



**INVESTIGATION INTO THE EFFECTIVENESS OF BLENDED  
LEARNING AS A MEANS OF SUPPORTING MANAGEMENT  
DEVELOPMENT IN MBA PROGRAMMES**

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**ABSTRACT**

The aim of this research was to evaluate the effectiveness of blended learning as a means of delivering management development in Master of Business Administration (MBA) programmes. This research followed an interpretivist and qualitative approach, utilising multiple case study as a research method to explore the MBA programmes of three UK universities. The three case universities offered MBA programmes that were marketed as online learning, distance teaching, and face-to-face learning. Building this study around the theoretical learning models of Cookson (2000); Wilde et al. (2000) and Khan (2001), and their missing dimensions, data were collected by online questionnaires and semi-structured interviews from students and module leaders respectively. The collected data were further triangulated using document analysis to enhance the internal validity of the research. Based on the three theoretical frameworks and the missing dimensions, data analysis for interviews involved coding using a classification scheme, while data from the online questionnaire were analysed using descriptive statistics.

Among many others, findings in this study show that; there is a difference between marketing, education and academic language when the language used in the marketing of MBA programmes is investigated; all the programmes in all three Universities were, in practice, blended learning programmes despite the fact that they were marketed as fully online learning, distance teaching, and face-to-face learning, respectively; and MBA pedagogy in the three case study Universities includes different pedagogies in full-time and part-time MBA programmes, i.e., more didactic on full-time and more experiential on part-time programmes. Based on these findings, this research developed a theoretical framework for MBA programmes, with new dimensions that strongly reflect the need for a clearly defined meaning of MBA pedagogy for institutions in the UK.

**DICTATION**

*This thesis is dedicated to my Parents **Abdulhadi and Rydah**,*

*They, without a doubt, had long loved to see my study journey completed.*

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**GLOSSARY**

AACSB	Association to Advance Collegiate Schools of Business
ABS	Association of Business Schools
ACCA	Association of Chartered Certified Accountants
ACF	Academic conceptual framework
AMBA	Association of MBAs
APPGM	All-Party Parliamentary Group on Management
BERA	British Education Research Association
BIS	Business, Innovation and Skills
BREO	Bedfordshire Resource for Education Online
CFML	Commission on the Future of Management and Leadership
CMI	Chartered Management Institute
CourseRA	Course Remote Active
CMS	Course management system
CSA	Case Study A
CSB	Case Study B
CSC	Case Study C
CSR	Corporate social responsibility
EFMD	European Foundation for Management Development
EMBA	Executive MBA
EU	European Union
EQUIS	Equality Improvement System
FT	<i>Financial Times</i>
GDP	Gross domestic product
HBS	Harvard Business School
HE	Higher Education
HEFCE	Higher Education Funding Council for England
HESA	Higher Education Statistics Agency
IAAB	International Accreditation Advisory Board
ICT	Information and communications technology
IT	Information technology
JISC	Joint Information Systems Committee
KAU	King Abdul-Aziz University
KFU	King Faisal University
KFUPM	King Fahd University of Petroleum and Minerals
KSU	King Saud University
LBS	London Business School
LCMS	Learning content management system
LMS	Learning management system
MBA	Master of Business Administration

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MOOC	Massive open online course
ODL	Open Distance learning
PIA	Professional identity of academics
QA	Quality assurance
QAA	Quality Assurance Agency
QE	Quality enhancement
TALL	Technology-Assisted Lifelong Learning
TAM	Technology Acceptance Model
VLE	Virtual learning environment
VoI	Voice over the Internet



## **CHAPTER ONE INTRODUCTION**

### **1.1 INTRODUCTION**

This chapter provides a critical assessment of the basis for undertaking this study. The first section introduces the research topic, followed by the purpose of the study. The next section highlights the problem statements; the research aim; research objectives; and research questions. These are then followed by the research approach which highlights the various choices made in the research methodology section for this research. Finally, this section concludes by discussing the potential contributions of this research from both a theoretical and managerial perspective as well as the significance of the study and the structure of the entire thesis.

### **1.2 PURPOSE OF THE RESEARCH**

In the opinion of Atef and Medhat (2015), blended learning can be defined as the utilization of different styles or modes of delivery or discovery of content. It can also be defined as the range of modes of learning which vary from the traditional face to face classrooms to full online degree programmes. Atef and Medhat (2015) also define it as the total mix of pedagogical methods, employing a collection of diverse strategies of learning, with or without the use of technology. According to Mirriahi et al. (2015), blended learning is a method of learning that addresses or caters for access, cost-effectiveness, as well as convenience, thereby empowering students to save a substantial sum of time and resources from traveling and institutions to lessen the cost for extra facilities and buildings. In the opinion of Hilliard (2015), blended learning can be defined as a method of involving participants in learning to connect to broader groups in their bid to carry on their professional development training. From the definitions provided by Atef and Medhat (2015), Mirriahi et al. (2015), and Hilliard (2015), it can be deduced that

blended learning is a learning method. It can also be deduced that it is a method of learning that varies in its mode of delivery.

Therefore, the purpose of this thesis was to evaluate the effectiveness of blended learning as a means of delivering management development in Master of Business Administration (MBA) programmes. MBA programmes are available worldwide and are often seen as an important means of management and leadership development for aspiring leaders. An MBA programme is offered by a university or college and provides theoretical and practical training to help students acquire an in-depth knowledge of business administration. MBA programmes might be offered as full time or part time, and by face-to-face, blended learning or online learning. Further, the MBA degree can have a specific focus on subject areas such as accounting, finance and marketing.

The Master in Business Administration programme is one of the most popularly known postgraduate programmes (AL-Mutairi<sup>1</sup> and Saeid, 2016; Clayton, 2015). Its curriculums are structured for those who decide to operate within the field of business and management by availing them with the abilities that they require in positions of management (Franco, 2015). It provides the participants and the students with over thirty courses in numerous disciplines which include accounting, human resources management, finance, and marketing. However, in the opinion of AL-Mutairi<sup>1</sup> and Saeid (2016), there is a necessity for the Masters in Business Administration programme to be shifted from the delivery of knowledge to the application of knowledge in life situations. AL-Mutairi<sup>1</sup> and Saeid (2016) also noted that the addition of value for students from finishing the Masters in Business Administration programme arises from the increase in knowledge, the increase in earning potential, as well as the recognition status in society (Aly, 2016; Gilfoil et al., 2015).

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Although AL-Mutairi<sup>1</sup> and Saeid (2016) advocate for the necessity for the Masters in Business Administration programme to be shifted from the delivery of knowledge to the application of knowledge in life situations, AL-Mutairi<sup>1</sup> and Saeid (2016) fail to acknowledge the fact that some Masters in Business Administration programmes have been structured to incorporate the application of knowledge to real-life situations via the utilization of case studies. According to Baruch (2009), the MBA programme is recognised as one of the highest qualifications by both employers and students alike, and many employers encourage and sponsor their employees to study for an MBA. Even if the course is not sponsored by an employer, students consider the MBA as a professional degree. As indicated by Donnelly et al., 2012 cited in Kwak et al., 2015; 2012:7),

employers today are demanding more education from their employees than ever before. Further, an accredited online MBA degree will carry significant value in any organisation's hiring and career advancement decisions and several researches indicate that there is a direct correlation between MBA and employee salaries.

Similarly, employers believe that an MBA from an accredited university will raise the capability of their managers by implementing their learning into management practice and, consequently, encourage them to aspire to reaching higher positions within the organisation (Donnelly et al., 2012).

### **1.3 THE RESEARCHER'S BACKGROUND**

The researcher is a Saudi national, a mother of two, with a postgraduate degree and knowledge in information management. The researcher also holds a Diploma in Teacher Training Techniques and a Diploma in Academic Leadership, both from the International Academy for Training and Development in the UK. The researcher became interested in the blended learning concept after realising the important role that blended learning can play as a flexible means of combining her own learning and her many other duties. For the researcher, combining and fulfilling different duties was a

management role in its own right and, therefore, the researcher started to read about management studies. Further, the researcher found the MBA programme to be one that integrates various methods and techniques in its implementation and is, therefore, an appropriate subject area for research.

Since internet access became readily available to the Saudi public in 1999, there has been significant growth in its access and usage (Alebaikan and Troudi, 2009). The estimated general Saudi Arabian population is just over 26 million (CIA World Fact book, 2016). In 2012, *Internet World Stats* put the number of internet users in Saudi Arabia at 11 million. This indicates that just under 50% of the Saudi population had access to the internet at the time. In contrast, the US had a 50% internet user population (*Internet World Stats*, 2012 cited by Aljabre, 2012); however, the US has a population more than 10 times that of Saudi Arabia.

Similarly, the researcher anticipates that the state and extent of technology and internet usage in learning or blended learning in Saudi Arabia can be increased substantially. For this, it is imperative to understand the state and extent of distance learning and teaching, as well as the technological infrastructure, in a developed country such as the UK, to be able to transfer knowledge or learning to Saudi Arabia for both universities and management. Further, there is enough evidence to claim that there is sufficient basic infrastructure in Saudi Arabia to help the researcher to transfer the findings and recommendations of this research to a Saudi context.

Furthermore, the King Fahd University of Petroleum and Minerals (KFUPM) in Dhahran was already connected to the internet in 1993 (Chanchary and Islam, 2011). Aljabre (2012) mentioned that the Saudi Ministry of Higher Education established the National Centre of e-Learning and Distance Learning to organise the country's switch to e-learning, which further offered training to academics in the universities who had agreed to adopt e-learning. King Saud University (KSU) in Riyadh, King Abdul-Aziz University (KAU) in

Jeddah, and King Faisal University (KFU) in Al-Hasi all share the mission of delivering distance learning to their students to utilise and integrate, and train students and faculty in, the latest technology in distance learning. Even though the mission is expressed differently by the three previously mentioned universities, provided there is increasing interest from the government and state universities and the basic infrastructure is available for blended learning, the researcher believes that this is the right time to explore different learning and teaching techniques in a developed country such as the UK and transfer such learning to the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (KSA).

Rugh (2002) reported that, in 2000, the number of adult Saudi women enrolled in educational institutes was 74,000, compared to 34,000 Saudi men. As the number of women enrolling in universities is increasing, new ways of delivering education must be found to meet the different challenges involved. There is a general perception that the role of women is critically important for family structure and, in turn, fundamental to society (Hamdan, 2005). However, this also necessitates preparing women to play this critical role. The current narrative of the traditional role of women in Saudi society as housewives and, in general, conservative is gradually shifting, to their being more education-oriented and the seekers of a professional career. Further, the researcher is a follower of Islam, a religion which urges its adherents to explore, learn and transfer knowledge, which also shaped and motivated the researcher to explore different learning and teaching methods in UK universities and transfer this knowledge to Saudi institutions. Most importantly for women, the use of blended learning techniques can help them progress and be flexible, enabling them to fulfil both their domestic and life duties. Furthermore, the issues of being a Saudi national, a follower of Islam and a product of a culture which is male dominant with fewer opportunities for females has also potentially generated bias in the research process. This potential bias is discussed in more detail in the research methodology chapter.

The availability of basic infrastructure, government and state universities' initiatives towards different modes of blended learning, cultural changes, following the teachings of Islam, and the researcher's own knowledge and background, were some of the main motives for exploring and evaluating the effectiveness of different learning and teaching methods as a means of delivering management development on MBA programmes. A further motivation was the transfer of knowledge and to make suggestions for improvements or further developments in such frameworks. Therefore, it is intended that the findings and recommendations made in this research will help women in Saudi Arabia to access and manage their MBA programmes successfully.

The researcher aims to work in Saudi Arabia to promote learning and teaching in higher education, which the researcher hopes will make a significant difference to Saudi Arabian women who had to leave their education half way due to personal commitments. For example, traditionally, Saudi Arabian female students have several constraints to face if they wish to undertake higher education. Because of traditional and religious customs, Saudi Arabian women get married at an early age, which puts a stop to formal education (Al- Qahtani, 2013). They usually soon become pregnant and have less time to attend university and undertake a higher education programme. Moreover, there are several restrictions upon women in Saudi Arabia as to the places they can go and to whom they can speak, etc. Saudi women would, however, like to obtain management qualifications e.g., in human resource management, to make practical improvements in women's progression in Saudi Arabia (Abunar, 2010).

Furthermore, lectures to female students should be delivered by women; it is possible for such lectures to be given by men, but only via closed-circuit television (Baki, 2004). Therefore, blended learning MBAs would overcome all these barriers for those women who wish to undertake a higher degree and

would offer an opportunity for women in Saudi Arabia to gain managerial or leadership qualifications.

#### **1.4 PROBLEM STATEMENT**

Despite the high standing of MBAs and their host business schools, there has been a continuous debate surrounding this qualification, particularly the perceived focus on short-term financial gains at the expense of the human side, which implies that it underplays the importance of communication and interpersonal and teamwork skills (Thompson, 2015; Windsor & Tuggle, 1982; Eberhardt et al., 1997). In the opinion of Blackman (2016), some of the benefits of an MBA programme include transferability of skills, high probability of employment, degree specialization, and opportunities to network. Thus, this study focuses on evaluating the effectiveness of blended learning as a means of delivering management development in MBA programmes. Although MBA programmes present themselves in different ways, such as face-to-face, online, blended learning and distance teaching, there are overlaps in the existing practices by which MBA programmes are delivered. Furthermore, there is a lack of information and knowledge in the existing literature about the underlying pedagogies of MBA programmes in UK universities.

A contemporary MBA programme is delivered in various formats globally. Further, the researcher believes that blended learning is an important concept which has the potential to become a central concept as a means of capturing various modes of MBA programme delivery, such as enabling face-to-face learning, distance teaching and fully online learning to converge. However, instituting blended learning can be challenging, given that blended learning takes the form of several delivery models. According to the Horizon Report (2016), some of the challenges involved in blended learning include the blending of both formal and informal learning, the improvement of digital literacy, the competition between models of education, the personalizing of learning, the balancing of connected and unconnected lives,

and the maintenance of the relevance of education. However, its implementation can be dogged by a lack of appropriate technical infrastructure, an unmotivated academic staff, and difficulties in setting up face-to-face modules to suit an online environment (Melvin et al., 2015; Hofmann, 2014).

It was therefore against the above gap in knowledge that the need to undertake a study that evaluates the effectiveness of blended learning as a means of delivering management development in MBA programmes was based. Therefore, in developing a new theoretical framework for blended learning and teaching in MBA programmes, the main aim, research question and objectives of this research as the basis for evaluating the effectiveness of blended learning for delivering management development in MBA programmes are presented as follows:

### **1.5 Research Aim**

- ❖ To evaluate the effectiveness of blended learning as a means of delivering management development in MBA programmes.

### **1.6 Research Objectives**

- ❖ To critically review the concept of blended learning in MBA course delivery for management development and the extent of effectiveness of this approach in UK Universities.
- ❖ To identify and evaluate existing theoretical frameworks for learning and teaching in MBA programmes and to compare and contrast these with existing MBA frameworks within three UK Universities
- ❖ To critically investigate and evaluate existing pedagogies for learning and teaching part time and full time MBA programmes and the extent of alignment between these pedagogies and theoretical frameworks



- ❖ To develop a theoretical framework that can be used by practitioners and managers of MBA programmes in UK Universities to improve and market their approaches to blended learning

### **1.7 Research Questions**

- ❖ How effective is “blended learning” as a means of delivering management development in MBA programmes?
- ❖ What existing theoretical framework for learning and teaching are relevant to the MBA programmes in UK universities selected in this research?
- ❖ What are the existing pedagogies for learning and teaching part time and full time MBA programmes in UK Universities and how do these pedagogies align with existing theoretical frameworks?
- ❖ What theoretical framework can be used by practitioners and managers of MBA programmes in UK Universities to develop and market their approaches to blended learning?

### **1.8 RESEARCH APPROACH**

To achieve the research objectives, an inductive qualitative research methodology based upon interpretive and subjective paradigms was adopted to explore and evaluate the effectiveness of blended learning as a means of delivering management development in MBA programmes. A multiple case study research method was adopted to explore and evaluate blended learning techniques and their effectiveness in the contemporary context of three UK based universities. Data were collected by semi-structured interviews, which were further subject to narrative analysis. Interpretivism was used to interpret the findings, which requires the researcher to be an active participant in the creation of new knowledge. An online e-survey service (eSurv) was also used to collect data from students about their experiences of the MBA programmes at three UK universities. To ensure the research quality and enhance the robustness of the research process, research quality

issues concerned with credibility, transferability, dependability and confirmability were also considered, along with their implications in the context of this research.

### **1.9 SIGNIFICANCE OF THE RESEARCH**

This research makes various valuable contributions, such as a better understanding of blended learning on an MBA programme. Different challenges to effective blended learning and teaching were also explored and their overall impact evaluated. As an outcome of this research, various recommendations are made to practitioners, along with a contribution to the theory in this area.

### **1.10 CONTRIBUTION TO KNOWLEDGE**

This study contributes to knowledge by exploring the way in which the MBA programmes at each of the three case universities are marketed as offering fully online learning, distance teaching, and face-to-face learning. However, in reality, programme delivery can be different from the way in which it was marketed. This study also contributes to knowledge by arguing that AMBA requirements are centred primarily on face-to-face contact time, but not necessarily on the online aspects. Furthermore, this research demonstrates the use of different forms of language in the marketing and in the educational development and delivery of MBAs. In addition, this research highlights the significance of considering an individual academic's discipline or professional interest and her or his influence on the pedagogy underpinning single modules and/or a whole programme. Ultimately, this thesis provides a new framework of findings against which practitioners can benchmark effective learning and development of their MBA programmes, as this research reflects practical examples drawn from three UK universities.

Critical to the assessment of the quality and component of an MBA programme is the solidness of the business education, the value of the

academic experience, as well as the impressiveness of the professional credentials (Online MBA, 2016).

It is therefore crucial to note the fact that one of the most vital aspects of an MBA programme curriculum is the learning method being employed, which plays an important role in the research and the studies that are related to such a curriculum (Esmi, 2015). This study therefore contributes to academic research within the context of learning theories by providing valuable knowledge in the differences and values in different learning theories. In particular, findings within this context will help to outline the level of consistency that can be achieved between the learning method being advertised for MBA programmes and the actual learning method adopted.

In the opinion of Havergal (2015), some pedagogy trends include crossover learning, context based learning, adaptive learning, as well as embodied learning. One of the key theoretical contributions of this study will be in uncovering the differences that exists, if any, between the MBA pedagogy engaged in different institutions and existing pedagogy in academics.

### **1.11 STRUCTURE OF THE THESIS**

Chapter one presents an overview of the research, its significance, the purpose of the study, the research objectives and the researcher's position. Chapter two provides a critical review of the existing literature and offers the reader in-depth information about MBAs as a form of management education and MBA blended learning programme. This chapter further highlights the importance and challenges of MBA blended learning programmes. Chapter three explores the theoretical frameworks and models for learning and teaching (Cookson, 2000; Wilde, 2000; Khan, 2001) and each of these are introduced and compared to identify the dimensions missing from the frameworks and which later became the focus of this research. Chapter four explains and explores in depth the methodology used

in this study. Case studies were conducted on three UK universities to evaluate theory and identify any missing dimensions. Case studies were carried out to understand in depth the blended learning providers. Semi-structured interviews were carried out to collect data for this research and an online survey was also conducted to understand more about learners' experiences of programme delivery. Chapter five presents the research findings, which revolve around the main themes of the different delivery modes of blended learning in the MBA programmes in three UK universities. Different techniques were used to present the research findings, including figures and tables. Chapter six provides an interpretation of the major findings and further compares them with the existing literature to examine similarities and differences. Further, the researcher links the findings with the main research aim and objectives, theoretical frameworks, contemporary management education and MBA blended learning programmes. Chapter seven presents recommendations made by the researcher to improve or develop practices for delivering MBA programmes in the future. This chapter also outlines the limitations of this research, which are then suggested as future research directions for further exploration.

