSITY, MUTARE, ZIMBABWE

Stanislas Bigirimana 

PhD, Faculty of Management and Administration, Africa University, Mutare, Zimbabwe
sbigirimanaus@yahoo.com

Joseph Chinzvende

EMBA, Department of Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs),
Africa University, Mutare, Zimbabwe
chinzvendej@africau.edu

Reason Masengu

Phd Candidate, Graduate School of Business Management and Governance Leadership,
North West University, Mmabatho, South Africa
masengumasengu@yahoo.com

Abstract

The purpose of this study was to investigate factors influencing the enrollment of students into the Executive Masters of Business Administration (EMBA) Programme at Africa University in Mutare, Zimbabwe. Questionnaires were distributed to students, lecturers and administrators of the EMBA programme. The analysis showed one the factors hindering increased enrollment is cost. The fees are unaffordable given the fact that the majority of students pay from their personal savings. Moreover, there is emerging competition from other programmes offered by Africa University while other universities in Zimbabwe are offering similar programmes at a lower cost. The participant also indicated that quality of service needs to be improved and formal advertising and marketing efforts made as many participants indicated that they got to know about the programmes through informal means such as from friends.

Keywords: Higher Education Management, Executive Education, Africa University, Education Commercialisation, Academic Capitalism, Further Education

INTRODUCTION

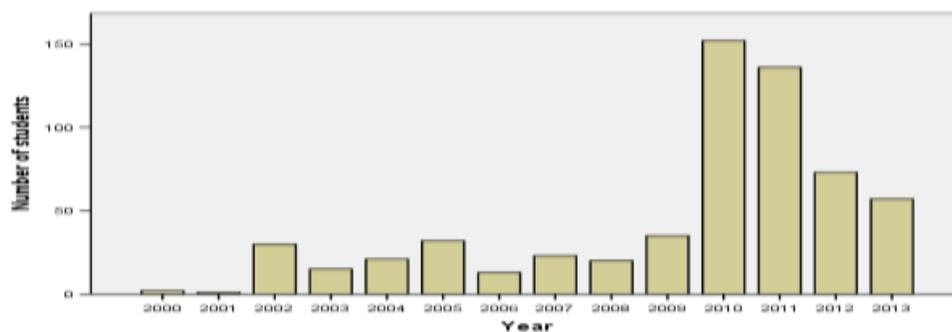
Africa University is the first fully accredited United Methodist-related institution of higher learning on the African continent. It was established by the action of the United Methodist General Conference in 1992. Moreover, Africa University is the first private university in Zimbabwe (Africa University Prospectus, 2005-2007). Africa University is located in the Eastern Highlands of Zimbabwe, in a city called Mutare in the Manicaland Province. The majority of faculty and administrative staff are Africans, who serve alongside visiting educators from the United States, Europe, and other parts of the world. The official language at the university is English. The vision of Africa University is to become a world class university for leadership development in Africa. The mission of Africa University is to provide quality education within a Pan-African context through persons who acquire general and professional knowledge and skills, grow in spiritual maturity, and develop sound moral values, ethics and leadership qualities.

The Executive Masters of Business Administration (EMBA) Program was established at Africa University in 1998 targeting experienced managers seeking advanced business training in addition to their undergraduate degrees. The program is offered during weekends on a modular basis. In 2009, the programme was run on two additional campuses, one in Harare, Zimbabwe and another in Maputo, Mozambique. Currently, the programme is running from a fourth campus in Chimoio, Mozambique. While the programme started modestly in Mutare, it reached its peak in 2010 and 2011 and is currently facing decline in enrolment numbers. This study aims at identifying the facts influencing the enrolment of students in this programme.

Research Problem

After phenomenal growth in 2010 and 2011, the enrolment into the Executive Masters of Business Administration Programme (EMBA) at Africa University in Mutare, Zimbabwe has declined in 2012 and 2013 (Figure 1).