### **1.12 SUMMARY**

This chapter first sheds light on the research focus: "the effectiveness of Blended learning in MBA programmes". This was followed by a presentation of the research purpose; researcher's background, problem statement; research aim, objectives and questions as well as the significance and main contributions of the study. The researcher holds that the basic infrastructure is available in Saudi Arabia to enable the transfer of the findings and recommendations of this research to a Saudi context. This research further recommends that practitioners adopt the constructivist learning model, in which MBA delivery is learner-centred. The next chapter critically reviews the existing literature and explores important themes relevant to the delivery of contemporary MBA programmes.

## **CHAPTER TWO LITERATURE REVIEW I**

### **2.1 INTRODUCTION**

This chapter provides a critical review of literature on the effectiveness of blended learning as a means of delivering management development in MBA programmes. in the context of the UK. First, a critical review of generic MBA research including the history, benefits and criticisms/challenges of the MBA as well as the means of delivery of MBA programmes, such as face-to-face, distance, online and blended learning models are all presented. Further, a general overview of literature relevant to the theories of learning and its place within the structure, organisation and delivery of a contemporary MBA programme is presented. The literature review then moves to focus on the theoretical frameworks for implementing distance and online learning models are outlined next. Finally, a review of some of the quality assurance principles in online and blended learning environments and how they apply to MBA is critically reviewed and discussed.

### **2.2 INTRODUCTION TO LITERATURE ON MBA PROGRAMME**

This chapter focuses on the MBA as a programme of graduate education, both as an academic endeavour and as professional development. In this chapter, the most important issues in the literature relevant to the MBA are critically reviewed. This first section introduces general overview of the origins of the MBA and what defines an MBA programme. This is followed by an examination of the research literature and the main discussions and criticisms regarding the value of an MBA programme. Some contemporary MBA pedagogy within the context of how some of the world's best business schools teach their MBAs, and an outline of relevant portions of the AMBA guidelines that apply to ensuring the quality of an MBA programme, are also presented. The literature review goes on to examine previous work that explores the MBA programme in an online and blended learning context, as

well as presenting the results of previous research which has examined the level of success in developing the MBA as an online and blended learning programme. The chapter concludes by summarising the main points and ideas presented in the chapter, the research gaps identified and the research questions that arose from these gaps.

### **2.3 OVERVIEW OF THE DEVELOPMENT OF MBAs**

Since the introduction of the MBA early in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, it has been known as the signature programme of business schools and the most significant and systematic effort to equip individuals with the skills needed to manage people and organisations (Varela et al., 2013). Varela et al. (2013:436) further defined an MBA as “a Master’s programme in the business administration and management discipline” taken as a postgraduate degree. Similarly, Baruch (2009) argued that the MBA is a well-known and accredited developmental based learning programme in management education. It is a programme which provides students with a global perspective in response to general market competition (Datar et al., 2010). Clearly, both Varela et al. (2013) and Baruch (2009) agree on the fact that an MBA is a programme that involves a training in management. However, the definition provided by Datar et al. (2010) limits the scope of an MBA to market assessment and competitive analysis. It fails to recognize the fact that an MBA is a training programme that spans Human Resource Management, Analysis of Business Problems, Organizational Psychology, Business Ethics, Business Economics, Operations Management, Logistics and Supply Chain, Service Management, to mention a few.

The Harvard Graduate School of Business Management pioneered the first structured MBA degree in 1908 (Kaplan, 2014), made up of 15 faculty members, 33 regular students and over 40 ‘special students’. The MBA rapidly spread throughout the US and North America and then into Europe, and has now been adopted by universities worldwide (Quacquarelli, 2012). An AMBA report (2012) indicated that, in 2010, the number of MBA students in its 43 accredited schools in the UK was 8,082.

Murray (2012) traced the origins of the MBA to the 1880s in the US. In 1881, during the process of industrialisation, Joseph Wharton, a prominent American industrialist, had made his fortune in the mining and metallurgical industries and proposed what many in the world of education perceived as a radical idea: founding the first collegiate business school. This business school was the Wharton School of Finance and Commerce at the University of Pennsylvania. The MBA degree was introduced in the US when, as mentioned above, Harvard Business School (HBS) launched the first programme in 1908 (Chen and Yang, 2010; Kaplan, 2014). Clearly, although Quacquarelli (2012) and Kaplan (2014) provide a historical perspective of the MBA programme, Murray's (2012) perspective was deeper in scope than Quacquarelli (2012) and Kaplan (2014) in providing an explanation regarding the ideology that governed the pioneering of the first MBA programme.

In the UK, the first MBA was introduced at the London Business School and the Manchester Business School in the 1960s. However, UK business schools modelled their MBAs on their US counterparts (Kaplan, 2014). Various well respected business and finance publications, such as the *FT* and *The Guardian* newspapers in the UK, started providing rankings of the numbers and quality of MBA education providers (Find-MBA online, 2012). These rankings further suggested that the US and the UK were the two dominant centres for MBA study in the world (Wolf, 2012). Das (2013) indicated that a school's rank would often vary significantly across publications, however, as the methodologies used for the ranking were different among publications. The opinion of Das (2013) was corroborated by *The Economist* (2016), which lays emphasis on the fact that rankings tend to be controversial because the ranking are based on the varying opinion of various individuals.

The MBA has become a fast-growing area of interest and currently attracts large numbers of students. For example, Murray (2012) reported that approximately half (49.7%) of all educational institutions that offered

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master-level degrees in the US offered an MBA degree. The report further highlighted that educational institutions enrolled more than one quarter of a million students on MBA programmes and awarded more than 100,000 MBA degrees annually. This formed at least 66% of all graduate business degrees conferred in the US in 2008 (Graduate Management Admission Council [GMAC], 2012).

According to a recent online indicator (Find-MBA, 2016), there are 126 popular business schools in the UK that offer MBA programmes. However, among them, only 44 business schools have their MBA programme accredited. The statistics from the *FT* Business Education report (2014) suggest that the MBA continues to be one of the UK's most popular postgraduate programmes, more than 8,000 new students having enrolled in business schools in 2011 for courses accredited by AMBA alone. HESA is a charitable company that collects a range of data every year across UK universities, higher education colleges and other differently funded providers of HE. HESA then supplies these data to the UK government and higher education funding bodies to support their work in regulating and funding HE providers. In terms of numbers, and according to HESA (2015), 10,530 MBA students were domiciled in the UK in the 2012/2013 academic year. Other EU countries were represented by up to 1,045 MBA students, with non-EU countries recording 9,360 MBA students. In total, there were 20,930 students studying for UK MBAs in the 2012/2013 academic year. For the 2013/2014 academic year, 9,525 MBA students were domiciled in the UK, with 1,300 from other EU countries, and non-EU countries accounting for 9,960 MBA students. In total, there were 20,785 students studying for UK MBAs during that academic year. Over 200 business schools in more than 80 countries have had their MBAs accredited, and MBA graduates connected, by at least one MBA accreditation body based in the UK (AMBA, 2013).



## **2.4 CRITICISMS OF THE MBA**

According to *The Guardian's* business news publication, an MBA offers intensive training in managerial and technical skills, many people regarding the qualification as a fast track to promotion if they feel their careers have stalled. According to Guardian (2013), by taking an MBA, students are offered the chance to grow a network of industry contacts through alumni and develop specialisms in areas such as global energy and sustainability. Although Guardian (2013) limits the benefits that the MBA offers students to networking and specialization, the opinion of Guardian (2013) is corroborated by Blackman (2016), who believes that an MBA offers students networking opportunities and degree specializations, in addition to transferable skills and higher rates of employment.

In recent years, the MBA has also been criticised (Schlegelmilch and Thomas, 2011; Li-Hua and Lu, 2014). For example, Schlegelmilch and Thomas (2011) criticised MBAs for their very existence and claimed that MBA programmes were unable to supply employers with the skilled and knowledgeable recruits they needed. In particular, they claimed that the content of MBA programmes is unable to meet the requirements of a rapidly changing business environment. The opinion of Schlegelmilch and Thomas (2011) was also corroborated by Jaiswal (2015), who pointed out that while the salaries of graduates of MBA programmes from top business schools are on the increase, an MBA programme or education still tends to have little or limited tangible effect on the students.

In another critique, Li-Hua and Lu (2014) observed that the MBA, once regarded as a prestigious qualification for senior managers, had gradually been losing its lustre over the previous decade. Indeed, Schlegelmilch and Thomas (2011) argued that many viewed MBAs as having been complicit in the financial crisis of 2008, as they blamed the shareholder perspective of the MBA programme for the economic disaster. Clearly, the opinion of Li-Hua and Lu (2014) corroborates that of Schlegelmilch and Thomas (2011) and

Jaiswal (2015), pointing to the growing irrelevance of the MBA programmes to the needs of organizations.

Hopstaken (2012) further criticised the way in which the MBA curriculum, in many instances, offered outdated and irrelevant texts, taught outdated and flawed business models, and utilised a teaching model which was of limited use. This is in line with a report by the Ford Foundation, which criticized the MBA programme for being weak and irrelevant (The Economist, 2015). This was particularly the case for students in developing nations who were operating in a global world in which appropriate and effective managerial competencies and skill sets were required to make well-informed decisions in a timely manner. Varela et al. (2013) maintained that some of the criticism of the MBA originated from the erroneous idea in management learning, and, indeed, the unabashed marketing of some MBA programmes, that implicitly or explicitly ties skills development to the notion of mastery, such that falling short in reaching high levels of skills proficiency in classrooms is associated with the absence of development. In some instances, there were also conflicting opinions about MBAs, such as the view that MBAs and business degrees generally do not produce well-rounded managers with desirable leadership qualities. This opinion conflicts with the notion that MBAs are, or were for a long time, seen as a passport to career progression and greater earning power (Advanced Institute of Management Research, 2006).

However, there is a lack of empirical research that can demonstrate current criticisms of the quality of MBA programmes in UK universities. Nor is it clear what the current quality challenges are, in order to overcome those criticisms so that an effective delivery of MBA programmes in UK universities can be ensured, which is also an area of interest of this research. The following section sheds further light on the costs and benefits of an MBA programme. Some of the discussion in the subsequent sections will further highlight critics of MBA programmes.

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## **2.5 COSTS AND BENEFITS OF AN MBA PROGRAMME**

Pursuing an MBA requires substantial financial investment, especially when studying at the top institutions in the US and the UK (Baruch, 2009). According to *The Guardian* newspaper (2013), the cost of taking an MBA in the UK varies widely and does not always depend on the school's position in the various ranking systems. The paper further reported that the LBS, for instance, resides at the top of many UK MBA rankings and charges £57,500, while the Manchester Business School charges £38,000 for its 18-month degree. Baruch (2009) also mentioned that similar costs were being charged by the top institutions in the UK, including the London School of Economics (LSE) and the LBS, as well as INSEAD, which has campuses in Europe, Asia and the Middle East. This demonstrates a variety of charges by different business schools for their various MBA programme offerings.

*The Guardian* (2013) and the *FT* (2015) further reported that a one-year full-time MBA, such as that at Lancaster University Business School, cost £26,000, with living costs on campus estimated at up to £9,000. Similarly, Edinburgh University Business School charged £25,000 for its full-time programme, while Cranfield University Business School charged full-time students £35,000. Fees for part-time EMBA were usually the same. For example, Edinburgh University charged £27,400 for its new EMBA. In contrast, Cranfield University charged £33,000 for its EMBA programme (*Guardian*, 2013).

Clearly, it can be seen that business schools such as LBS, which is ranked a leader in the UK, Europe, and the world, charge tuition fees more than £50,000, while other business schools such as Manchester Business School, Lancaster Business School, and Edinburgh Business School, which may rank high in the UK but lack a top global ranking, charge an average tuition fee of £31,000. However, it is not yet clear whether, or how, the cost structure of an MBA programme has an impact on students' choice of this particular subject, or how various business schools enable interested candidates to overcome financial issues and study an MBA programme in a UK university.

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Perceptions of the benefits of an MBA degree have been expressed in recent publications, including the LBS's MBA employment report (2012) and the GMAC alumni perspectives survey (2015). When the GMAC conducted its alumni perspectives survey of 4,000 MBA graduates in 2012, the respondents claimed to have recouped, on average, one-third of the cost of their studies within a year of graduation and the degree had paid for itself in four years (GMAC, 2012). The assertion of GMAC (2012) is further consolidated by the opinion of Clarke (2015), which points to the fact that while the tuition fee of business schools such as Chicago Booth, INSEAD, and Oxford Said were recouped within 3 years, the tuition fee for business schools such as Harvard Business School, New York Stern, and London Business School were recouped within 3.5, 4, and 4.5 years, respectively.

The LBS's 2012 MBA employment report listed MBA salaries and reported the median base salary for its graduates going into consulting as £71,000, £70,000 for corporate sector jobs, and £65,000 for jobs in the financial sector. Despite the significant costs of taking an MBA, Baruch (2009) and Varela et al. (2013) affirmed the dominance of the qualification in postgraduate business management studies. In her exposition of the value of MBAs, Baruch (2009) observed that the MBA, alongside in-company and on-the-job training, is one of a number of ways of developing managers and leaders. Similarly, *The Guardian* (2013) reported that in 2012 more than one-fifth of the UK's postgraduate students were enrolled on business and administrative courses, making it one of the most popular areas of postgraduate study despite the seemingly high costs. Baruch (2009) argued that the reasons for this relatively high level of enrolment may be because the MBA is seen as having a certain value to employers, and a crucial qualification to possess when applying for a senior management position in many top companies. Even though the Wu (2013) has been categorical in stating that quantifying the value of an MBA is an inexact science, the GMAC's 2015 Global Management Education Graduate Survey Report indicated that more than 85% of the MBA graduates they surveyed rated the

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overall value of the MBA as good, excellent or outstanding, regardless of the type of MBA programme they were studying. Therefore, among other things, the opinion of Baruch (2009), which points to the value of the MBA degree to the employers, and the opinion of Wu (2013), which points to the value of the MBA degree to the students, both corroborate and provide a justification for the MBA as one of the most popular areas of study, as noted by Guardian (2013).

With regards to an MBA's value to an individual, Useem and Karabel (1986) reinforced Becker's (1964) human capital theory, as they indicated that it is possible for educational institutions to confer scholastic, social and cultural capital on their graduates. The human capital development of an MBA can be identified by its ultimate ability to make better managers of its graduates (Mihail and Elefterie, 2006), a quality that can be measured and evaluated (Gropper, 2007). Scholastic capital refers to the managerial knowledge that MBA students acquire to build the effectiveness and efficiency they require for higher performance. In terms of social capital, the MBA programme manifests itself in the generation of a web of personal contacts, such that the cohort of a specific class, the full alumni of the university, and the overall population of MBA graduates serve as a foundation stone for MBA-related networking (Baruch, 2009). The cultural capital dimension highlights an individual's status. For example, Tajfel (1981) earlier identified an MBA's value as a status symbol by giving an illustration of the way in which an MBA gained from a top ranked university adds to an individual's prestige (Baruch, 2009).

Therefore, it is the interest of the current researcher to evaluate the effectiveness of blended learning as a means of delivering the management development that is purported to be incorporated in such valuable but expensive courses, i.e., an MBA programme. In exploring and evaluating the different theoretical frameworks proposed by Cookson (2000), Wilde et al. (2000) and Khan (2001) for learning and teaching in the MBA programmes at three UK universities, this research will evaluate to what extent the

programmes corroborate the theory and, furthermore, to improve or further develop a theoretical framework with new dimensions for blended learning MBA programmes in the UK.

## **2.6 ASSOCIATION OF MBAs (AMBA)**

AMBA is a professional body, whose objective is to help improve the quality of MBA programmes around the world. The Association was created in 1967 in the UK, but has a wide and growing international presence in several countries around the globe.

According to AMBA (2013, 2015) reports, over 200 business schools have had their MBAs accredited by the Association. Further, the Association also connects MBA students, graduates, accredited business schools and employers in more than 80 countries. An AMBA-accredited MBA programme indicates that the course, after being taken through a peer-reviewed quality assurance process, has been certified as being of high quality. This procedure involves the setting-up of a dedicated account manager, enabling partner institutions to have access to support and advice, appropriate documentation and an online Accreditation Management System. AMBA provides accreditation for new business schools by requiring them to complete four stages of applying for and submitting relevant documentation, including a self-assessment form and self-audit report. AMBA also provides a renewal of accreditation to those institutions whose previous accreditation has run its course. AMBA enforces rigorous assessment criteria to ensure that programmes that are accredited are of the highest calibre or standard.

In its 2013 report, one of the reasons for the rigorousness and depth of the MBA accreditation process is that the procedure is focused on individual programmes, rather than whole business schools or even universities (AMBA, 2013). Further, AMBA believes that programmes should demonstrate best practice and reflect changing trends and innovation in postgraduate management education. AMBA (2013, 2015) reports also claim that its accreditation scheme is designed to provide stakeholders, such as potential

MBA students and employers, with quality indicators to help them make informed choices and decisions. AMBA maintains that it is concerned with working with its partners to accredit programmes which demonstrate current best practice in the area of management education, covering syllabus topics and providing support for students and alumni to enhance the overall learning experience.

Supervised by the International Accreditation Advisory Board (IAAB), and contributed to by deans and senior academics from various accredited business schools all over the world, AMBA (2013, 2015) states its reliance on relevance and consistency as the keys to its accreditation process and its criteria for accreditation are fully reviewed every five years. According to its reports, the last full review of criteria was conducted in 2010 in consultation with its stakeholders, which consist of employers, MBA graduate students and business schools and featured a renewed focus on ethics, corporate social responsibility (CSR) and risk management. Crucial for the current study is AMBA's claim that it has made further revision to better recognise the need for the provision of flexible delivery modes, such as distance or blended learning, thus enhancing focus on the areas of programme outcomes and student diversity. However, it is still not demonstrated in the research literature to what extent AMBA has been successful in its commitments, the way in which AMBA requirements have an impact on MBA programme design and delivery, or what the different challenges are.

According to AMBA (2013, 2015) reports, when a higher education provider or business school is created and decides to establish MBA accreditation, it requires fresh AMBA accreditation. There are five steps to completing the accreditation process, each with its own set of documentation to be submitted to the accreditation body. The first step is taken when a newly formed business school that is interested in accreditation contacts AMBA through its website seeking preliminary information, such as the criteria for accreditation or details about the process itself, through email or by telephone. Business schools can create their own profiles, and are assigned

an Accreditation Manager who will help them make a formal application for the process to begin, as well as managing the whole accreditation process. Schools are required to confirm their understanding of the process and criteria for application and to agree to the terms and conditions that apply before being invited to become candidates for accreditation.

The second step is the pre-assessment stage, in which a school's eligibility for accreditation is assessed by the IAAB Eligibility Committee after the payment of a non-refundable pre-assessment fee. The next step is the assessment stage. After the IAAB Eligibility Committee confirms the school's eligibility, an accreditation visit by an AMBA assessment team is scheduled to take place at the school's cost, usually after three months' notice. This goes hand in hand with all the due process required to be completed at that particular stage. In the last step, the post-assessment stage, a final report is released by the assessment team, approximately six weeks after the accreditation visit, for the benefit of the school. The school can, in turn, make any amendments to the factual part of the document. A final decision of accreditation is made by the IAAB Endorsement Committee, after it has reviewed any recommendations made by the assessment panel.

If a school requires re-accreditation, it will only have to go through the third and final steps referred to above. The school concerned has to request reaccreditation for the process to start and then to be completed after all due process has been followed, AMBA accreditation depending on the recommendation of the panel and the decision of the IAAB Endorsement Committee. This means that new schools can receive accreditation for three or five years, a deferral of accreditation (with a reduced visit within one year), or the denial of accreditation. For re-accreditation, the options are for one, two, three, or five years or even for the removal of accreditation entirely.

AMBA has been issuing accreditation to MBA programmes since 1983 and expects business school programmes to fulfil certain criteria. These criteria relate to the institution, the faculty, the programme management and student engagement. According to AMBA (2013, 2015), its criteria require an



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institution to have an MBA programme that has a clearly expressed mission and strategy, has identified and understood its key strengths, and conducts marketing for its products. The institution should also have its own identity and an adequate degree of independence from any larger institutional structure, and must be financially viable. AMBA expects the faculties of business schools to have teaching staff that are appropriately qualified and credible. Most faculty members should hold a doctorate degree with high-quality research in all areas of activity, showing evidence of an international dimension. AMBA (2013, 2015) also expects the level of academic leadership and administrative support for the programme to be strong, with a well-developed and effective career service for placements and enhancement.

AMBA reports (2013, 2015) and the British Council (2005) consider an MBA to be a post-experience and postgraduate degree. Further, students on an accredited MBA programme must have a minimum of three years' work experience. AMBA also expects student admissions to follow a certain level of standards, such as those relating to academic credentials and candidates' relevant work experience. There should be enough students with enough variety to form what the AMBA report refers to as a "critical mass". This also reflects how the accreditation body places emphasis on the value of peer group exposure during an MBA. An AMBA (2013) report also stated that an MBA programme candidate for accreditation should have the following purposes and outcomes:

- ❖ To enhance and develop previous relevant experience in business and management.
- ❖ To prepare students for leadership and transformational roles in business.
- ❖ To develop strategic thinking, innovation and entrepreneurial skills.
- ❖ To develop an understanding and provide experience of global business issues, including the potential contribution that business can make to solving these issues.

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- ❖ To develop the ability to apply previous and newly acquired knowledge and experience to complex business issues in a range of contexts.
  - ❖ To develop knowledge at an advanced level of organisations, their management and the environments in which they operate.
  - ❖ To develop an understanding of responsible risk management and sustainable value creation on the basis of the environmental, social and governance impacts of business.
  - ❖ To develop interpersonal and group-working skills.
  - ❖ To encourage lifelong learning and personal development.

Accredited programmes must also be designed to build on the experience and diversity their student body brings because of their work as professionals in the field, as well as approaching contemporary management with an international dimension (AMBA, 2013, 2015). An appropriately rigorous and well-implemented assessment regime is required for an MBA programme to be AMBA accredited. AMBA reports (2013, 2015) state that programmes should be equivalent to at least one year of fulltime or two years of part-time study. This also includes a minimum of 500 contact hours and 1,800 student learning hours (or the equivalent of 90 European Credit Transfer System [ECTS] credits). The Association also has expectations regarding the offerings of accredited programmes. For example, institutes must offer a more flexible mode of delivery and provide substantial evidence that the programme design and delivery allow all the criteria to be met. Further, distance learning programmes must also contain some element of face-to-face contact (British Council, 2005). However, not clear in the literature what challenges business schools are facing in meeting AMBA requirements and how these might have an impact on their own mode of delivery.

With regards to the modes of delivery for the MBA programmes, Vt (2016) lays emphasis on the fact that there is a diversity that exists in the learning style of students, and these differences tend to have an impact on the overall

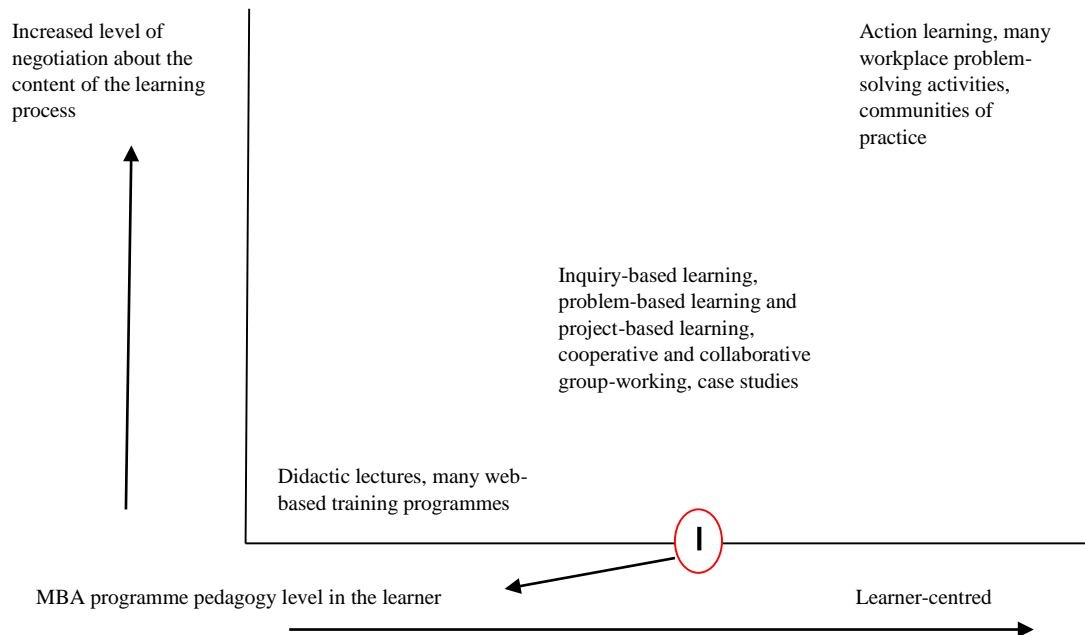
learning process of the programme. Therefore, in a bid to maximize the learning experience, Vt (2016) points to the need to engage different learning or delivery methods. Dozie (2015) iterates the fact that the most common methods or modes of delivery are the lecture method, the case study method, the experiential learning method, as well as the simulation method. Other methods of learning or delivery at the MBA programmes include the context based learning, adaptive learning, experiential learning, to mention a few (Havergal, 2015). While both Dozie (2015) and Havergal (2015) identify different learning methods, they both agree on the fact that experiential learning is a method or mode of delivery that is used in an MBA programme. However, given the importance of the fulfilment of the AMBA requirement, business schools essentially adopt a mix of learning styles which maximize the learning experience of students, while at the same time fulfilling the AMBA requirements regarding learning.

## **2.7 MBA PEDAGOGY**

This section discusses contemporary MBA pedagogy and its underlying principles. This section also discusses various surveys which have reported upon some of the world's best-ranked business schools and how they teach their MBAs. According to Cogill (2008), pedagogy is an ambiguous concept and is difficult to define. As defined by Uthra (2014:77), "Pedagogy is the base building block of the art and profession of teaching". Pedagogy, as described by Mehdinezhad (2011), can be teacher-centred or learner-centred. Mascolo (2009:4) defined teacher-centred pedagogy as "based upon a model of an active teacher", whereas learner-centred pedagogy "is based upon the idea of an active student". However, Mascolo (2009) also argued that pedagogy can be a mixture of teacher-centred and learner-centred approaches. A perfect teacher is one who can bring about a rapid transformation in the content of a learner's skills and knowledge.

Prince and Felder (2006) and Mehdinezhad (2011) described teacher-centred learning as presenting the historical, traditional approach to learning, in which knowledge delivery is dominated by the teacher and, therefore, makes the student dependent on the lecturer for knowledge. Mehdinezhad (2011) built on Cornelius-White (2007) and argued that learner centred pedagogy reduces the number of situations in which the lecturer directs the instructional process. This increases students' involvement in their own learning and is more in tune with the constructivist school of thought. It also improves students' ability to obtain new information. Prince and Felder (2006) further argued that the inductive methods of discovery, inquiry and problem-based learning are associated with the constructivist view of learner-centredness.

Learner-centred instruction allows learners or students to explore, manipulate and ask complex questions. In learner-centred learning, instructors are more facilitators than lecturers; they offer guidance and share their perspectives and experience in a dynamic exchange with students. Allan (2007) showed (see Figure 2.7) that, as learner-centredness increases, the instructional process moves away from a didactic form through a more inquiry-based approach and on to an action learning style, even if there is an increased level of negotiation about content. In its didactic form, the instructional process is more of a lecture, with a low participation level for the learner, and is more tutor centred. The inquiry-based approach introduces more collaborative group work aimed at problem-solving in the learning process, with action learning offering opportunities for student participation in collaborative and cooperative learning (Allan, 2007).



**Figure 2.7: Tutor- and learner-centred approaches to learning and teaching**

Source: Allan (2007:54)

Focusing on the world's best business schools and MBA programmes has recently become an area of interest for many reports and educational publications. For example, Lee et al. (2009) highlighted various insightful and wide-ranging issues in contemporary pedagogy, e.g., the use of case-based learning in MBAs, which have been observed in some of the most popular and influential business schools in the world (Caruana and Ploner, 2012). From another perspective, Van Auken and Chrysler (2005) focused on the language employed in MBAs and reported that business terminology is the most-used language in MBA programmes, e.g., that related to strategic management and human resources. Similarly, the Global Management Education Graduate Survey Report of 2015 surveyed 3,329 graduate management students in the class of 2015 at 112 universities in 29 countries

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worldwide. The report indicated that most survey respondents (76%) expressed their interest in an MBA programme (GMAC, 2015).

The findings of Hebert-Maccaro indicated that MBA programmes employed a variety of pedagogic methods, such as the case-based method, lecture-based instruction, experiential learning and a team-based focus approach (HebertMaccaro, 2012). However, different students have different learning approaches, and there is a very strong link between academics' identity and their teaching approaches (Luke and Freebody, 1999; Deem, 2006; Rhoades, 2007; Marcelo, 2009; Clarke et al., 2013; Komba, 2013). Similarly, the 2015 Global Management Education Graduate Survey Report listed lectures (including a mix of pure lectures and discussions), case studies, experiential learning and team projects as pedagogic methods (GMAC, 2015). This illustrates that a variety of pedagogic methods are used to develop graduate business students' knowledge, skills, and abilities during their educational experience. Many researchers have discussed case-based learning, lecture-based instruction, experiential learning and team-based projects. Therefore, the following is a discussion of some of the most important and common approaches to learning and teaching, as described in the literature.

### **2.7.1 Case Studies**

The case study is one of the most important and common methods of teaching and learning in MBA programme in particular and in the management sciences in general. Similarly, Arbaugh (2010a) argued that case-based learning is one of the main methods used to teach within an MBA programme. For example, the HBS estimated that 80% of all its MBA learning was done through case study. Similarly, the IESE Business School, Madrid, Spain, estimated that case studies contributed up 70% of its MBA instruction. On the other hand, the Stanford GSB and IE Business Schools in the US reported a case study content of 40% each, with INSEAD (in France) and ESADE (in Spain) each reporting 30%. Similarly, the 2015 Global Management Education Graduate Report reported 23% use of case studies in

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its learning time, although this varied by programme type (GMAC, 2015). As Helms (2006, cited in Lee et al., 2009) described, learners are presented with a range of viable/realistic or logical alternatives to choose from as they attempt to solve problems in case-based learning. In their summary of how case-based learning benefits the teaching and learning process, Lee et al. (2009) observed the work of Williams (2004), who pointed out some obvious advantages to using the case-based model in business education, as follows:

- ❖ The application of theoretical knowledge to real-world contexts.
- ❖ The opportunity to reason out complex situations critically and make recommendations for courses of action.
- ❖ The development of self-knowledge and a recognition of students' own assumptions.
- ❖ Clarification of personal beliefs about teaching.
- ❖ A comparison and evaluation of students' own and each other's perspectives (peer assessment).
- ❖ Development of the practice of reflection.

Williams (2010) argued that most of the universities in the UK adopted the case study approach after being motivated by the Franks report in the 1960s, which stated that the UK needed a US style of business schools. Case-based learning, according to Schmidt (2000), is a problem-based learning approach suited to adult teaching and learning, posing contextualised questions which are based on real problems. Learners are presented with a range of viable and realistic or logical alternatives from which to choose as they attempt to solve problems (Helms, 2006).

Case study-based pedagogy situates cases within a certain context to promote authentic learning, characterised by hypothesis generation as well as the consolidation and integration of learning activities (Mullins, 1995). This

further allows students to develop a collaborative, team-based approach to their education (Williams, 2005). Furthermore, it is important that students, programme designers and instructors alike on an MBA programme develop the ability to apply knowledge and skills learned in theory to a practical environment. Certain traits inherent in the case-based learning model, such as discussion of specific situations applicable to real-world conditions, as well as the collaborative and cooperative sense this fosters, are qualities that are of great value to learners on an MBA programme.

Wang and Bonk (2001) discussed the positive aspects of case-based learning in the light of its ability to enable learners to analyse cases and explore solutions through discussion, reflection and decision making, whereby students are also prompted to integrate prior experience. Case-based learning thus becomes an important technique for instruction in business schools. Schmidt (2000) maintained that case-based learning derives some of its main traits from problem-based learning, further arguing that a case, problem, or inquiry is used to stimulate and underpin the acquisition of knowledge, skills and attitudes. Merseth (1999) observed case-based learning as a means of developing the critical, analytical and problem-solving skills of students.

Benbunan-Fich and Hiltz (1999) further preferred case study due to its ability to present a real or hypothetical problem to prompt in-depth discussion and help students in developing solutions. Benbunan-Fich and Hiltz (1999) held that case-based learning allowed personalised learning because of developing intrinsic and extrinsic motivation, which creates conditions in which self-evaluation and critical reflection are fostered and further enabling the integration of knowledge and practice.

Similarly, Lee et al. (2009) also reported some advantages to using the case based model, such as the application of theoretical knowledge to real-world contexts, the opportunity to reason out complex situations critically and the ability to make recommendations for courses of action. They also commented



upon the development of self-knowledge and the recognition of students' own assumptions, the clarification of personal beliefs about teaching, the comparison and evaluation of students' own and other's perspectives (peer assessment) and the encouragement of the practice of reflection. However, case study is not free of critics. For example, Williams (2005) argued that case-based learning requires a certain level of appreciation or prior knowledge on the part of the students to help them solve a problem. This indicates that case-based learning requires more time for background study about a particular problem, which some MBA students may not readily have.

Ammerman et al. (2012) argued that the case study method showed shortcomings in not developing soft skills in MBA students, such as leadership and negotiation. These skills are considered important in developing MBA students to meet challenges in real and practical work life, leaving a gap in theory and practice. Further, many business schools require MBA candidates to have at least three years of practical experience to grant them admission to an MBA programme. This restricts many interested students who want to study for an MBA but, due to a lack of three years' experience, cannot be granted admission.

### **2.7.2. Lecture Method**

The lecture-based teaching and learning method is known to be the oldest, and is still commonly used in modern business schools (Hrepic et al., 2007). Osakinle et al. (2010) and Karabarbounis (2015) have also described how the lecture format is still used in many of the top MBA programmes. Further, some schools stand out for their significant use of this traditional pedagogic technique. *Bloomberg Businessweek* (2012) reported that INSEAD in both France and Spain estimated that lectures counted for 30% of their MBA instruction. Similarly, the IE Business School and Stanford GSB reported that approximately 20% of their MBA instruction was based upon lectures. The Tepper School of Business at Carnegie Mellon University headed the list of top business schools using the lecture method. The list reported that approximately 50% of all pedagogy in their MBA programme was done by

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traditional face-to-face stand-up lectures. The Marshall School at the University of Southern California was second, with 48%. Among the UK institutions who took part in the study, LBS reported an estimated 30% of its MBA instruction as lectures. Similarly, the Saïd Business School at the University of Oxford estimated as much as 40% lectures (*Bloomberg Businessweek*, 2012).

The 2015 Global Management Education Graduate Survey Report found that pure lectures were a commonly used method of instruction preferred by only 5% of students (GMAC, 2015). Davis (2009:148) stated that the lecture method is one “in which voice, gesture, movement, facial expression, and eye contact can either complement or detract from the content”. Traditional lectures, also known as didactic lectures (Richardson, 1997), are used particularly for large class sizes. Lectures are perhaps the oldest instructional format (Hrepic et al., 2007) and remain a valid instructional alternative, despite the availability of various other methods of teaching and learning (Svinicki and McKeachie, 2011).

Several comparative studies carried out in the past on the effectiveness of didactic lectures relative to other more interactive delivery types, such as case reports, technology-assisted learning, problem-based learning and open discussion, have shown that students’ satisfaction is higher for interactive delivery types (Millis et al., 2009). Doucet et al. (1998) reported that learners in a lecture format tended to be passive recipients of knowledge in an externally driven process. Cashin (2010) argued that in lecture-based learning, learners’ attention was quickly lost if a lecture was solely based upon talking. Further, the lack of student feedback was viewed as a large problem with the traditional stand-up lecture pedagogic delivery style (Cashin, 2010). However, Brownell and Tanner (2012) argued that it is the lack of faculty training in presenting an interactive lecture, rather than the method of delivery itself, that is the main reason for a lecture being ineffective. Based upon the findings regarding a suitable learning and teaching module, Finlayson et al. (2006) and Ofsted (2008) further

highlighted the importance of faculty members' training for the effective delivery of a module. Similarly, Finlayson et al. (2006) and Ofsted (2008) reported the importance of faculty training for any online/distance learning and teaching in MBA programmes. Because of such criticisms, increasing efforts are being made to transform didactic lectures into a more effective medium (Sandhu et al., 2012).

Researchers (Goldberg and McKhann, 2000; Sander et al., 2000) have argued that, in the past, effective lectures were characterised by the active participation of students, instructor-student questioning, discussion, and formative quizzes, with immediate feedback and the ability to capture and maintain students' attention. An effective lecture efficiently transfers knowledge to students by enhancing their conceptual understanding and retention of knowledge (Feldon, 2010). A lecture can summarise scattered material, describe the latest discoveries or issues, and show how experts in a field think, how they approach questions, and how they try to solve problems (Cashin, 2010).

The traditional face-to-face lecture method aligns with the stage learning approach as a pedagogical method of delivery for the MBA (Varela et al., 2013). Varela et al. (2013) further suggested that knowledge acquisition through the grasping of factual information requires that understanding of skill-relevant facts be unambiguous. In general, stage theorists consider learning in three broad phases: conceptualisation or declarative knowledge, associative or knowledge compilation, and the automaticity or procedurisation of knowledge. The conceptualisation stage denotes a time for the accumulation of unprocessed information (Varela et al., 2013). According to Logan (1995), conceptualisation is the encoding and memorising of novel information, resulting in stacks of disconnected facts. The associative phase transitions declarative knowledge into mental schemas which form the basis for using new information, as declarative knowledge is elaborated upon and connected to conditions to guide application. In the third stage, the interconnection of facts is strengthened through varied practice and

reflection, resulting in the procedurisation of knowledge. The stages approach suggests that teaching on MBA modules can proceed in a stepwise form, which starts by presenting factual information to ensure an unambiguous understanding of facts which are relevant to skill-building (Varela et al., 2013).