Figure 1. EMBA enrolment per year



Source: AU Student Database, 2014

There are many possible causes of the decline in the enrolment of the Executive Masters of Business Administration (EMBA) at Africa University. They may include the cost of the programme, internal competition from programmes such as the Masters in Public Sector Management (MPSM) in the Faculty of Management and Administration or emerging programmes in the Institute of Peace Leadership and Governance (IPLG) or the Faculty of Health Sciences (FHS). The decrease in enrolment may also be due to poor quality of service or to external competition given the fact that other universities such as The Midlands State University, The University of Zimbabwe, The National University of Science and Technology, and The Chinhoyi University of Technology are offering similar programmes. There is need for a study to identify factors that led to the decrease in enrolment in this programme from 2011 to 2013.

Research Aim

This study aims at investigating the factors that affect the enrolment of students into the Executive EMBA programme at Africa University in Mutare, Zimbabwe.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The Executive Master of Business Administration (EMBA) program is a university-based approach to executive education. It is designed specifically for working business professionals so that students can complete a program with minimal work interruption. (Bevelander and Pitt 2004) EMBA programs are a by-product of non-credit management training programs. Early management training programs were designed for executives from large corporations and typically included four weeks courses. Companies sent managers to executive programs in an effort to enhance skills, win loyalty from employees, and gain a competitive edge in the marketplace. In some countries, EMBA were offered along non-degree programs as “mini MBAs”, directors’ seminars, corporate retreats, and training programs in subject-specific areas like negotiations, leadership, or marketing. (Cythia et al 2006: 29-42).The first EMBA program was offered in 1943 at the University of Chicago. More than 20 years passed before the second EMBA program was developed at Michigan State University. By the end of the 1970s, there were 34 EMBA programs in the United States and today there are 140 EMBA programs in the United States alone. These programs are members of the EMBA Council, a professional group representing universities and colleges throughout the world (Drew & Stephens 2011).

One of the oldest executive MBA programmes, the Sloan Fellows Programme, has had a complete makeover. In its present form, the program is more flexible and involves participants having a shorter absence from work. Other regular programs are becoming increasingly

custom-based, as is the case with the MBA program offered at Stanford University (Bodoo et al 2012) Sheikh (2006) reported that the core course curricula for Executive Master of Business Administration (EMBA) programs significantly differed from the curriculum commonly found in full-time (FT) and part-time (PT) programs. FT and PT course curricula are less concentrated on specific topics than EMBA program curricula. The executive MBA at Africa University is done on part time basis during weekends. EMBA programs also place a stronger focus on global concerns in their courses. These differences in course curricula exist because of EMBA programs' capitalizing on older, more experienced students in the executive program. Further, an increased number of executive programs do not require any standardized admission test. In addition, the structure of most EMBA programs around weekends, or in modular blocks-is designed to minimise the disruption to the work commitments of executives and managers. An EMBA program that can demonstrate minimal disruption to work commitment will get attention of many organisations. The executive MBA at Africa University is modelled along these lines.

Although the number of companies sponsoring employees on an EMBA is dwindling, employers on the whole do still recognize the immense value such a degree can bring to their company. EMBA programs have prospered in the past 50 years despite having to compete with corporate-based education and traditional MBA programs. As the number of EMBA programs increases and traditional MBA programs step up marketing efforts to attract students, EMBA programs must become more proactive in recruiting both students and sponsoring organizations (Anna et al 2001). The EMBA market has continued to grow, and for many business schools the product may be the only star in a rather dismal universe (Bevelander & Pitt, 2004: 3) In the last decade Executive Master of Business Administration (EMBA) programs have seen a major growth in their student enrolment worldwide. This growth is caused by the increasing need felt by both large and small organizations for highly qualified professionals to manage in the increasingly complex and competitive global market place (Drew & Stephen, 2011).