### **2.7.3 Experiential Learning**

Experiential learning is an increasingly adopted method of learning and teaching. Byrne (2015) reported that, in the institutions studied, the use of experiential learning was about 30% for MBA courses, and the Sloan School at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT), the Goizueta School at Emory University and the Smith School at Maryland University each reported an estimated 20% of their MBA course pedagogy as experiential learning. For the UK institutions featured in the report, the LBS reported that an estimated 15% of its MBA teaching was based upon experiential learning. The 2015 Global Management Education Graduate Survey Report found that experiential learning was used approximately 10% of the time and was also preferred by a sizeable 24% of the students. According to Yballe, O'Connor, and College (2000) and O'Connor (2015), the experiential learning pedagogical method is a guiding philosophy and method which has garnered almost universal acceptance among management faculties. Building upon Dewey (1938) and Levin's (1970) work, Kolb's (1984) experiential learning theory features a four-stage cyclical theory of learning: direct experience, reflective observation, abstract conceptualisation and active experimentation, such that students can generate their individual interpretations of new events (see Appendix E). Indeed, the proponents of experiential learning acknowledge the centrality of reflection in the learning process, as well as the idea that skilled activity is part of an ongoing process of transformation which may not necessarily be tracked through knowledge-based outputs (Varela et al., 2013).

Experiential learning helps students acquire valuable work-related social skills, gain maturity, and increases their confidence about the future by combining new experiences with dialogue with others and continuous reflection to bring changes to their previous capabilities (Cook et al., 2004; Varela et al., 2013). Yballe, O'Connor, and College (2000) maintained that students' experiences are valuable and relevant aspects of learning. Kolb (1984) had also acknowledged the usefulness of students' past and present experiences as an interesting focus for reflection and a credible source of guidance for action and experimentation. Experiential learning takes place as a process in which existing information is modified by the integration of new experiences into emerging mental structures (Weil and McGill, 1989).

In their analysis of the relevance of experiential learning for MBA instruction, Varela et al. (2013) suggested that real-world business situations were characterised by their own attendant chaos and dynamism, which it may not be possible to replicate appropriately in the classroom in a way that an experiential learning setting probably requires. They further attributed this as a potential pitfall for this type of pedagogy. They also developed the idea that the relevance of experiential learning to MBA instruction is evident through role-playing and hands-on activities that engender dialogue and reflection as principal tenets of experiential learning. Further, approaches such as action learning live projects and many workplace problem-solving activities and communities of practice can be considered as examples of experiential learning.

Action learning, for instance, sees students working together to solve a real-world business problem, such that peer interaction challenges existing perceptions and success in practice solidifies commitment (ABS Task Force, 2014; Thorpe and Rawlinson, 2014). In such a situation, the lecturer takes on the role of a facilitator who injects knowledge into the process and, therefore, action learning is flexible (Johnson and Spicer, 2006). Experiential learning further includes simulation (GMAC, 2015). Expounding on the simulation used in MBA courses, Orta (2013) suggested a staged presentation to a board

of directors or stockholders, for instance, which would reflect how this would be done in an actual real-world situation. Reflection potentially develops students' ability to anticipate future scenarios, a resource which is of particular significance for MBA students as they attempt to transfer learning from the classroom to rapidly changing working environments. Similarly, a community of practice (CoP), according to Wenger (2003:4), is a "group of people who share a concern, a set of problems, or a passion about a topic, and who deepen their knowledge and expertise in this area by interacting on an ongoing basis". In a CoP, a small group of people or students work together and share knowledge; a small group is referred to as containing 6-24 people.

#### **2.7.4 Team-based Learning**

According to Michaelsen et al. (2009), the basic objective in team-based learning is to ensure that students have the opportunity to practise using course concepts to solve problems as part of their learning; a practice designed to go beyond simply covering content. Hebert-Maccaro (2012) argued in favour of such a practice by insisting that a large part of MBA learning comes from the exchange of ideas among students themselves, as well as between students and lecturers. Hebert-Maccaro further argued that students are actively encouraged to leverage their vast experience and expertise from various industries. Similarly, Krathwohl (2002) argued that team-based learning is designed to expose students to both conceptual and procedural knowledge.

However, Michaelsen et al. (2009) maintained that, in team-based learning, emphasis is primarily on team assignments that concentrate on using course content to solve typical kinds of problems during class time that the students are likely to face at some point in the future, the mastery of course content taking secondary importance in a team-based learning classroom setting. MBA programme team assignments attempt to replicate the fast pace and high pressure of a business environment (Orta, 2013). Michaelsen et al. (2009) also suggested that to organise effective team-based learning, the

following should be considered as essential elements: groups must be properly formed and managed; students must be accountable for the quality of both their individual and group work; students must receive frequent and timely feedback; and group assignments must promote both learning and application/practice.

Regarding the UK business schools survey (2014), the LBS reported no team project-based learning, while the Said Business School at Oxford (2013) reported 25% of all its MBA instruction to involve team project-based learning. From the 2015 Global Management Education Graduate Survey Report, it is evident that, on average, students were instructed through team projects 23% of the time (GMAC, 2015). Thus, as far as the researcher has could ascertain, the above findings and approaches have not yet critically evaluated MBA programmes in UK education institutions in terms of learners, teachers, resources, the interests of the MBA programme providers, their strategies for managing blended learning and teaching, student development, and the relationships between the providers (tutors) and the learners. These are specific areas of interest explored through the multiple case study of three institutions in the UK undertaken in the current research.

## **2.8 ONLINE AND BLENDED LEARNING AND TEACHING IN MBA PROGRAMMES**

Many MBA programmes have moved away from traditional delivery to one which combines face-to-face meetings and online learning, because an increasing number of students want to achieve an MBA without having to give up their jobs, relocate, or attend evening classes during the week (Middleton, 2010). Less traditional delivery methods allow students to be flexible in terms of carrying out their professional duties and attaining a qualification.

Several factors have been suggested by various researchers as necessary for the successful implementation of blended learning in institutions of higher learning. Hebert-Maccaro (2012) argued that four important elements must

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be considered to achieve a successful implementation of blended and online learning formats for MBA programme modules: the existence of committed leadership from faculty and administrators; the presence of the ‘right students’; flexible and adequate technology; and instructors transforming from playing the role of central figure to that of a facilitator. These elements are consistent with both Stacey and Gerbic (2008) and Harris et al. (2009), who argued that the factors necessary for the successful implementation of blended learning include the availability of financial resources, support from senior management, and access to personnel with the requisite technological capabilities and skills. From the opinion of Stacey and Gerbic (2008), Harris et al. (2009), and Hebert-Maccaro (2012), the elements necessary for the successful implementation of blended learning can be divided into elements that pertain to the staff of the universities, as well as elements that pertain to the students who are embarking on the MBA programme. Elements that pertain to the staff include the existence of committed leadership from faculty and administrators, the availability of flexible and adequate technology, as well as the ability of instructors to transform from playing the role of central figure to that of a facilitator. On the other hand, elements that pertain to the students include the presence of the ‘right students’, as well as the availability of financial resources.

With respect to the element of adequate and flexible technology argued by Hebert-Maccaro (2012), Garrison and Vaughan (2008) seemingly make the same assertion by underscoring the need for a seamless connection between face-to-face and online components to ensure a truly blended learning environment. Stone (2015) further argues that the right technology can go a long way in fitting the needs of every student while at the same time fitting under the time constraint and the limitation of modern education. This assertion by Stone (2015) corroborates the argument of Hebert-Maccaro (2012) and Garrison and Vaughan (2008), there by pointing to the need for the right technology that will aid and facilitate the blend between face-to-face and online components of the learning environment. In order to ensure a



successful blended learning experience for students, there must be university support for course redesign, which may involve deciding which course objectives can be best achieved through online learning activities, which can best be accomplished in the classroom and how to integrate these two learning environments (Dziuban et al., 2006). On the other hand, Dziuban et al. (2006) argued that the creative use of Web 2.0 technologies can further transform a technical platform from a simple tool into a dynamic window to a virtual world of engagement with the material, with interaction with classmates and the instructor also seen as important components of a blended learning environment. Clearly, the contribution of Dziuban et al. (2006) further advances the assertion of Stone (2015), Hebert-Maccaro (2012), and Garrison and Vaughan (2008), but from the perspective of faculty and staff, and their willingness to redesign the course to accommodate a blended pattern of learning.

With respect to the existence of committed leadership from faculty and administrators, Garrison and Kanuka (2004), Harris et al. (2009) and Vogel (2010) maintained that one factor required for successful blended learning is the allocation of dedicated services to support and assist facilitators throughout the development and use of modules. This allocation also includes spending resources on communication between users and developers (which is linked to learning and associated outcomes rather than the use of technology alone) to encourage instructors and students to become actively involved and fully aware of blended learning initiatives.

However, Ooms et al. (2008) maintained that faculty scepticism and misunderstandings about what blended learning includes are not uncommon, and are factors that could hinder the development of blended learning. Hebert-Maccaro (2012) further described how, whilst there may be initial scepticism about the implementation of a blended learning model in an MBA programme, early adoption among senior faculty and academic leadership can help facilitate discussion among the local academic

community to address concerns that may exist. She maintained that early adoption provides the opportunity for a sustained effort which is likely to lead to a greater acceptance of the new programme and improve its chances of success. Picciano and Dziuban (2007) also reported that core faculty members perceived the development of online based activities as time-consuming and were more likely to shy away from technology-facilitated interactions.

Ooms et al. (2008) further cautioned that blended learning development takes time, and the amount of work involved, even when given support by developers, can be underestimated by staff new to this approach. However, the key stakeholders can provide support, not only with teaching, but also through faculty development programmes, funding for faculty research on pedagogical techniques, and modifications to evaluate and reward performance in a blended programme. Ooms et al. (2008) were convinced that there was staff reluctance in adopting technology to support or replace face-to-face teaching. To resolve the issue of staff reluctance, the HEFCE (2005) and Hannon (2008) had earlier suggested a combination of technological and pedagogic training for faculty. Similarly, Beadle and Santy (2008) and Harris et al. (2009) suggested that instructors should be taught to use the technology from the user end in order to facilitate student learning effectively. They further added that the attitude, readiness, and technological skills of the course facilitators were equally important factors, which affected how successfully they used, developed and updated the technology-based tools and resources in operation.

With respect to the transformation from the role of instructor to the role of facilitator, Picciano and Dziuban (2007), Attwell and Hughes (2010) and Mayes and Fowler (2006) argued that, as instructors take charge of learning new technology, adapting the technology to the pedagogy or even forging new pedagogical principles based on innovations in technology, the role of the instructor transforms from that of teacher into facilitator. Further, Coffield

(2008) emphasised that learners should be considered as the important element in the learning process. On the other hand, Tabor (2007) and Vaughan (2007) argued that students must be encouraged to take more responsibility for, and demonstrate autonomy in, their learning in online and blended environments.

In her own experience of implementing the blended learning MBA programme at the Worcester Polytechnic Institute, Hebert-Maccaro (2012) explained that many faculty members found their traditional central role of commanding attention, monitoring and closely steering class discussions and shaping outcomes in the face-to-face instruction-learning process being diminished in place of the participant, and becoming less of a 'front and centre' role in a less linear, student-shaped discourse model of blended learning. The faculty members found this trend to be quite disarming, since they believed that it was their responsibility as experts to impart their expertise to their students. Clearly, the assertion of Hebert-Maccaro (2012) is corroborated by Limmer (2015), who points to the fact that facilitation places students at the centre of attention while instructing places the teacher at the centre of attention. However, unlike Hebert-Maccaro (2012) who focuses on the need to transform from the role of instructor to facilitator, Limmer (2015) emphasizes other differences that exist between the role of instructor and facilitator. Among these differences is the fact that an instructor lectures while a facilitator discusses.

With respect to the presence of the 'right students', many researchers (e.g., Stewart, 2002, Mitchell and Honore, 2007 and Hebert-Maccaro, 2012) lay emphasis on the need for students' readiness, which implies that the right students are generally those with a high degree of self-motivation, since a lot of work done in blended learning is asynchronous, making intrinsically motivated learners more likely to do better than those who are not (Hebert-Maccaro, 2012). This statement seemingly aligns with Stewart's (2002) earlier argument that learners' motivations should be considered when

working to implement a successful blended learning model. Similarly, Mitchell and Honore (2007) also argued that the attitude and motivation of learners is particularly significant when online learning is involved because these factors affect acceptance and participation. Baldwin-Evans (2006) also favoured ensuring learner readiness and Tabor (2007) highlighted the importance of students' ability to cope with independent learning.

Further, Smyth et al. (2012) addressed the issues of student readiness for blended learning environments by arguing that the technology associated with blended learning may provide the advantageous effect of relatively unrestricted access to course materials. However, they added the caveat that pervasive online access can also be invasive to students' personal lives, and students who are not able to strike the right balance can feel overwhelmed and exhausted. In line with Smyth et al. (2012), Vaughan (2007) had also maintained that students enrolled on blended courses can sometimes have unrealistic expectations, such as the notion that reduced face-to-face class time directly translates into less work. Inevitably, these students show little in terms of time management skills and experience problems with accepting responsibility for their personal learning. Therefore, some researchers (Tabor, 2007; Vaughan, 2007) have taken the position that students must be encouraged to take more responsibility for and show autonomy in their learning.

The right students are also characterised by a willingness to embrace technology and are more likely to utilise the full range of all the tools available to support, augment and enrich their learning. However, students on such courses can feel isolated due to the reduced opportunities for social interaction compared with a face-to-face classroom environment (Smyth et al., 2012). Hebert-Maccaro (2012) suggested that institutions should take a consultative approach to admission and emphasise getting to know prospective students early in the process, which could assist in determining if candidates have the competence to succeed in the classroom, as well as

having the necessary professional attitude and resourcefulness to manage and optimise the delivery mode. Bliuc et al. (2007), Mitchell and Honore (2007) and Harris et al. (2009) appeared to support this in their earlier work, as they pointed out that consideration of learners' needs and management of their expectations and level of understanding were important for the development and implementation of successful blended learning modules.

With respect to the availability of financial resources, Naseem and Handley (2015) point to the fact that the factors that result in the successful implementation of blended learning are focused on the availability of financial resources among other things. This is in line with the contribution of Stacey and Gerbic (2008) and Harris et al. (2009), which also point to the importance of financial resources in successfully implementing blended learning. This rests on the fact that aside the capital investment in the development and deployment of the needed technology, students will need to make some expenditure that will enable them participate in the blended learning methods, other than their tuition fee. Such expense could include cost of travel as well as cost of internet access for participation in online classes. Without the availability of resources, the blended learning experience of the participants might be limited.

## **2.9 STAKEHOLDER BEHAVIOUR IN ONLINE AND BLENDED LEARNING DELIVERY MBA PROGRAMME MODULES**

The literature also outlined stakeholder (staff and student) activity within various individual modules taught within MBA programmes delivered at least partially in an online and blended learning environment, and is reviewed in this section. The taught modules on MBA programmes encompass accounting, auditing, marketing, economics, and operations management and are delivered in online and blended environments. As a result of her experience during an online organisational behaviour module as part of an EMBA programme, Brower (2003) outlined how online

environments should be managed by staff to avoid instructor over-participation. The researcher further advised that instructors stay out of online discussions, stepping in only to redirect the discussion if there is the need to do so to promote student discovery of knowledge. With respect to what can be considered as effective discussion management practices in an online learning environment, Walker (2004) studied the elements of effective conflict management in an online professional communication course. She found that actions such as complimenting fellow posters and generalising issues all helped to normalise online discourse. Studying the elements of student group behaviours, such as team dynamics in online environments, Liu, X. et al. (2007) observed an online strategy course, and found cohesiveness, trust and cognitive styles to be significant predictors of online team dynamics and, by extension, online student group behaviours, but not student learning outcomes. Interestingly, Williams et al. (2006) also chose an online strategy module and discovered that the relationship between teamwork and student learning outcomes was defined by group cohesiveness. However, this finding is in direct conflict with that of Liu, X. et al. (2007), particularly with regards to the relationship between teamwork and learning outcomes.

When Hodgson and Watland (2004a) debated Arbaugh and Benbunan-Fich (2004) about identifying appropriate research methods that could be used for studying management courses delivered online, the former contended that researchers should focus more on qualitative than on quantitative methods because collaborative and constructivist learning models drive many of the online learning models. The latter, while not disagreeing with the former about the importance of qualitative methods, cautioned that, as an emerging field, research into online learning should allow for diversity in methods.

This is of particular relevance to this current study, given that this research has to do with studying the delivery of MBAs through blended and online-assisted platforms. In comparing blended and traditional offerings of an MBA-level managerial accounting course, two blended and two purely

classroom courses were studied and the findings published by Chen and Jones (2007). The research demonstrated that while students on the purely classroom courses reported their course instruction had greater clarity, those on the blended courses reported higher levels of learning. However, the latter group stated that they found their format to be less effective than that of the former. Further, they were still interested in taking more blended courses in the future. Later, Jones and Chen (2008) reported that students working within the blended learning format indicated they had better access to and contact with the instructor, but were concerned about instructor presentation of material and student-student interaction during online meetings.

Arbaugh et al. (2009) argued that studies of fully online accounting courses had a tendency to become narrative accounts of the instructors' experiences. In her study of 115 students completing a compressed MBA-level tax accounting course on WebCT during the summers of 2001 and 2002, Dunbar (2004) suggested shifting to a more flexible course format between the first and second course offerings. Acknowledging that it was the students' first experience with a graduate-level course, as well as an online course, Dunbar (2004) reported that making the transition was not easy for the students and had conclude that online instruction could be as effective as face-to-face teaching. This conclusion was based on her realisation that she spent a comparably large amount of time on the online class as on the face-to-face version.

Cleveland and Larkins (2004), working in the then-emerging area of studying online supplements to classroom-based accounting courses, found that web-based writing and self-testing significantly improved accounting students' writing skills. A report by Gammie et al. (2002) showed that students saw as a major advantage the flexibility and opportunity afforded by the online module of an auditing course when applying learning to work, but that accessing, developing and assessing the module were points of concern. DeLange et al. (2003) conducted research to examine student attitudes towards the design features and attributes of WebCT as a virtual learning

environment (VLE). They found that the availability of lecture notes, bulletin boards, online assessments, and chat and audio summaries were four factors that were associated with improved student learning motivation. Further, Delialioglu and Yildirim (2007) and Hameed et al. (2008) highlighted the limitations of a VLE (online instruction), e.g., pedagogical, time, and hardware and software problems. Similarly, Rovai and Jordan (2004) outlined the limitations of web-based learning environments e.g., students dropping out from the programme due to a feeling of isolation.

In terms of using Blackboard as a supplement to classroom instruction in accounting courses, Love and Fry (2006) and Wells et al. (2008) reported that lecture notes, content availability and announcements were the strongest predictors of overall perceptions of the CMS. Further, Arbaugh et al. (2009) argued that students viewed the CMS as a content repository, instead of a mechanism for engaging with their classmates, although the students featured in these studies still found Blackboard to be useful and rewarding. Studies such as those carried out by Marriott et al. (2004) and Potter and Johnston (2006) found that prior subject knowledge and the amount of time spent on the CMS were the primary predictors of examination performance. They further found that students' attitudes towards online learning were mixed.

Sautter (2007) compared online discussion activity with its face-to-face version in a consumer behaviour course. The researcher revealed that each approach accomplished a different set of objectives. In providing a perspective on Sautter's (2007) findings, Arbaugh et al. (2009) made the case that if the learning objectives call for improving active listening skills, building oral communication skills, or developing contemporaneous thinking skills, then the face-to-face discussion method may be preferred. However, if developing logical reasoning and critical thinking skills, building written communication skills, or encouraging a greater diversity of perspectives happened to be the learning outcomes, then an online platform may be more appropriate. Anstine and Skidmore (2005) sampled eight MBA-level



economics and statistics courses: four delivered online and four taught in classrooms. Controlling for student demographic characteristics and considering instructor experience and endogenous learning choice variables in their study, Anstine and Skidmore (2005) found that students on online statistics courses scored significantly lower than those in classroom-based settings.

This section highlighted various constructivist characteristics that can help or hinder online or distance learning teaching. The role of technology, resources, skills, prior knowledge and psychological elements were also discussed. Gaps identified in the literature and the research questions generated in response are discussed in the next section.

## **2.10 SUMMARY OF LITERATURE REVIEW CHAPTER**

This chapter has discussed various frameworks for learning and teaching, particularly learning and teaching pedagogies, including the costs and benefits of MBA and all underlying criticisms. However, it was noted that the literature still lacks theoretical frameworks for learning and teaching in MBA programmes in UK universities. It was also not known how the existing learning and teaching approaches and frameworks are relevant to the MBA programmes in UK universities. Similarly, various sections in the literature review also shed light on techniques which can be utilised to evaluate different learning and teaching approaches. It was discussed that multiple factors have an impact on students' development, such as the management, leadership and other skills of MBA students. The literature review chapters also highlighted the positive and negative impacts that an existing learning and teaching framework can have on students. However, the literature has not yet demonstrated empirical investigation of the different features of MBA programmes in UK universities that could have positive or negative impacts on the students as well as the universities, e.g., AMBA. Therefore, the next chapter critically reviews literature on the underlying theories and models of learning as well as the quality aspects of MBA programme delivery.

## **CHAPTER THREE LITERATURE REVIEW II**

### **3.1 INTRODUCTION TO CHAPTER THREE**

This section of the literature review critically explores the most significant and relevant learning theories to the current study. In particular, it considers objectivism, behaviourism, cognitivism and constructivism and discusses the differences and similarities among these theories with a view to identifying the most relevant learning theory for the current study. Secondly, this section examines the current models of MBA delivery with particular emphasis on traditional face-to-face delivery, distance learning and blended/web facilitated modes. It discusses the nature of these models including differences between them. Finally, this section critically examines the quality environment of online and blended learning, linking findings from this area to the main focus of this study.

### **3.2 THE LITERATURE ON LEARNING THEORIES**

This section critically discusses and examines the underlying principles of some of the learning theories that are relevant to adult learning, and hence the MBA programme. Many learning theories have informed the design of strategies in the creation of learning systems. Therefore, this section also examines how these learning theories are reflected within the design, delivery and policies of an MBA programme. Since the 1800s, three important learning theories - behaviourism, cognitivism and constructivism - have continued to influence education and provide guidance for instructional practice (Baruque and Melo, 2004). From another perspective, objectivism and constructivism are the two ends of a continuum that have important implications for MBAs in their distance learning format (Phan and Hoover, 2014). This study, therefore, limits its presentation of learning theories to

objectivism, behaviourism, cognitivism and constructivism. The following sections discuss each of these four learning theories in detail.

### **3.2.1 Objectivism**

Lakoff (1987) illustrated that objectivism is, first, based on realism, in which the existence of the real world is external to and independent of human experience and that all learners gain the same understanding of the world around them. Second, objectivism is based on essentialism, the belief that the existence of essential properties makes an entity the particular thing it is. Essentialism accepts that there exist certain qualities and attributes in any entity that make it stand out from all others and give it an identity (Lakoff, 1987). In this way, objectivism believes in only one reality that is true and correct. While Lakoff (1987) limits the basis of objectivism to realism and essentialism, Nugent (2015) provides a broader perspective of objectivism, which he iterated as entailing metaphysics, epistemology, ethics, and politics. Nugent (2015) classifies realism as a part of metaphysics, which is concerned with objective realism.

Arbaugh and Benbunan-Fich (2006) conducted a study on 49 different MBA courses from multiple disciplines and expounded that the objectivist model hinges on transferring knowledge from the lecturer to the students, allowing each of the students to learn independently. The researchers further argued that “there is a unique and objective knowledge representing the world [truth] that can be articulated or communicated to the students” (Arbaugh and Benbunan-Fich, 2006:780). In that sense, learning is about finding out or being taught true reality, and not leaving it to the learners to find out what holds true for each of them in terms of their interpretations of situations. The role of instructors in objectivism thus assumes great importance, as they are the ones trained to interpret the real world for students.

The fundamental principle underlying this assumption is that there is a unique body of knowledge to be articulated and directly communicated to the learner by the instructor. The role of the student in this process is to follow

the real worldviews shaped by the teacher and to replicate this content. Further, in the objectivist model, the instructor transfers knowledge to the learners, who independently absorb or learn it. Objectivism may, therefore, seem inappropriate in learning situations in which learners are expected to apply prior knowledge to a different situation, since the very essence of objectivism discourages learners from doing this.

This assertion by Arbaugh and Benbunan-Fich (2006) is supported by Biddle (2016), who holds the opinion that the objectivism theory is a theory that supports the assertion that the mind of students is an empty slate which the lecturer or the teacher fills up. Hence, Arbaugh and Benbunan-Fich (2006) and Biddle (2016) point to objectivism as a philosophy of learning which places the lecturer or the teacher at the centre of attention. The weakness of this perspective of objectivism by Arbaugh and Benbunan-Fich (2006) and Biddle (2016) lies on the fact that it leaves no room for the transition of roles from instructor to facilitator, as iterated by Limmer (2015).

Contrary to the perspective of Arbaugh and Benbunan-Fich (2006) and Biddle (2016), Knowles' (1984) points to the fact that as junior, middle or senior-level managers and administrators, MBA students are learners who come into a learning situation with a great deal of experience, which may make it difficult for them to perform those roles that objectivist adherents would expect of students.

The tenets of objectivism would, however, appear to have a high degree of relevance to MBA courses in which stand-up lectures are employed, a sentiment which Schell and Janicki (2013) shared. Richardson (2008) contended that the traditional stand-up lecture is often suggested as being more passive in nature. Being passive indicates that, in stand-up lecture settings, lecturers/instructors lead the way at the head of the class, and the role of the student is to absorb as much of the knowledge that is being transferred from the instructor as possible, and where the instructor is in control of the content and pace of learning. However, Hoadley (2009) and Osakinle et al. (2010) affirmed stand-up lectures as a delivery method which

is still in use in teaching MBA courses in many of the top-ranked business schools in the world. Phan and Hoover (2014) expatiated on the relevance of objectivist principles in the teaching modules of MBAs by suggesting that in a distance/online MBA, objectivist principles are applied to help learners with fundamental concepts, principles, theories, and guidance prior to their applications, as personalised knowledge of fundamental concepts could lead to academic chaos.

### **3.2.2 Behaviourism**

Weegar and Pacis (2012) argued that behaviourism is a school of thought that believes that a learner or learning is shaped by external forces, instead of an individual's characteristics. Further, learning occurs because of receiving external stimulus and the learner's response to it. The theory asserts that there is an engineering of the conditions in the learning environment to create, develop and maintain desirable behaviours. Coined by John Watson (1878-1959), behaviourist learning is interested in the acquisition of new behaviour by means of conditioning. In the process of receiving and responding to external stimulus, Ertmer and Newby (1993) claimed that what is most critical in affecting learning depends on how the association between stimulus and response is made, strengthened and maintained. Behaviourist theory is supported by many researchers, such as Thorndike (1913b), whose contribution is expressed in his exposition on connectionism, which featured the three main laws of effect, exercise and readiness.

Eisner (1994) argued that specifying behavioural objectives is very useful and appropriate in some instances, but maintained that objectives will probably emerge from class activities in most cases. He further argued:

I believe behavioural objectives to be appropriate for some types of educational aims, even though I recognise that they are in no way adequate for conceptualising most of our most cherished educational aspirations (Eisner, 1994:45).

For those who subscribe to such a practice, it is appropriate to be more linear in some instances. For example, in teaching someone how to use a computer,

the teacher can allow the student to experiment and explore for a while. However, there will come a time when, unless the teacher presents specific steps to follow and lets the student practise these steps, it is very likely that the student will become frustrated and discouraged (Vrasidas, 2000).

Another seminal work that explains behaviourist theory is by Pavlov (1927), who focused on the principle of classical conditioning. Classical conditioning is concerned with reflex and spontaneous actions, whereby a relationship is established between an involuntary reaction and the stimulus that occasioned it. Thorndike's (1913a) work inspired Skinner's (1938) operant conditioning theory. Skinner explained that, to understand behaviour, one has to consider the cause of an action and the consequences of that action. Skinner mentioned three types of operant: neutral operants, reinforcers and punishers. Skinner (1938) described neutral operants as having no effect on the likelihood of repeated behaviour in terms of increasing or decreasing it. Reinforcers, on the other hand, are operants that increase the likelihood of repeated behaviour, whilst punishers decrease the likelihood. A major point of departure between classical and operant conditioning lies in the former's focus on the nexus between a spontaneous or reflex response to a stimulus, whilst the latter seeks to find a relation between voluntary behaviour and consequence.

In a more recent appraisal of this learning theory, Schunk (2012) suggested that behaviourist learning is a result of trial and error, whereby learners strengthen the interactions of stimulus and response they find satisfying and weaken those that they do not. However, Morrison et al. (2011) argued that behaviourist theory does not deal with issues of thought, reasoning, processing, or memory. On the surface, the basic tenets of behaviourist learning appear to contrast quite markedly with the assumptions espoused by the work of the researchers reviewed so far about adult learning and adult learners. However, Morrison et al. (2011) indicated that some behaviourist principles, which can be found in actions such as giving feedback verbally and through online grading, as well as continuous practice until there is a

demonstrative mastery of prerequisite skills, help provide guidance in designing instruction for distance modules for course or unit design. Phan and Hoover (2014) intimated that the principle of giving a small amount of reinforcement immediately, rather than giving a large amount of reinforcement later, applies to distance learning MBA programme modules, whereas withholding feedback to a later date is more suited to a face-to-face MBA module.

### **3.2.3 Cognitivism**

Cognitivism, as described by Piaget (1952), is the learning school of thought that values the complexities of knowledge or information gathering, processing and storage. For cognitivists, the mind actively organises and processes information and utilises previous knowledge in the learning process. Cognitivism concerns how individuals come to know what they know. Cognitive theory, as explained by Stacey (2001), is concerned with learning through the mind's ability to generate meaning and understanding, and was born out of the Gestalt movement in Germany in the early 1900s.

Piaget (1952) further maintained that knowledge is actively constructed by learners in response to interactions with external stimuli. However, Vygotsky (1962) held that language and culture are frameworks through which human experience, communicate and understand reality, making these an important part of cognitive development through the growth of the human intellect and the perception of the world, whilst there is agreement between Vygotsky and Piaget that learners respond to their interpretation of stimuli and not just to the stimuli. On the other hand, Vygotsky (1962) also criticised Piaget, claiming that the latter had failed to understand that learning is a collaborative process in his disregard for the inherently social nature of language. Thus, he claimed that other cognitivists had also failed to understand that learning is a collaborative process.

The processing of information is important for cognitivists and Ertmer and Newby (1993) advised that learners should be involved in the learning process, information should be organised and sequenced for proper

processing, and learning environments should be created to help learners connect new knowledge with material previously learned. According to Morrison et al. (2011), adherents of cognitive theory see learning from the following perspectives: learners' formation of personalised and unique knowledge structures called 'schemas'; that the more learners connect prior knowledge with new and apply it to novel situations, the better the knowledge will be learned; and that prior knowledge influences new learning experiences, and new knowledge changes learners.

Graduate management education, and programmes such as the MBA in particular, aim to produce managers capable of developing the cognitive and thought processes of students (Benjamin and O'Reilly, 2011). Phan and Hoover (2014) outlined the essential implications of cognitive theory for online and technology-assisted distance MBA models by highlighting that the theory is used to guide web-based instruction and multimedia learning, where it is necessary for organising objectives, materials and activities for instruction, meeting learners' zones of proximal development, facilitating memory and providing interaction with instructors and peers.

### **3.2.4 Constructivism**

The basic and most fundamental assumption of constructivism is that knowledge does not exist independently of the learner, and that knowledge is constructed (Vrasidas, 2000). Constructivists further believe that individuals link the new information they receive to their prior knowledge or experiences. Rogers et al. (2009) argued that the constructivist mind is in a state of dynamically constructing knowledge within an environment by putting together interactions and linking them with meaningful experiences. Cobb (1994) and Prawat and Floden (1994) acknowledged, however, that there are varied views, even among the proponents of constructivism.

Vrasidas (2000) also highlighted various dimensions of constructivism. First, personal constructivism, espoused by Piaget (1970) and Von Glasersfeld (1989), as knowledge being constructed in the learner's head whilst the



reorganising of experiences and cognitive structures takes place. Second, Vygotsky (1978) and Kuhn (1996) argued that, in social constructivism, knowledge is constructed in communities of practice through social interaction. However, Cobb (1994) maintained that both views complement each other and, therefore, cannot be separated. This means that, in constructivism, meaningful knowledge is constructed first by sharing social interaction, but also at an individual level in the learner's mind. Tenenbaum et al. (2001) maintained that constructivist theory regards knowledge as a capability that an individual constructs psychologically through understanding, behaviour and activities, which the learner captures from instant learning and broader social environments. Hence, a learner constructs knowledge by actively interacting with the learning and with external objects.

In an interesting association between constructivism and adult learning, Knowles et al. (1998) observed that both constructivism and adult learning share the following ideas: learners owning the learning process, experiential learning, and having a problem-solving approach to learning. In another instance of association between constructivism and adult learning, Phan and Hoover (2014), whose study focused on the implications of some of the main theories of learning for the modern distance MBA, acknowledged that most learners on MBA courses are adults who have gained a significant amount of prior knowledge and skills, as well as the ability to take responsibility for their own learning, and maintained that constructivism should be the dominant theory for learning and teaching. Phan and Hoover's (2014) observations were further reinforced by Bentley et al. (2012), who reported on a review of surveys featuring a blended learning MBA programme run by a UK university in association with partner institutions abroad. Their review documented that the average age of the respondents was 35, with most of them holding middle or senior-level management positions, such as assistant manager, contract team leader, information technology (IT) support manager, deputy director, operations manager or general manager.

Jonassen (1991), an adherer of constructivism, goes as far as rejecting the notion of an absolute real world; that is to say, there cannot be any objective reality that is independent of human mental activity. The constructivist school of thought, therefore, concerns learners constructing their own knowledge through the interaction of the learner and the environment. Similarly, Bruner (1987, 1990) maintained that constructivism emphasises learners' construction of their own world based upon certain factors, such as prior experience, mental structures and the beliefs which one uses to interpret objects and events.

With respect to arguments in favour of constructivism, Roberts (2016) believes constructivism is a method of teaching that is effective for students who are capable of learning better in a hands-on environment. Roberts (2016) also argues that constructivism facilitates the ability of students to further relate the information that they learn in the classroom to their lives and experiences, caters for the prior knowledge of students on a subject matter, and encourages students to work in groups. The assertion of Roberts (2016) regarding the ability of students to apply lessons learnt to real-life experiences aligns with the assertion of Knowles et al. (1998) regarding how constructivist theory promotes experiential learning. However, in his arguments for constructivism in learning, Roberts (2016) fails to acknowledge the fact that constructivism promotes hands on tasks that engage the students in the process of learning. This point is iterated by HRDI (2016), in addition to the fact that constructivism promotes the role of facilitation by the teachers. In other words, HRDI (2016) suggests that constructivism can serve as a basis for the assertion of Limmer (2015), who advocates for a transition from the role of instructor to the role of facilitator.

The constructivist position is also not free from criticism. In the opinion of Roberts (2016), the training that is required for constructive teaching is extensive, thereby requiring long-term professional development that is costly. Such a type of training may turn out to be unreasonable for school budgets, while also being disruptive to the learning of students. Also, Roberts

(2016) notes the fact that with an average number of students in a single classroom, there is a likelihood that teachers will be unable to customize or tailor the curriculum to each student, given the fact that their prior knowledge varies. Although Roberts (2016) makes an argument against constructivism citing its costly nature, he focuses more of the financial cost without consideration of the time resource requirement. However, HRDI (2016) takes time requirement into consideration in its argument against constructivism in learning by stating that the implementation of solid constructivist strategies needs an extended time of preparation for the teacher.

In an MBA programme, the constructivist approach can be adopted to cater for learners' various interests, needs, abilities and backgrounds, such that learning activities can be carried out by working individually, in pairs or in groups on cases and projects. Further, tasks and strategies are less prescription-oriented in the sense that there is no single correct way to address an instructional problem, as well as adopting a less criterion-referenced evaluation process.

The relevance of constructivist methods in mainstream MBAs is further reinforced by many researchers. The most prominent research works in this area are by Arbaugh and Duray (2002), Arbaugh and Hwang (2005), Moon et al. (2005), Strang (2006), Rovai et al. (2007), Chia and Holt (2008) and Tsai et al. (2008). These researchers reported that many of the top business schools in the world were adopting and using some highly typical constructivist methods, such as experiential learning and case study, in many of their programme modules.

### **3.2.5 RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN LEARNING THEORY AND RESEARCH**

Although it is apparent from the above discussion that constructivist theory is more appropriate for distance/blended MBA learning, all the learning theories referred to above overlap in some areas and contradict in others. Further, each of the theories has its own advantages and limitations.

However, their usefulness and appropriateness is partly determined by and based upon the context, the type of student and the course content.

In the context of this research, none of the above-discussed theories have been explored and evaluated in an MBA programme, which reflects the usefulness of the current study. Further, existing efforts are limited and lacking in explanation (Bentley et al., 2012) of how a particular learning and teaching theory can help or hinder the development or management of an MBA programme in the UK universities. In considering how one particular theory could have an impact and have the potential to become challenging in delivering an MBA programme effectively, as discussed above, different theories pose different stresses and demands for multiple resources and conditions for their execution. Similarly, it is also not clear if UK universities have ever tried to implement a particular theory and what were the outcomes, or why UK universities might not even have tried to implement a theory in their MBA programme.

These issues are of interest in this research in exploring the context of three UK universities so that an effective learning and teaching framework can be designed for an MBA programme that could be equally useful in practice. In particular, this study found the constructivism learning theory to be the closest theory to the interpretivist research paradigm among all the four chosen learning theories as it's been found to dominate distance/online MBA education; encourage the negotiation of learning activities which is typical of MBA studies; and particularly suitable for catering for learners' various interests, needs, abilities and backgrounds within many business schools' settings. Scholars including Arbaugh and Duray (2002), Arbaugh and Hwang (2005), Moon et al. (2005), Strang (2006), Rovai et al. (2007), Chia and Holt (2008) and Tsai et al. (2008) all confirm the relevance of this learning approach within the MBA programme structure of most top business schools in the world. However, some aspects of behaviourism, cognitivism and objectivism were also found relevant for the discussion of the pedagogical aspects of this study as well as the chosen UK case institutions and

consequently, some aspects of these theories were adapted in the discussion and development of the new learning framework as shown in figure 6.1.

### **3.3 LITERATURE ON MODELS OF MBA PROGRAMME DELIVERY**

As the market and interest in business and management subjects have grown, so have class sizes. This growth is also accompanied by concerns and interest in how business schools might be able to deliver content to students successfully and appropriately (Thorpe and Rawlinson, 2014). This section reflects on the literature that discusses how MBA programmes have been delivered over the years. The delivery approaches presented include the traditional face-to-face method, which is presented first, followed by the distance learning method, online learning and, finally, the blended learning model.