Executive programs experienced a tremendous increase in the 1970s and 1980s. This was especially true of the MBA program, which saw a doubling in the number of annual MBA graduates from 1974 to the mid-1980s (Ann, 2014). With this growth in demand, schools previously offering only undergraduate programs or subject-specific Master's degrees began offering MBA programs and expanded by offering full or part-time MBAs, distant MBAs, or specialised MBAs. Further, business schools began to expand their offerings of executive programs including corporate and executive MBAs (degree granting) as well as such non-degree programs as "mini MBAs", directors' seminars, corporate retreats, and training programs in subject-specific areas like negotiations, leadership, or marketing. (Cynthia et al. 2006:29-42)

Applicants to executive education programs have increased over recent years. A study published in 2006 by the Graduate Management Admission Council (GMAC) indicated that the volume of applications to MBA programs increased between 2005 and 2006 (Ann et al. 2006). When different types of MBA programs were examined, the largest increase in volume was reported among EMBA programs, with 69% of executive programs reporting increased applications. Also, a trend has emerged in the duration of EMBA programs (Executive MBA Council, 2006). Since 2003, the number of institutions reporting longer EMBA programs of 21–22 months decreased. Bevelander and Pitt (2004) argue that the EMBA qualification is much sought-after as an alternative to either full time or part time study for a postgraduate management qualification. Potential top managers and organisations alike have eagerly embraced it, with the former seeing it as a pathway to corporate success and the latter as a solution to issues such as management succession and sustained competitive advantage. Recent years have seen many state and private universities in Zimbabwe introduce the executive MBA Program.

Institutions offering EMBA programmes must respond to market needs (John et al, 2003). Those who are unwilling to change, according to Schmotter (1994), may experience dissatisfied students and staff as well as a low demand for their programmes. Henning et al (2001) reports that since most of these schools lack brand identity, accreditation, reputation, alumni network, and so forth, they have little basis for competition except service, promotion and cost. For nationally known EMBA programs an important component of their competitive strategy was maintaining or increasing the rank of their EMBA program. Further Mellisa and Malon (2014) reports that “this reputation-centred competition was largely limited to the top 20 programs”. For most of the other thousands of colleges and universities, ranking was a non-issue. These schools faced localized competitive pressure that was centred more on cost and accessibility than reputation. As a result, high-quality night programs were developed in response to those students who worked during the day. The rapid growth of such programs indicated the overwhelming desire of customers for the EMBA degree.

As enrolment in these new programs grew, the number and quality of students in the “regular” MBA declined. MBA programs were now experiencing competition from inside their own university as well as outside. As a result, both revenue and enrolment suffered. Further, in Zimbabwe, the executive MBA program is offered by both private and state universities across the country. University admissions and EMBA programmes have become commercial activities. This is particularly true for MBA programs, which are in many cases flagship programs for colleges of business. In this view, the quality of the Executive MBA program has a direct impact on how alumni and the business community perceive the entire college and university.

Recent years have seen the demand for executive education programs lessen as corporations facing lower profits began to cut their executive training budgets (Jose et al, 2005). Corporations began demanding more customized executive training programs (which cost more for the business school to develop) while also demanding lower prices. Jose et al, 2005 reports that executive education revenue declined by over 15 percent at top schools, with a projected decline of 20 percent for North-western, 15 percent for Wharton and 22.5 percent for Michigan from 2001 to 2002. The Graduate Management Admission Council (2003) reported that 65 percent of the 289 schools responding to a survey indicated either no increase (12 percent) or a drop (53 percent) in applications for their EMBA programs compared to the year before. The Association to Advance Collegiate Schools of Business (2004) showed that US schools had experienced a 7 percent decrease in international MBA student numbers together with a flat demand for domestic students.

Developments in information technology were lowering the costs of offerings off-campus, distance learning, modular, or weekend programs in other geographic areas. As a result, colleges and universities began to present existing programs in the “home markets” of other schools, thus creating increased rivalry. Many new players began to offer an executive MBA or similar degrees, among new entrants were corporations and universities from outside the USA (Tay, 2001). New programs included the EMBA. Graham (2014) argues that Small Private Online Classes (SPOCs) are custom-designed to deliver to corporate clients. Russel (2001) further notes that there are no dedicated top tier EMBA programs provided entirely online in (Massively Online Open Classes) MOOCs or SPOC format. MOOCs are online university courses, provided by some of the world’s top universities, and offered through designated online platforms at a fraction of the cost of traditional university courses. Some are even offered for free. Online university course lectures are streamed around the globe for the masses interested in higher education and accompanying materials are made available through the platforms. Universities such as Stanford, MIT and Harvard are avid providers of MOOCs, offering them either through their own online platforms, such as edX (a non-profit platform created by Harvard and MIT), Coursera (a Stanford spin-off) or through external providers. Further, other reputable business schools around the globe have adopted MOOCs as a way of offering flexible learning to reach out to a wider audience. The University of Virginia’s Darden School of Business, for example, has offered a number of its business courses in MOOC format in 2013 to great success. Meanwhile, Fox School of Business offers its ‘Quantitative Methods for Business’ course in MOOC format.

People are going into MBAs for a greater variety of reasons, such as self-improvement and a career change; for example, going into a not-for-profit organisation. According to Roa and

Kumar (2014) the EMBA market would be the first to become hypercompetitive because of its connectedness to businesses, importance to universities, and attractiveness to students. They further argue that, it is widely accepted in the business world that the holder of an EMBA has received top-notch instruction in the latest business theories, as well as exposure to direct practical application of theoretical knowledge. The EMBA degree became the “seal of approval” that the person being hired was well trained, bright and ambitious. National universities competed on the basis of prestige, reputations and rankings; while, regional universities competed for location-bound individuals on the basis of convenience and timing.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Research Design

The research design is case study. This study is qualitative in nature. Qualitative studies seek to understand a given research problem or topic from the perspectives of the population it involves. Qualitative research is especially effective in obtaining social, economic and other factor affecting enrolment of students.

Population and Sampling Techniques

Africa University has more than 350 junior and senior members of staff. The target population were the lecturers teaching in the EMBA program, the students in the EMBA program and administrators who were directly involved in the program. In this study purposive sampling was used. Administrators and lecturers were given questionnaires in their offices. For students, a simple random sampling procedure was used because it provides equal opportunity of selection for each element in a population. Questionnaires were placed on a desk at the entrance of lecture rooms and students were requested to pick them and fill them if they wished to. The total sample consisted of 50 EMBA students, 20 administrative staff and 10 lecturers who were directly involved in the teaching of courses in the EMBA program as detailed below:

Table 1: Breakdown of the Sample

| Section | Number of Participants |
|----------------|------------------------|
| EMBA Lecturers | 10 |
| Administrators | 20 |
| EMBA Students | 50 |

This study had a response rate of 90%. This implies that of the out of 89 questionnaires that were distributed 80 were returned and only 10% of the participants did not return the questionnaires.

Table 2: Response Rate from the Questionnaires

| Questionnaires | Given Out | Returned |
|----------------------|-----------|-----------|
| Lecturers | 10 | 10 |
| Students | 55 | 50 |
| Administration Staff | 24 | 20 |
| Total Responses | 89 | 80 |
| Percentage Returned | | 90% |

Data Collection Techniques and Instruments

Questionnaires, record sampling, direct observation and guided interviews were used.

Secondary data were collected through document analysis.

Data Analysis and Presentation

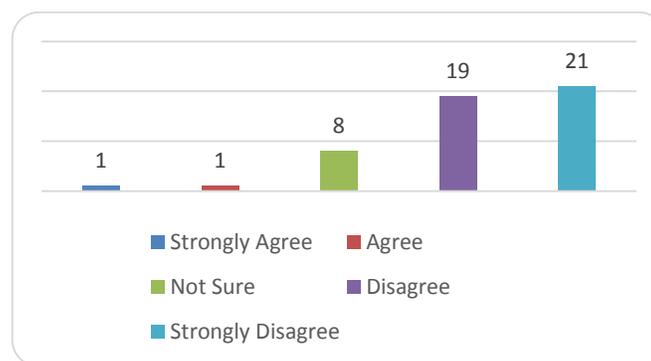
The data were presented in the form of tables, graphs and charts. Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) 14.0 for Windows Evaluation Version was used to further explore findings from the data so that a thorough analysis could be done.