Based upon empirical investigation, White et al. (2010) reported that no distinct definition had been proposed in the literature for the various ways in which MBA programmes were delivered. However, Allen and Seaman (2009, 2013) maintained that courses could be designed in such a way that they could be searched for based upon their mode of delivery, subject matter, etc. The researchers further recommended the following categories of MBA programme delivery methods:

- ❖ *Traditional (face-to-face) learning*: in this learning method, 0% learning takes place online. This type of course has no online technology use. However, content is delivered in writing or orally.
- ❖ *Web-facilitated learning*: this type of learning has 1% to 29% online content. Such a programme uses web-based technology to facilitate what is essentially a face-to-face course. However, it may use a course management system (CMS) or web pages to post the syllabus and assignments.

- ❖ *Blended/hybrid learning*: this type of learning has 30% to 79% online content. This would be a course that blends online and face-to-face delivery. A substantial proportion of the content is delivered online, typically using online discussions and a reduced number of face-to-face meetings.
- ❖ *Online learning*: this type of learning has 80% online content. In this type of course, most or all of the content is delivered online, and there are typically no face-to-face meetings.

The main aim of this research is to evaluate the effectiveness of blended learning as a means of delivering management development in MBA programmes. Therefore, the above-proposed definitions and categorisations by Allen and Seaman (2009, 2013) are used as basic concepts throughout this research to evaluate and explore different models of learning in UK universities, particularly, blended and online learning.

### **3.3.1 Traditional Face-to-face Learning Delivery**

As defined by Allen and Seaman (2013), traditional face-to-face learning is a situation in which content is taught in the classroom and coursework is completed through written assignments, examinations and homework. Van Doorn et al. (2012) defined a classroom as a high-fidelity learning environment, in which individual kinaesthetic senses and perceptions are heightened. They further argued that instructors and students in a traditional face-to-face classroom setting can actively conduct role plays, student presentations, debates and round-robin discussions. Their argument is reinforced and highlighted in a report by Carrington Crisp, the EFMD and the Association of Chartered Certified Accountants (ACCA) (2014). The report described how the in-class delivery method provides constructive peer pressure to engage in group learning and aids work and study in business schools by enhancing critical listening ability.

Thorpe and Rawlinson (2014) indicated that traditional teaching will remain important as a means of delivering an MBA course in business schools. Critics of the traditional face-to-face method have cited its perceived lack of flexibility in scheduling, students lacking control over the ability to adjust the pace of learning to suit their styles or to view lectures, and the inability to reduce commuting time and expense. Ealy (2013) considered these shortcomings as merits of online formats. However, Van Doorn and Van Doorn (2014) argued that instructors in a traditional face-to-face classroom tend to clarify core concepts, clearly articulate expectations and transfer enthusiasm for the subject in a brief, efficient, and high-fidelity manner, with most students having their questions answered instantly. Carrington Crisp et al. (2014) expressed the opinion that online learning was not friendly to reading, memory and analytical work as part of students' learning, while Kristjansson (2006) argued that the nuances of communication in facial expressions between students, peers, and instructors are part of the in-class learning process. Such interaction assists in building relationships, career networking, and enhancing social and emotional intelligence.

Dunn et al. (2011) insisted that direct access to lecturers for advice and out of class communication can help form student-teacher and mentor relationships. The report by Carrington Crisp et al. (2014) further asserted that face-to-face training would retain its relevance for business education. Similarly, programme delivery in the major high-quality business schools would continue to be more face-to-face oriented.

A recent phenomenon has, however, altered the way the traditional instructional process works. Whilst the traditional instructional process sets students to listen to lectures and take tests in class before they are given textbook reading assignments and problem sets to be completed outside school, 'flipped' classrooms or instructions lead students to study tutor prepared lessons on their own outside and before class and to use the knowledge acquired for hands-on practice in class (Nwosisi et al., 2015).

Similarly, the Durham University website (2015) reported that the flipped classroom technique is more effective for MBA students, and it was believed that it led them to enhance their ability for learning. Essentially, this new way ‘flips’ the traditional practice around. Similarly, *The Economist* (2011) and Wheeler (2015) suggested that flipped learning aids students by first having them study a topic by themselves outside class, and then applying this knowledge by solving assigned problems and doing practical work. In the flipped learning model, teachers shift direct learning out of the large group learning space and move it into the individual learning space by utilising technologies (Hamdan et al., 2013).

The instructor intervenes only to bring students back on track, rather than leading the process at the start (Nwosisi et al., 2015). In this method, videos or screencasts are available for students to access whenever and wherever it is convenient; at home, during study, on the bus, even in hospital and as many times as they like, enabling them to come to class better prepared (Hamdan et al., 2013). Video lessons are prepared by the tutor (Ronchetti, 2010; Toppo, 2011) or by third parties (Nwosisi et al., 2015). The flipped classroom model also allows students who require closer attention from their instructor greater leverage for engagement (Tucker, 2012). Instructors are also able to use time-embedded formative assessments to keep track of student learning activities (*New York Times*, 2014). Findlay-Thompson and Mombourquette (2014) conducted a study for an undergraduate business course (Business 1112) in three sections: one with a flipped classroom and the other two using traditional learning and teaching approaches. The findings supported the flipped classroom literature, in some instances: a flipped classroom has positive and negative outcomes.

### **3.3.2 Distance Learning**

Distance learning is often described as an effort to provide access to learning for those who are geographically distant (Moore et al., 2011). Phan and Hoover (2014) argued that terms such as ‘online learning’ and ‘distance



learning' are used interchangeably, by contending that the literature about distance MBA programmes has become focused on the online MBA. For others, such as White et al. (2010), the term 'online distance learning' (ODL) is used to refer to distance MBA programmes that are primarily run online. Moore and Kearsley (2011) further clarified that, contrary to many people thinking of the internet as the basis of distance education, the real starting point occurs through letter correspondence between teacher and student.

Outlining the impact of the internet on distance learning delivery at the HE level, Shelton and Isernhagen (2013) advanced the notion that, before the arrival of the internet, many HE institutions considered distance education an ancillary service for students, involving correspondence or remote audio or video technologies. The phrase 'online education' was created and became entrenched within HE when course delivery using the internet became an option (Shelton and Isernhagen, 2013). The cardinal tenet behind distance education, according to Moore and Kearsley (2011), is the ability to teach when students and teachers are not in the same physical context.

One of the most compelling studies conducted on the state of online distance learning in the UK was published in 2010. The study by the Technology Assisted Lifelong Learning (TALL) unit of the University of Oxford's Department for Continuing Education was commissioned by the Joint Information Systems Committee (JISC) on behalf of the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE). The study highlighted the UK provision of HE-level ODL through a process of desk research alongside a series of interviews with personnel from certain key institutions. As a guide for the study, the research team defined online distance learning as any course at any HE academic level delivered to students at a distance from the host institution which has a significant component delivered online to students.

In the final report, authored by White et al. (2010), the researchers concluded that their interviews with relevant personnel representing the 13 institutions surveyed established that one of the main motivations for institutions of

higher learning to provide distance learning courses to learners was the possibility of providing opportunities for learning to prospectors who would otherwise not be able to take part in face-to-face learning activities. According to White et al. (2010), TALL's findings also showed that the Open University, the premier institution of higher learning in the UK dedicated wholly to ODL, operated 257 "web supplemented" courses in 2010. While this is a valid motivation behind distance learning, White et al. (2010) limits the assessment to the motivation behind the supply of distance learning without consideration of the motivation behind the demand for distance learning. In this vice, Hughes (2015) and Vioreanu (2016) point to some of the main motivations behind the demand for distance learning, which includes the ability to study from all over the world, the flexibility it provides, and the cost saving it provides.

White et al. (2010) further explained "web supplemented" as situations in which online participation for learners was optional. They also documented 600 "web dependent" courses, and explained "web dependent" as a situation in which learners were required to interact with the content online and/or involved the use of online communication tools. They also reported that 95 courses were "fully online". In total, White et al. (2010) reported that 952 courses were provided by the Open University. However, none of these reports focused particularly on the state of MBA distance learning.

Apart from the Open University, several other institutions of higher learning in the UK provided online distance learning in two distinct forms. In the first instance, some institutions ran their own fully online distance learning programme. Second, some of the distance learning modules were created and implemented because of partnerships between institutions of higher education and commercial organisations. For the research team, a major observation made and documented by White et al. (2010) was that most of the institutions of higher learning created these distance learning models on an ad hoc basis, explaining this observation in the sense that the decision and subsequent actions to create and implement online distance courses were

taken on a departmental basis rather than on an institution-wide footing. Shirky (2012) reviewed the way in which various higher education institutions (HEIs) produced and supported massive open online courses (MOOCs). For HEIs, MOOCs are an effective tool for distance learning. Similarly, Carey (2013) observed that MOOCs would be useful in overcoming some issues of HE, such as the cost-effectiveness of a degree, e.g., in terms of HE marketing, by improving partnerships with presenting institutions.

White et al. (2010) investigated 28 commercial partner course providers and found that 17 of them offered higher-level online distance learning courses. A total of about 175 HE distance-level courses were offered as products of such partnerships. Partner course providers are commercial organisations or bodies that form partnerships with UK institutions of higher learning to create online distance learning courses. One such partnership was captured in a study of the design and implementation of an MBA programme model, which was published in an article in the *Electronic Journal of e-Learning*. However, White et al. (2010) fails to emphasize the peculiarities and the challenges that the commercial partnership model of distance learning possesses, as well as how it differs in experience from the distance learning programme offered directly by the HE institutions.

In their article, Bentley et al. (2012) reviewed an MBA blended learning partnership model, which was delivered primarily online through a UK university e-learning support system, whereby instructors from the UK were solely responsible for uploading all the online content, including required and optional reading, explanations of key points and study guidelines, as well as setting and marking all assignments and examination scripts. The face-to-face component could be taken at one of the overseas partner institutions, the UK University itself, or both.

At the partner institutions, which included centres in Oman, Germany, Switzerland, Poland, India, and South Africa, instruction for the face-to-face phase was carried out by the UK university faculty and by staff from the partner institutions. Bentley et al. (2012) reviewed the results of three

separate surveys conducted from 2008 to 2010 on the same MBA blended learning programme with the same partner institutions. As many as 133 students, representing 55% of a total of 240 students taking the programme across all sites, were based in Oman alone. The MBA programme typically took two years for working students to complete, with each student scheduled to complete eight taught units: 15 credit hours and two applied management projects of 30 credit hours in total (10 taught and applied units) broken into five units per year (Bentley et al., 2012).

White et al. (2010) stated that the courses provided as a result of partnerships were more evenly spread across all the HE levels (undergraduate and postgraduate). However, taken in conjunction with those offered directly by HE institutions, the emphasis remained on postgraduate provision. Indeed, most of the online distance learning courses identified could be described as continuing professional development studies. White et al. (2010) observed that the courses provided by HE institutions and private sector partnerships were heavily biased towards business-oriented programmes. The report also highlighted that in general terms the distance-level courses offered by institutions of higher learning on their own, or by institutions in partnership with other commercial organisations, numbered over 2,600. White et al. (2010) also documented that 113 institutions were responsible for 1,528 courses, of which 510 were delivered online and included models that would be described as blended learning. Eighty-six of the 510 courses delivered online could be described as blended learning, since they required some face-to-face instruction, with 393 said to be “online without attendance”.

Whilst the White et al.’s (2010) report is not exhaustive and could not be held up then or now as a definitive source of online data on distance learning in the UK, it can be concluded that distance learning in institutions of higher learning was a growing, dynamic and soon-to-be integral part of the instructional delivery process. The report concluded that distance learning

was quite popular with postgraduate-level courses that suited learners who were also professionals in their area of work.

In another research report by Chmura (2016), it was discovered that there was a 3.9% increase in the number of distance education students between 2015 and 2016. This was an increase from 3.7% which was recorded last year. Chmura (2016) also noted that at least 28% of students now take at least one distance learning course, and 49% of distance education students take their all their course at a distance while the remaining 51% take some of their courses at a distance.

Finally, with respect to arguments in favour of and against distance learning, CUG (2016) notes that distance learning aids the fitting of learning around one's work life and home life. IADL (2016) asserts the argument of CUG (2016) by stating that distance learning offers lots of flexibility. With respect to arguments against distance learning, both CUG (2016) and IADL (2016) point to the fact that distance learning results in a lack of interaction and socialization, as well as the discrimination against online degrees by some employers.

### **3.3.3 Online Learning**

The ABS Task Force (2014) acknowledged in its report that there was a lot of interest in online learning and its benefits, such as flexibility in students' location and the ability to record and monitor students' participation and interactions, which can be used for assessment. The strategies and techniques of introducing (or implementing) e-learning or online learning programmes differ significantly depending on whether this is being done in the developed or developing world, as there are differences in cultural and economic conditions (Abdulla, 2004). Ravenscroft (2001) argued that the implementation of e-learning technology in higher education provides a wide range of new opportunities for development by increasing flexibility in the time and location of study. This is in agreement with the opinion of IADL (2016), which argues that e-learning and distance learning tends to offer students a significant level of flexibility.

Wang (2006) held that an online environment offered learners learning opportunities that occur at a time and location of their own choice and in an interactive way while linking with other online learners. Arbaugh and Benbunan-Fich (2006) asserted that online space can be observed in two distinct forms of knowledge construction and group collaboration, based on how learners interact with each other and obtain information. However, it seems like learners interact with their peers in different ways and to varying degrees, depending upon timing, situation, circumstances, areas of interest and even the tools of communication or interaction available that learners choose to use and interact with other learners differently. In the opinion of CUG (2016), online learning enables students to set their own pace of study, while also reducing the cost of study, compared to the full-time programme.

Swan (2002) maintained that the quality and quantity of interactions between a learner and the system constrain or facilitate three other important types of interaction: interaction with content, interaction with the instructor, and interaction between students. Brower (2003) also mentioned that encouraging learning through discovery requires that online interactions and discussions be left primarily to learners, with instructors intervening only to redirect discussion and encouraging interaction by establishing an appropriate course structure and approach to interaction. Allan (2007) further noted that online course interactions are becoming increasingly sophisticated, as learners become better acquainted with technology use.

Arbaugh and Benbunan-Fich (2006) simplified this assertion by dividing knowledge construction into objectivist versus constructivist approaches, while separating collaboration into individual versus group work. Group collaboration is analysed by Arbaugh and Benbunan-Fich (2006) as a representation of the scope or level of independent learning by the learner on the one hand against learning interactively by engaging with colleagues and peers on the other. Rovai (2002) argued that, when learners engage interactively with each other, opportunities for greater social presence and an increased sense of online community emerge, which has a positive impact

upon online course outcomes. Hiltz and Turoff (2002) added that working with peers reduces anxiety and uncertainty through communication with classmates, as they work towards completing new and complex tasks instead of working alone or only with the instructor. Martins and Kellermans (2004) revealed that the strongest influence on students' active usage of a CMS and on system usefulness was that of peer encouragement, over the influence of the instructor's encouragement. However, after learners actively begin to use a system, the faculty can start to play an important role in shaping and maintaining interest.

Benbunan-Fich et al. (2002) introduced and described the idea of an asynchronous environment as one that enables its users to operate outside the constraints of location, allowing more reflection about their own contribution. In an asynchronous learning environment, the instructional interactions are reciprocal. As described by Wagner (1994), the events or interactions that occur are aimed at directing learners towards reaching their goals, with the learners and their environment interacting reciprocally. Similarly, Leidner and Jarvenpaa (1995) argued that the categorisations hold true in almost all settings, but remain especially crucial in asynchronous virtual learning. The three categories of online interaction proposed by Moore (1989) are learner-instructor interaction, learner-learner interaction and learner-content interaction.

Learner-instructor interaction, based on the insight shared by Leidner and Jarvenpaa (1995), describes the extent of an instructor's proximity to learners through the instructor's presence online and the degree to which the instructor interacts with the learners; either as a facilitator, in which case interaction is said to be learner-centred, or as the dominant source of information, where the interaction is said to be instructor-centred. In either situation, Leidner and Jarvenpaa (1995) observed that this category of interaction is favoured by the objectivist idea of instruction, which is based on the transfer of information from the instructor to the learner. Benbunan-Fich and Hiltz (2003) and Tallent-Runnels et al. (2006) categorised

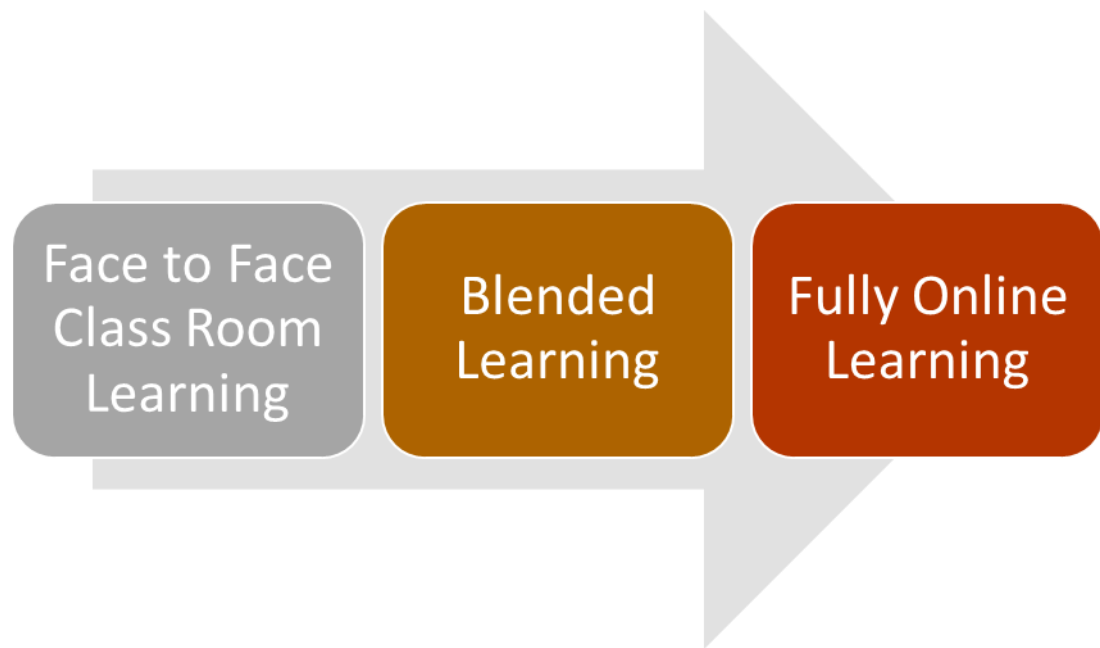
interactions in an asynchronous environment as a situation in which learners in a class share and interact with each other collaboratively, a practice based on the assumption that a greater success level is attained by working together within small groups. This is a form of learner-learner interaction, and provides the motivation and synergy for learners to excel (Tallent-Runnels et al., 2006). Further, Fjermestad (2004) stated that online participants obtain the resources and support necessary to succeed in their environment by engaging in task-oriented and socioemotional interactions.

The third category is learner-content interaction (Benbunan-Fich, 2002). In this category, the learner interacts with the instructional material to be learned through various formats, such as video, audio, text, images and graphs. The survey by Bentley et al. (2012) referred to earlier documented that full-time working, middle and senior-level management Executive MBA (EMBA) students who sometimes attended classes only at the weekends, criticised the online aspects of their course because they felt that there was an underutilisation of the e-learning support system (Bedfordshire Resources for Education Online [BREO]), in the sense that they were unable to experience valuable interaction with content because BREO did not provide an effective discussion forum. The connection between the learner and the material is influenced by the nature of the subject matter (factual vs. procedural or quantitative vs. qualitative content) and the design of the online environment.