ANALYSIS AND FINDINGS

Cost

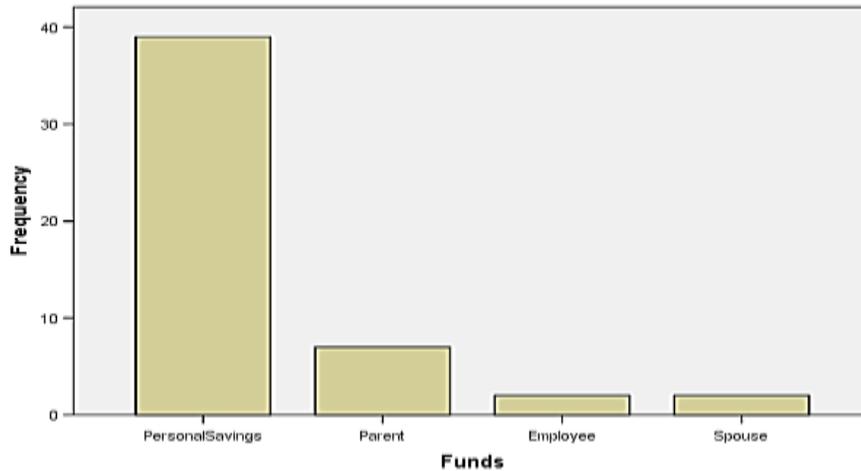
Participant indicated that fees are not affordable. With emerging competition from other Universities there may be need for AU to revise the fee structure in order to increase enrolment of students to EMBA at Africa University.

Figure 2: Frequency distribution on Affordability of Fees



The indication my most participants that the fees were not affordable prompted the researcher to query about the sources of funds for the students enrolled in the EMBA programme. Figure 2 shows that the majority of student paid their fees using money from personal savings.

Figure 3: Distribution on Sources of Funds for Students



Quality of Service

Table 3: Summary of Service Department (Quality service Offered)

| Library Support | Lecturers | Students | Admin |
|------------------------|-----------|----------|-------|
| Reliability | 100 | 48 | 50 |
| Assurance | 100 | 44 | 95 |
| Responsiveness | 60 | 45 | 60 |
| Communication | 70 | 48 | 70 |

| Academic Affairs | Lecturers | Students | Admin |
|-------------------------|-----------|----------|-------|
| Reliability | 50 | 70 | 80 |
| Assurance | 50 | 80 | 60 |
| Responsiveness | 60 | 58 | 70 |
| Communication | 70 | 66 | 75 |

| ICT Support | Lecturers | Students | Admin |
|--------------------|-----------|----------|-------|
| Reliability | 75 | 70 | 65 |
| Assurance | 80 | 48 | 70 |
| Responsiveness | 60 | 40 | 75 |
| Communication | 80 | 30 | 85 |

| Accounts | Lecturers | Students | Admin |
|-----------------|-----------|----------|-------|
| Reliability | 80 | 40 | 75 |
| Assurance | 75 | 60 | 70 |
| Responsiveness | 80 | 30 | 85 |
| Communication | 80 | 45 | 70 |

T-Test: lecturers against students =0.003926

T-Test: students against admin = 0.00142749

Table 3 above shows a summary of responses of students, lecturers and administrative staff to the service departments at Africa University. The service departments were ICT, Library, Registry and Business office (Accounts). The response of Agree and strongly agree was summed up to make a total of agreed for students, lecturers and administrators. A T-Test was calculated using data from the response of lecturers and students. The result showed there is a significant difference in the proportion of lectures who agreed with the services offered by the service department mentioned and that of the students. This difference may be due to students who just want more than what is provided.

Publicity of the Programme

60 % of the students said they got to know about Africa University EMBA programme through friends and 20% through the press as shown by table 3 above. This might imply that former students talk about the good work at Africa University. Advertising in the press and on website also contributes to popularisation of Africa University.

Table 4: Knowledge about the EMBA Programme by Students

| Source | Percentage |
|-----------|------------|
| Friends | 60.0 |
| Relatives | 8.0 |
| Press | 20.0 |
| Website | 12.0 |
| Total | 100.0 |

Internal Competition

Table 5: Distribution of Administrators there is Competition from programmes

| Other Programs | | | | | |
|----------------|-------|-----------|---------|---------|--------------|
| | | Frequency | Percent | Percent | Cumulative % |
| Valid | SA | 6 | 30.0 | 30.0 | 30.0 |
| | A | 6 | 30.0 | 30.0 | 60.0 |
| | NS | 4 | 20.0 | 20.0 | 80.0 |
| | DA | 2 | 10.0 | 10.0 | 90.0 |
| | SD | 2 | 10.0 | 10.0 | 100.0 |
| | Total | 20 | 100.0 | 100.0 | |

Table 5 above shows that 60% of the administrators said that there is competition from other programmes at Africa University. 20% did not agree with this statement and 20% were not sure. There was emerging competition from other programmes within Africa University. These programmes were being offered in other Faculties like the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences and the Institute of Peace Leadership and Governments. Students who wanted to do masters could opt for these programmes. However the other factor affecting enrolment to EMBA are that there is strong competition from other programmes offered by Africa University. 60% of the respondents agreed that students now prefer other programmes rather than the EMBA.

External Competition

Table 6: Distribution of administrators, competition Universities

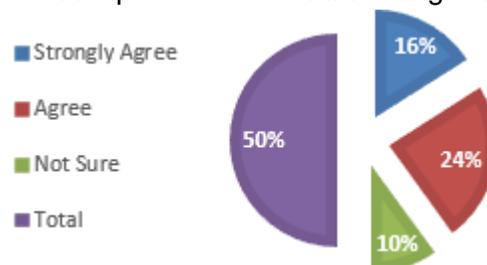
| Competition EMBA | | | | | |
|------------------|-------|-----------|---------|---------|------------|
| | | Frequency | Percent | Percent | Cumulative |
| Valid | SA | 12 | 60.0 | 60.0 | 60.0 |
| | A | 6 | 30.0 | 30.0 | 90.0 |
| | NS | 2 | 10.0 | 10.0 | 100.0 |
| | Total | 20 | 100.0 | 100.0 | |

Table 6 above shows that 90% of the administrators said that there is competition from other universities for the same EMBA programme. Other universities like Midlands State University Universities it means the administrators of the EMBA programme at Africa University should identify strategies to make the programme viable.

Customer Satisfaction

In order to assess customer satisfaction, the researchers asked the participants whether they would be willing to recommend someone else to the EMBA at Africa University. On the question of recommending someone to AU figure 3 shows that more than half of the student respondents would recommend someone to study at AU.

Figure 3: Distribution of responses to recommending someone to EMBA, AU



CONCLUSION

The aim of the study was to investigate factors that have led to the decline of enrolment in the EMBA programme at Africa University, Mutare, Zimbabwe. The students indicated that the fees for the programme are high given the fact that most students pay from their personal savings. The quality of service needs to be improved as the programme faces both internal and external competition. Nevertheless, students in the programme indicated that they would be willing to recommend the programme to other people. There is need for formal and coordinated advertising the promotion efforts may students indicated that they got to hear about the programme from friends through word of mouth. Further research may include an assessment of the perception of service quality in the EMBA programme and factors that lead to that perception. Such research can led to evidence-based policies within the university which may require the university to adapt its recruitment, enrolment, teaching and administrative processes and structures to world-class standards and current disruptive innovations such as Open and Distance Learning (ODL), online delivery, multi-location and use of administrative software such as Enterprise Resource Planning (ERP) systems.

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