Learner interaction with content can be placed in either the constructivist or objectivist model (Arbaugh and Benbunan-Fich, 2006). Suhail and Mugisa (2007) attempted to create understanding of how face-to-face, blended learning, online and mobile platforms link and interact, together with the meanings and features of each of these concepts and what they stand for through their representation of how course material delivery has progressed. These ideas potentially share insights into the way in which a course can be fully online, with all instruction taking place through the internet with personal computers and laptops or on mobile devices, such as smartphones



and personal digital assistants (PDAs), or the online elements of a course can be combined with face-to-face interactions (Suhail and Mugisa, 2007). It can, therefore, be understood from Figure 3.3.3 that blended learning would be a middle ground between face-to-face learning and online or distance learning. Suhail and Mugisa's (2007) proposed gradual transition model for the implementation of e-learning in HE institutions, which considers distance learning delivered by means of mobile devices. The present researcher would argue, however, that not all transitions are gradual and there is not always a development process. Some business schools start with a fully online learning course.



**Figure 3.3.3: Proposed gradual transition model for the implementation of elearning in HE institutions in LDCs**

Source: Adapted from Suhail and Mugisa (2007)

Taking into account the concerns with respect to implementation, Arbaugh (2010b) maintained that online learning and teaching in web-based MBA courses around the world has dramatically increased over the past decade, with revolutionary changes in how universities deliver education. This has been further enabled by rapid growth in educational technology and

increases in bandwidth, higher internet speeds, and the availability of Web 2.0 technology, portable devices and a new generation of technology-savvy users (Ladyshewsky and Soontiens, 2013). Technology has been used to aid the teaching of large numbers of students in business schools (ABS Task Force, 2014; Thorpe and Rawlinson, 2014). Linardopoulous (2010) observed that an increasing number of working adults who pursue further education choose online education, especially online business education.

Cao et al. (2010) argued that with the advent of internet and electronic delivery technologies, online learning has proliferated in use and become increasingly popular among adult learners. In business school online learning modules, students work with materials, upload assignments, carry out asynchronous group work over the internet, and, on some modules, take assignments in person at regional centres (ABS Task Force, 2014; Thorpe and Rawlinson, 2014). Materials used on the online learning platforms in business schools include videos, audio podcasts, articles and library resources, interactive graphs and books (ABS Task Force, 2014). A fully online course format offers students and teachers greater flexibility with more course offerings, even on mobile platforms such as smartphones and tablets (Van Doorn and Van Doorn, 2013).

The online delivery format is often criticised for lacking the discipline required to attend classes at a fixed time, its inability to deal with unplanned explanations and examples developed in response to live questions, and offering less stimulation by having students work alone (Ealy, 2013). Even though online chat forums, Skype technologies and video conferencing are now available to provide synchronous interactions, Stodel et al. (2006) reported that synchronous chat room discussions relied too much on typing speed, whilst there was a lack of the physical presence, informal social interaction and non-verbal cues that are typical of traditional face-to-face communication and a lack of spontaneity with the use of asynchronous message boards.

Researchers have also cited differences in personality types as a reason for the varied preferences of learners on the subject of interacting with each other in a distance/online learning setting. Lin et al. (2005) found that students who missed the physical presence and non-verbal aspects of communication in their interactions with colleagues more than their peers of other personality types were social-minded and extrovert learners. This implies that the reasons and circumstances which inform a learner's preference for one means of interacting with a peer over another are the result of the complexity of individual thought processes, attitudes, situations, personality and behavioural tendencies, learning habits and the platform provided by the educational institutions themselves.

Some of the challenges of online course delivery, according to Van Doorn and Van Doorn (2013), are that instructors may have to stay up-to-date with course delivery software, grade book programmes and taking CMS training. The opinion of Van Doorn and Van Doorn (2013) is further corroborated by Arinto (2016), who asserts the fact that the rapid pace of change in technology can end up being confusing for full time faculty members. From a report issued by the University of Pennsylvania (2016), members of faculty tend to often require a rethinking of their course design and a utilization of diverse strategies for teaching, engagement, as well as assessment in the online environment. Unlike course taken in the campus which require meeting once or twice every week, course taken online are open 24 hours a day, 7 days a week and learning tends to occur continually in the asynchronous environment.

The Quality Matters Programme (2011) provides fully online courses with a master rubric designed to provide professional faculty-centred workshops. Neff (2013) further claimed that practised online teachers offered resources, strategies and advice to help new online teachers better navigate design delivery and reduce their preparation time. In terms of its efficacy in producing learning outcomes, Cater et al. (2012) and Lack (2013) found in

their separate empirical studies of various delivery models that an online format was at least similar to the traditional face-to-face delivery method.

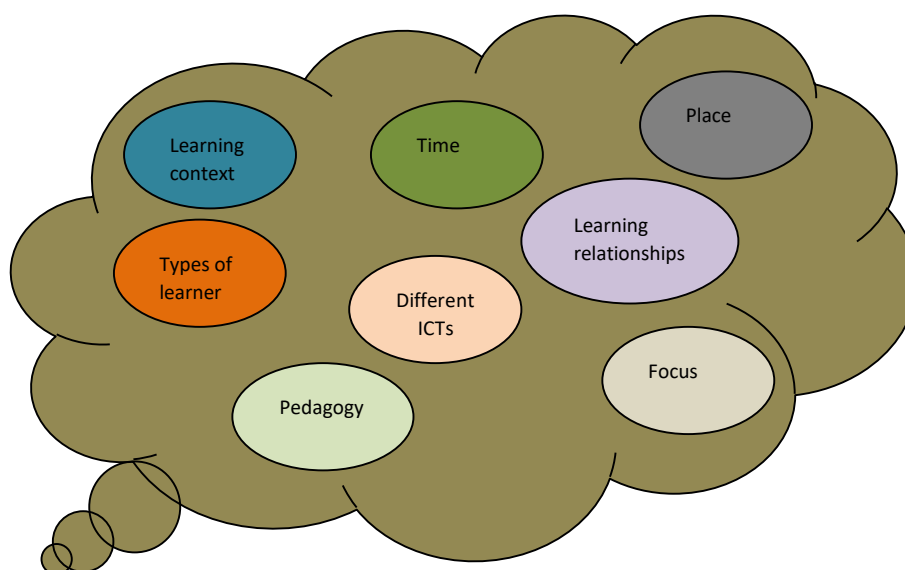
Business school education, it appears, has felt a significant impact from online programme delivery. As the results of a recent survey report revealed, online programmes seem to have stirred the expectations of students. From this survey, Carrington Crisp et al. (2014) reported that some business schools had already introduced online programmes for students before the start of their formal course to help bring them up to speed on certain topics. The report findings also showed the following expectations of the growth of the delivery of online programmes in business education at the highest level: around 40% of the respondents believed that executive education for middle managers will be largely delivered online, even though that falls to about 25% for respondents in the UK and Ireland; just over 80% of the business school respondents surveyed agreed or strongly agreed that degree students expect delivery of programmes in part (up to one-third) to be delivered online; more than 80% of the respondents agreed or strongly agreed that degree students increasingly want a flexible approach to their studies, fitting learning around lifestyle and other commitments; and about the same percentage at least agreed that degree students increasingly expect technology to support delivery of their studies, just as much as they increasingly expect a personalised approach to their experience, especially with career support (Carrington Crisp et al., 2014). However, the ABS Task Force (2014) also reported that, on some modules in business school programmes, students were able to attend short residential courses that supplemented their online work.

Another dimension to the online learning experience is the availability of handheld devices, such as smartphones. As Rose and Smith (2014) noted, mobile platforms, on tablets such as iPads, are increasingly a feature of education, their creative applications granting students immediate access to courses. Consequently, Van Doorn and Van Doorn (2014) suggested that a class environment is stripped of all boundaries when connected with good

WiFi access. Cao et al. (2010) outlined the relevance of online learning to an MBA degree by acknowledging the importance and attractiveness of online learning in MBA programme delivery to certain specific demographics of students: adults, especially those of 35 years old or over; females; part-time; and married student.

### 3.3.4 Blended and Web-facilitated Delivery Models

Sharpe et al. (2006) argued that ‘blended learning’ is a term that began to be popularised in the 1980s to describe the Open University’s model of blending distance with face-to-face learning, which, as a concept, encompasses a gamut of instructional and learning approaches, such as time, space, different information and communications technologies (ICT), the learning context, pedagogy, focus and types of learner and learning relationships (Figure 3.3.4). Allan (2007) later adapted Sharpe’s model, such that the first three dimensions of the original model (Sharpe et al., 2006) (time, space and different ICTs) came to represent the initial context of blended learning, and the remaining (pedagogy, focus, types of learners and learning relationships) formed part of the blended learning context related to classroom or work-based activities.



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**Figure 3.3.4: Sharpe's (2006) model of the landscape of blended learning**

Source: Allan (2007:5)

According to Sharpe et al. (2006), universities find various advantages in blended learning, such as the ability to support operating in a global context, greater efficiencies, especially with increasing student numbers or group sizes, and support for professional or work-based skills development. In the first of three surveys of a UK-foreign institution partnership, an MBA blended learning programme reviewed by Bentley et al. (2012) documented that respondents showed an overall “fairly high level of satisfaction with the MBA blended learning programme”. Among 30 survey items representing various aspects of the MBA blended learning course, particularly the registration process, teaching by UK and local tutors, course and unit information, e-learning materials and the overall experience with tutors, achieved up to 80% positive reviews.

In the second survey, Sharpe et al. (2006) further reported that 22% of the total number of their respondents found blended learning “excellent”, with 44% indicating “good”, only 25% perceiving it as “average”, and another 9% indicating that they felt it was “poor”. This suggests that a significant majority (66%) of the respondents had positive views about various aspects of their MBA blended learning course. To return to the third survey, 26 out of the 30 aspects surveyed received positive responses of either “excellent” or “good” (Bentley et al., 2012). However, Gulc (2006) advised that the design of a blended learning model must be built around the fundamental ways in which people learn. Gulc (2006) observed that individuals acquire knowledge and skills through reading, observation, collaboration, trial and error, guided practice, application and experimentation. Therefore, these must be the same guiding principles that inform the development of a blended learning model.

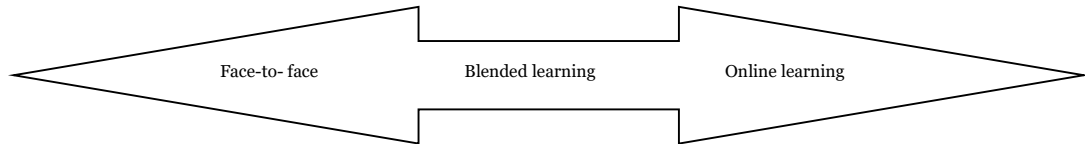
Van Doorn and Van Doorn (2014) further argued that blended courses demand both organised and synchronous (real-time) delivery by a lecturer and an asynchronous online delivery. Further, in some instances, accreditation requires courses to be delivered with specific time ratios of

synchronous to asynchronous teaching. Similarly, El Mansour and Mupinga (2007) reported blended delivery as the most effective format for a variety of student learning styles, with its combination of face-to-face lectures and web-facilitated learning environments. The blended format, therefore, caters to different aspects of need. For example, Jensen (2011) found that students liked the convenience of online video lectures but preferred attending traditional lectures, suggesting that they paid more focused attention in class.

In the application of a blended delivery model, Van Doorn and Van Doorn (2013) observed that many teachers make decisions to use online technology for testing and extensive discussion board assignments, while keeping the in-class environment rich, for example, through the employment of in-depth debates, experiential learning, concept critiques, team presentations, hands-on experiments and demonstrations. The apparent rapid rise of the blended delivery model and its relevance for MBAs can be seen in Middleton's (2010) assertion that many MBA programmes are transitioning from face-to-face delivery to a combination of face-to-face meetings and online learning. This is due to more students aiming to undertake an MBA without having to give up their jobs, relocate, or attend evening classes during the week. According to Lokey-Vega (2014), the implementation of blended learning can be observed and understood to occur within certain dimensions. These dimensions include, but are not limited to, the following: learner participation in the instructional process (learner-centred instruction); the use of instructional material (the characteristics of instructional models); and the resources available to the providers of the blended learning model and the institutions themselves.

The way in which the above dimensions are taken through the blending or mixing process can be visualised as a continuum of activity (see Figure 3.3.5). The left of the continuum represents a predominantly face-to-face process with the most minimal online activity possible; the part furthest to the right represents the exact opposite, with the most minimal face-to-face activity possible and a predominantly online process. The space between them can be

seen as a matrix in which mixing or blending takes place, decreasing in face-to-face activity and increasing in online activity from the left to the right of the continuum (Lokey-Vega, 2014).



**Figure 3.3.5: The blended learning continuum**

Source: Adapted from Lokey-Vega (2014)

Bhote (2013) advanced the concept of blended learning as a fusion of online learning and traditional face-to-face class interaction. Many researchers (Reay, 2001; Sands, 2002; Young, 2002; Rooney, 2003; Ward and LaBranche, 2003) have endeavoured to define blended learning. However, Graham's (2006:4) proposed definition of blended learning as "combining online and face-to-face instruction" seems more convincing, as it reinforces the above discussion, particularly Lokey-Vega's (2014) continuum (Figure 2.3). Similarly, Yen and Lee (2011:138) maintained that "blended learning, thoughtfully combining the best elements of online and face-to-face education, is likely to emerge as the predominant teaching model of the future"; making the present research valuable and timely. On the other hand, Oliver and Trigwell (2005) argued that, due to the lack of overall understanding, the blended learning model must be abandoned. Further, blended learning has been defined and discussed from the teacher's perspective. For example, Caravias (2015) maintained that blended learning helps teachers to evaluate their teaching approaches. Further, it is evident from the literature that blended learning will become more important soon due to its flexibility and usefulness. Many researchers (Garrison and Kanuka, 2004; Bonk and Graham, 2006; Allen et al., 2007; Garrison and Vaughan, 2007; Picciano, 2006, 2007; Picciano and Dziuban, 2007) reported that there is an ever-increasing interest in blended learning and a substantial increase



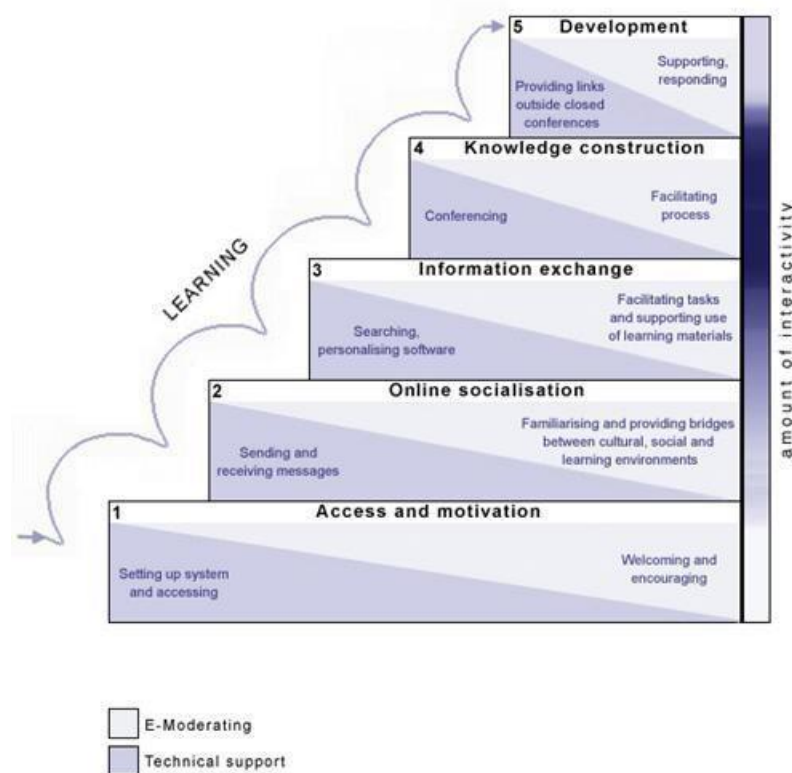
in publications, i.e., books and journal articles on the topic of blended learning.

In summary, this section reviewed the literature on models of MBA programme delivery and provided discussion of different modes. It was noted that there are various delivery modes, each with its own merits and disadvantages. Further, each mode requires different resources and conditions for its successful delivery. Certain other factors, such as technology, learner and teacher roles and personality characteristics, also play a main role in each type. However, it was also noted that none of the above-discussed delivery modes have been explored and evaluated in the context of UK universities and particularly for their MBA programme delivery. Therefore, the present research was intended to explore and evaluate these issues through a multiple case study in order to design a learning and teaching framework for MBA programmes.

### **3.4 THEORETICAL FRAMEWORKS FOR IMPLEMENTING DISTANCE AND ONLINE LEARNING MODELS**

There are various models of distance and blended learning in the literature. For example, the Technology Acceptance Model (TAM) developed by Davis (1989) and Davis et al. (1989) for online learning has been evaluated, particularly in web-based MBA courses, from the student's perspective (Arbaugh and Hwang, 2005). Another online learning framework which has gained wide coverage in the literature and is the most cited to date is the Community of Inquiry (CoI), which has, furthermore, also been used in online MBA courses. According to Garrison and Vaughan (2007:13), "CoI" provides a means to shape practice, to reflect upon, and make sense of outcome". Salmon's model (2000) describes a learning process for an e-learning course rather than blended learning. Salmon developed the 'e-moderator' diagram, which is well known in the field of online/e-learning and used as an alternative to an 'e-tutor'. This diagram consists of five steps,

as shown in Figure 3.3, and has been reported as being equally useful for both online and distance learning courses. Like other theories, frameworks or diagrams, Salmon's (2000) diagram is also not free from criticism. For example, Lisewski and Joyce (2003) argued that a face-to-face element is important in a blended learning programme, and criticised the way in which, in Salmon's (2000, 2002) diagram, it only appears in the first stage. At the outset of the disagreements and controversies regarding blended learning and its definitions, the research defined blended learning (see section 2.8) as a fusion of online and face-to-face learning. Since Salmon's (2000, 2002) framework does not include a face-to-face learning element, it is not, therefore, considered further from the conceptual or definitional perspective in this research.



**Figure 3.4: Salmon's model**

Source: E-moderation (Salmon, 2000, 2002)

Another criticism or weakness of the Salmon's model is expressed in the following way: For example, if a student is not able to set up his or her access

to the system, the student will not be able to learn with the help of an on-line system (ACU, 2016). ACU (2016) also criticizes the model for the rigor it places on the tutor. Different learners tend to be at different stages in the development process. Therefore, just like in a face-to-face learning scenario, there is a need for the tutor to support and manage students in the same group, who are at different stages of the model as suggested by Salmon.

### **3.5 Selected Models and Rationale for Selection**

As discussed above, many researchers (Sharpe, 2006; Allan, 2007; Garrison and Vaughan, 2008) have proposed various frameworks for online/distance/blended learning. Various frameworks have also been developed in online business education e.g., CoI and TAM (Arbough, 2002, 2008a). However, this research has focused on three frameworks: those proposed by Cookson (2000), Wilde et al. (2000) and Khan (2001). because all three reflect the importance of both learner and teacher in the distance learning environment. A closer investigation of the dimensions and conceptual understanding of these models also reflects blended learning aspects (distance, online, face-to-face, etc.), providing a foundation for this research to develop a new framework for evaluating blended learning in MBAs. Therefore, these models were used as a theoretical anchor for this research. The striking feature of these frameworks, and their reason for selection in this research, is that they are comparable with, and complementary to each other. They also provide a high degree of perspective on the quality of the delivery of distance and blended learning. These frameworks can also be discussed in relation to each other, because they were proposed within short intervals of each other and complement each other in several dimensions. Furthermore, these frameworks continue to be of relevance to contemporary online and blended MBA programme delivery. The next sections discuss these three frameworks in detail.

**3.5.1 Cookson's (2000) Model and benefits to present study**

Jain et al. (2002) maintained that Cookson (2000) regarded the internet as an effective tool with the potential and capability to offer efficient and effective distance learning for students. The internet provides options for interactions through asynchronous discussion forums, as well as animated illustrations and several other multimedia applications (Singh, 2003). Du Mont (2002) outlined how Cookson (1998) utilised the work of Banathy (1992) to analyse distance education as an organisational system. Banathy (1992) described three system models: the system-environment model, the structure-function model, and the process-behaviour model. Further, Cookson (1998:3-4) showed how each of the models proposed by Banathy (1992) offered a unique perspective for understanding the structure of distance learning as a system. For the purposes of this study, this research examines the system-environment model as envisioned by Cookson (2000) as a distance learning framework (Figure 3.5.1).

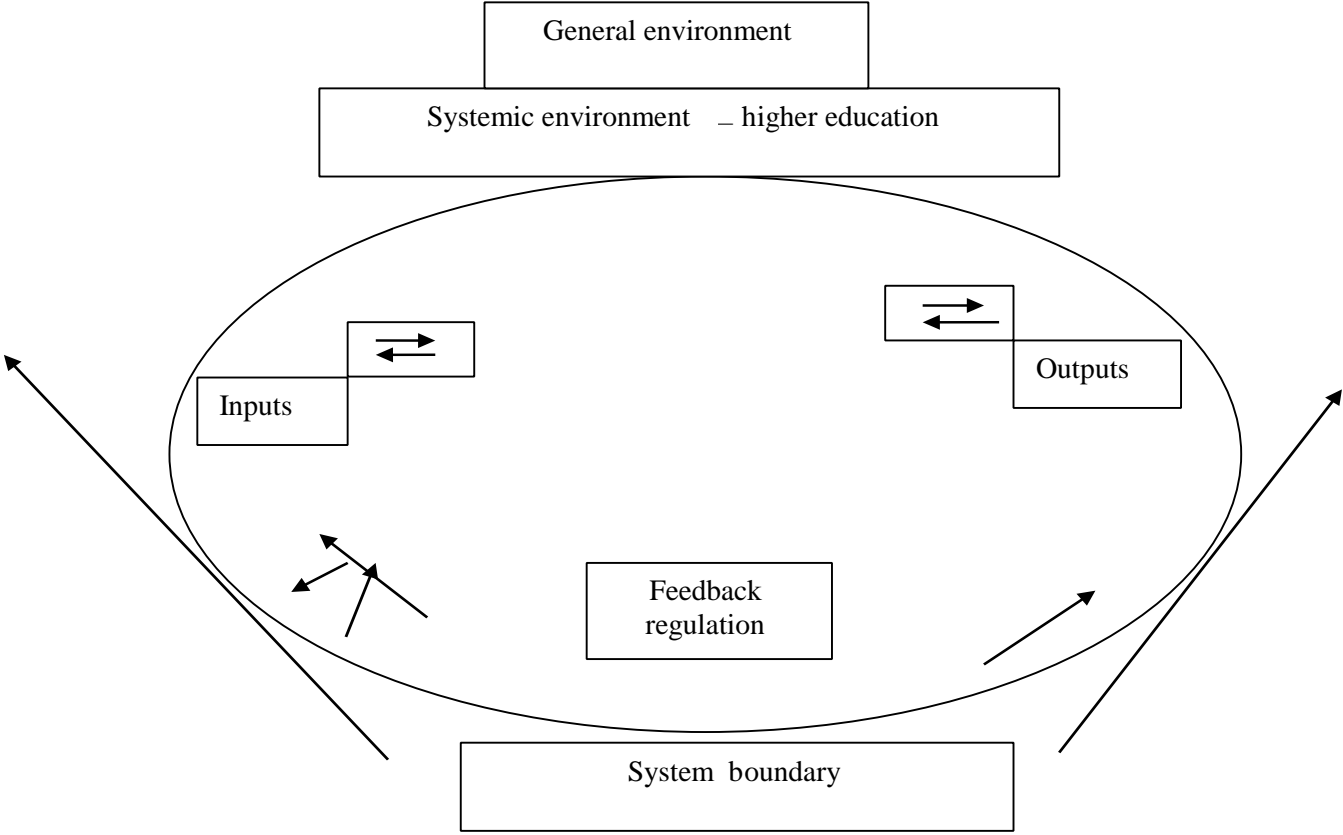


Figure 3.5.1: Cookson's Model

Source: Adapted from Cookson (2000:2)

Elaborating upon Cookson's ideas of the system-environment model, Du Mont (2002) suggested that a system cannot be comprehended without constant study of the environmental forces that impinge upon it.

Furthermore, Cox

(1997:1) observed that

what actually governs complex systems is rarely the industrial age's notion of design at all. Rather, they evolve, shaped by an interaction in which system and environment minutely adjust to each other as biological organisms evolve with ecologies.

In its simplest terms, Cookson's (2000) model is based upon the idea that the relationship between a system and its environment can have a major influence on the performance of the system.

In terms of a distance learning model, it can be argued that the relationship or interaction between a distance learning system and the environment in which it operates is likely to be the most important determinant of the success or failure of that particular distance learning system. Cookson's (2000) model was composed of the general environment as the outermost component, followed by the systemic environment, before the distance learning space. The systemic environment is the one in which a distance learning programme runs but is smaller than the general environment. Du Mont (2002) further described this as the environment which, in higher institutions, may include a university's traditions. The distance learning space has further inputs and outputs and feedback regulation (Cookson, 2000). Inputs for distance learning systems include the knowledge of a subject and the job-specific needs in each community. According to Du Mont (2002), the obvious distance learning output is content delivery, which is either synchronous or asynchronous. Output can also be seen in the light of supplemental educational resources distributed in various forms that can be utilised over a longer period (Du Mont, 2002).

The general environment within which a distance learning programme can operate can be wide and varied, and exist in direct or indirect ways. The

general environment can range from the type of society to the state of the economy. Dron et al. (2000) argued that the forces driving this exchange or interaction between a system and the general environment may not always meet the needs of the learner, but can be swayed by everything in the environment from government policies to university traditions. Du Mont (2002) further discussed a potential scenario in which distance education programmes could depend heavily on human resources in their various environments, such as the ability of students to pay the tuition fees required to sustain a pool of qualified instructors for the delivery of a distance learning programme. Also included are costly fixed assets, such as the appropriate technical infrastructure to support course delivery (Du Mont, 2002).

Cookson (2000) also discussed boundaries in his model. Boundaries are defined as the limits of any system; what belongs and what does not. As Rogers et al. (2009) highlighted, what Cookson (2000) communicated here is that by establishing boundaries there is clarity regarding what goes in or out of a system. By appropriately understanding boundaries, tutors and course providers can establish, identify and manage the kind of information that their students require in an appropriate format that they can use. Cookson (2000) indicated that what happens at the input point perhaps presents a tricky problem, because of the difficulty that tutors have in fully identifying what students expect. A higher education institution environment provides a buffer for the general external environment. Similarly, the inner core of the system is made up of inputs, feedback regulation and outputs, and serves as a screen that shields items that get in or out, or go to or from the inner components. Thus, the dimensions of this model, including the benefits that are discussed above make it highly suitable for replication in the present study. However, a major drawback and criticism of Cookson's (2000) model is that a minor malfunction in one component can have major repercussions for the entire system (Du Mont, 2002).

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### 3.5.2 Wilde et al.'s (2000) Model

Wilde et al. (2000) suggested a matrix which explains the technical environment within which distance learning functions (see Table 3.5.2). The model constructed by Wilde et al. (2000) highlights the following technology requirements for an effective distance learning programme:

❖ *Instructional tools*: all the necessary media and pieces of equipment required by both tutors and students for the distance learning process.

Bentley et al.'s (2012) survey review of UK university-foreign institution MBA programme partnerships reported that the instructional tool employed was the Blackboard e-learning environment (known as BREO), which instructors used to provide learning material to learners. Blackboard technology allowed students on the MBA blended learning programme to interact using discussion boards and blogs. The researchers also reported different devices used for this purpose, such as a Voice over the Internet (VoI) system known as Wimba, a plug-in WebCT Vista equipped with a live classroom, and a voice tool. These devices allowed instructor and students to hold a virtual class simultaneously, see each other via webcam and talk to each other as in a face-to-face class. Bentley et al. (2012) reported that Wimba was important in helping instructors in the UK to gain a good grasp of students' progress, answer student questions related to the subject and provide additional support for their coursework and examinations; the Turnitin support system was used to check plagiarism.

❖ *Access to learning resources*: both tutors and students are required to have enough access to resources that they can offer and accept learning resources effectively.

❖ *Interaction*: concerns how tutors and students relate amongst themselves and with their environment. In the MBA programme partnership model reviewed by Bentley et al. (2012), communication and collaboration between the education partners was seen as important by the MBA



student respondents. The respondent students further expressed their interest in an effective communication and collaboration mechanism and the improvement of the existing ones.

- ❖ *Library and information resources*: concerns the ability to access information and library resources, enabling effective teaching and learning. This requirement has also been highlighted by Bentley et al. (2012), as discussed earlier. The researchers mentioned that students on MBA distance learning programmes require resources to submit their assignments and receive feedback online. Similarly, instructors also need these resources to provide additional online learning content each week, such as research papers, cases and videos/podcasts, alongside basic learning materials, in response to students' dissatisfaction with the underutilisation of BREO.

**Table 3.5.2: Wilde et al.'s (2000) model framework for distance learning**

<b>Distance learning application</b>	<b>Course/programme preparation</b>	<b>Student support services</b>	<b>Delivery hardware and software</b>	<b>Course/programme evaluation, assessment and certification</b>	<b>Feedback device</b>
Instructor's tools	Instructional design tools, word processing course management tools	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Word processing</li> <li>• Electronic course content</li> <li>• Electronic mentoring and tutors</li> <li>• Electronic syllabus</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Extended campus wide area networks (WANs)</li> <li>• Internet/WEB</li> <li>• Dial-up</li> <li>• Satellite</li> <li>• Compressed video</li> <li>• Cable modem</li> <li>• DSL</li> </ul>	Electronic testing Feedback during class	Email news groups, electronic focus groups, electronic bulletin board video networks
Network access to educational resources		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Extended campus</li> <li>• Internet access</li> <li>• File transfer protocol (FTP) connection</li> <li>• Bridging service to connect students at multiple sites</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Extended campus</li> <li>• Home/office</li> <li>• Modem</li> <li>• Internet service provider</li> <li>• Student access to: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• electronic courses</li> <li>• electronic syllabuses</li> <li>• electronic</li> </ul> </li> </ul>		

			interaction		
Email/ interaction	<p>Communication channels:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• students</li> <li>• work groups</li> <li>• news and user groups</li> <li>• chat rooms</li> </ul>	<p>Enrolment services:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• catalogues</li> <li>• admissions</li> <li>• registration</li> <li>• counselling/advising</li> <li>• financial aid</li> <li>• security systems/firewalls</li> <li>• marketing tools</li> <li>• student records management</li> </ul>	Email FTP	Online testing Assignments	
Library and information services	<p>Resource libraries, print media library, graphics library, software library</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Online public catalogue</li> <li>• Digital library</li> <li>• Electronic reservations</li> <li>• Electronic syllabuses</li> <li>• Online books/materials ordering</li> </ul>	<p>WAN WEB Dial-up FTP</p>		

Electronic book store		Ordering texts, instructional materials	WAN Dial-up WEB		
Storage and distribution tools	Servers for templates	WEB portals	On-demand access		

Thus, Wilde's et al. (2000) model as shown above seems to explain all the different aspects of blended learning that would be in the case study organisations, making it highly suitable for the present study.

### **3.5.3 Khan's (2001) Model**

Khan (2001) proposed eight dimensions in his framework for e-learning (see Figure 3.5.3). According to Singh (2003), a systemic understanding of these factors can enable designers to create meaningfully distributed learning environments. Khan's (2001) model shows several interrelated and interdependent factors which create a meaningful learning environment, also known as an octagonal framework, including the following;

- ❖ *Pedagogical*: the pedagogical dimension consists of the content, course goals, course design, strategies and learning materials. It applies to both learners and tutors in equal measure, suggesting that the pedagogical dimension has elements which are equally important from the point of view of both groups. Singh (2003) advanced the idea that the pedagogical dimension is concerned with the combination of the content that must be delivered (content analysis), learner needs (audience analysis), and learning objectives (goal analysis). Included in the pedagogical analysis are the design and strategy aspects of blended learning, whereby the best delivery method is chosen for all the learning goals in each programme.
- ❖ *Technological*: this refers to the technology-based infrastructure that forms the platform for the delivery of e-learning courseware. Singh (2003) maintained that this involves identifying the most suitable learning management system (LMS) to manage multiple delivery types and learning content management systems (LCMS) containing the actual content (online content modules) of the learning programme. The use of technology includes employing the Wimba Live Classroom to enable synchronous communication whilst archiving materials generated from previous Wimba sessions, hence allowing the scheduling of more frequent online sessions so that they can be re-used and re-visited by students to meet student requirements for more time with UK tutors, especially in

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terms of receiving extra support for assignments, as well as the Blackboard e-learning environment (Bentley et al., 2012).

- ❖ *Interface design*: describes the overall appearance and experience of the blended learning programme in terms of users' access to and use of the finished products of the courseware. This includes page design, navigation and being user-friendly. Regarding the interface design dimension, Singh (2003) highlighted the importance of ensuring that the user interface supports all the elements of a blended programme. The interface has to be of a sufficient level of sophistication to integrate different elements in the blended learning mix, thus further enabling users to utilise each delivery type and switch between the different forms. Issues such as content structure, navigation, graphics, and help can be addressed in this dimension. Many researchers have documented an MBA blended learning programme that previously employed Voice Cafe, which had a poor design of user interface and whose attendant problems of unclear voices, vague images, and limited functions were raised by the respondents (Bentley et al., 2012), leading to its replacement by the Wimba Live Classroom platform to help provide solutions to the problems that existed.
- ❖ *Evaluation*: this also applies to both learners and tutors and includes an evaluation of the learning materials, learning process and userfriendliness. Items to be addressed in the evaluation dimension are the level of effectiveness of a learning programme and learners' performance. Each delivery type must have its appropriate evaluation criteria (Singh, 2003).
- ❖ *Management*: this dimension deals with the maintenance of the learning environment as a whole. Singh (2003) argued that this dimension deals with issues related to the management of a blended learning programme, such as infrastructure and logistics, to manage multiple delivery types. The management process in the UK University referred to above, which runs a blended learning MBA programme in association with partner institutions abroad, also included a requirement to revise and cross-check

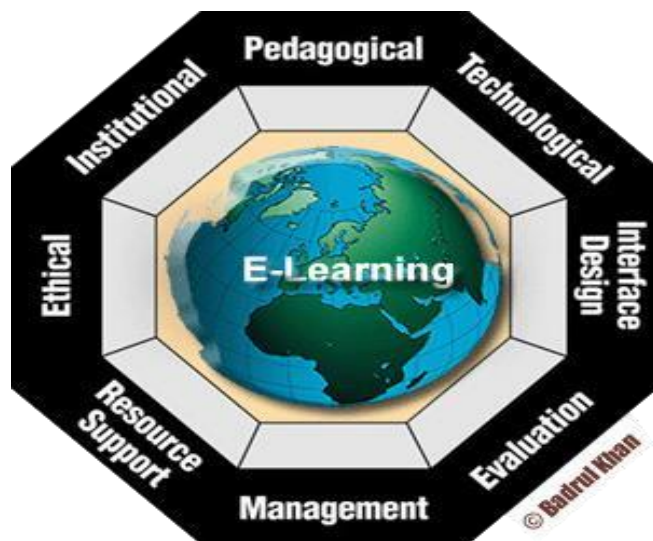
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assignment instructions and marking criteria to make them accessible on BREO for each module (Bentley et al. 2012). This included addressing student dissatisfaction with assignment instructions, as well as referral and failure procedures. Delivering a blended learning programme involves more management work than delivering an entire course in one delivery type. The management dimension also addresses issues such as registration and notification, as well as the scheduling of the different elements of the blend.

- ❖ *Resource support*: this is concerned with providing support for the continuously effective and efficient use of the platform. The resource support dimension deals with making different types of resources (offline and online) available for learners, as well as organising these resources. Resource support could also be a counsellor/tutor who is always available in person, via email or on a chat system. Some of the concerns regarding resource support are an expectation of greater consistency and completeness in the module information and guidance and the lack of clear assignment instructions and examination formats. Bentley et al. (2012) reported on a second survey, which they conducted in 2009. The survey yielded 37 valid responses, with 30 completed in class and seven online. Further, 18 questions were repeated from the first survey in addition to some new ones. The results of the survey indicated that there was a 23% increase, compared to the first survey which was conducted in 2008, on the issue of resource support, particularly in the e-learning training area.
- ❖ *Ethical*: the ethical dimension considers the legal, political, cultural and social 'red lines' and caveats that should be respected while accessing information online. This dimension identifies the ethical issues that need to be considered when developing a blended learning programme, such as equal opportunity, cultural diversity, and nationality.
- ❖ *Institutional*: refers to the administrative, academic and general service issues that fall within the remit of the institutions that provide a blended learning programme. Singh (2003) described the way in which the

institutional dimension addresses issues concerning organisational, administrative and academic affairs and student services. This also involves the level of preparedness of the organisation, content and infrastructure availability and learners' needs. Singh (2003) further argued that this raises questions of whether the organisation can manage to offer each trainee a learning delivery mode independently, as well as within a blended programme, or whether a needs analysis should be performed to understand all learners' needs.

Khan (2001), however, linked the effectiveness of the framework to several other features of e-learning and blended learning. The features on which the effectiveness of Khan's (2001) framework depends are listed as interactivity, authenticity, learner control, convenience, self-containment, ease of use, online support, course security, cost effectiveness, collaborative learning, formal and informal environments, online evaluation, global accessibility, cross-cultural interaction and the minimum degree of discrimination.



**Figure 3.5.3: Khan's distance e-learning framework**

Source: Khan (2001)



This section discussed three learning and teaching models and showed that the models provide various perspectives for both academic staff and students regarding the delivery of distance and blended learning. Also discussed was the relationship between a system and its environment and how this can have a major influence on the performance of the system as a whole. However, missing from the literature was what would be the consequences for an education system and its environment of this influence, particularly with regard to MBA programmes in the UK universities. The role of technology in course or programme preparation was discussed, along with student support services, delivery, course or programme evaluation, and feedback. Also, missing from the literature was at what stage UK universities are in terms of these elements and what challenges they face in organising this. This section also discussed the role of instructional tools, access to learning resources, interaction, and library and information resources. However, the researcher was unable to find any model that provides the basis for a theoretical model for blended learning in MBAs. Therefore, there was a gap in the literature on the consideration of how these elements are relevant to an MBA programme and what impact they have, positive or negative, on the effective delivery of MBAs in UK universities.

Khan's model was discussed, particularly the pedagogical dimension, which consists of the content, course goals, course design, strategies and learning materials. The pedagogical dimension is also concerned with the combination of the content that must be delivered (content analysis), learner needs (audience analysis), and learning objectives (goal analysis). However, little attention has been paid in the literature to how UK universities evaluate or analyse these factors in terms of their MBA programme delivery. Also, not clear is how UK universities are managing, evaluating and developing their MBA programmes and what role the above-discussed elements play in this.

### **3.6 Similarities and Differences among the Three Models**

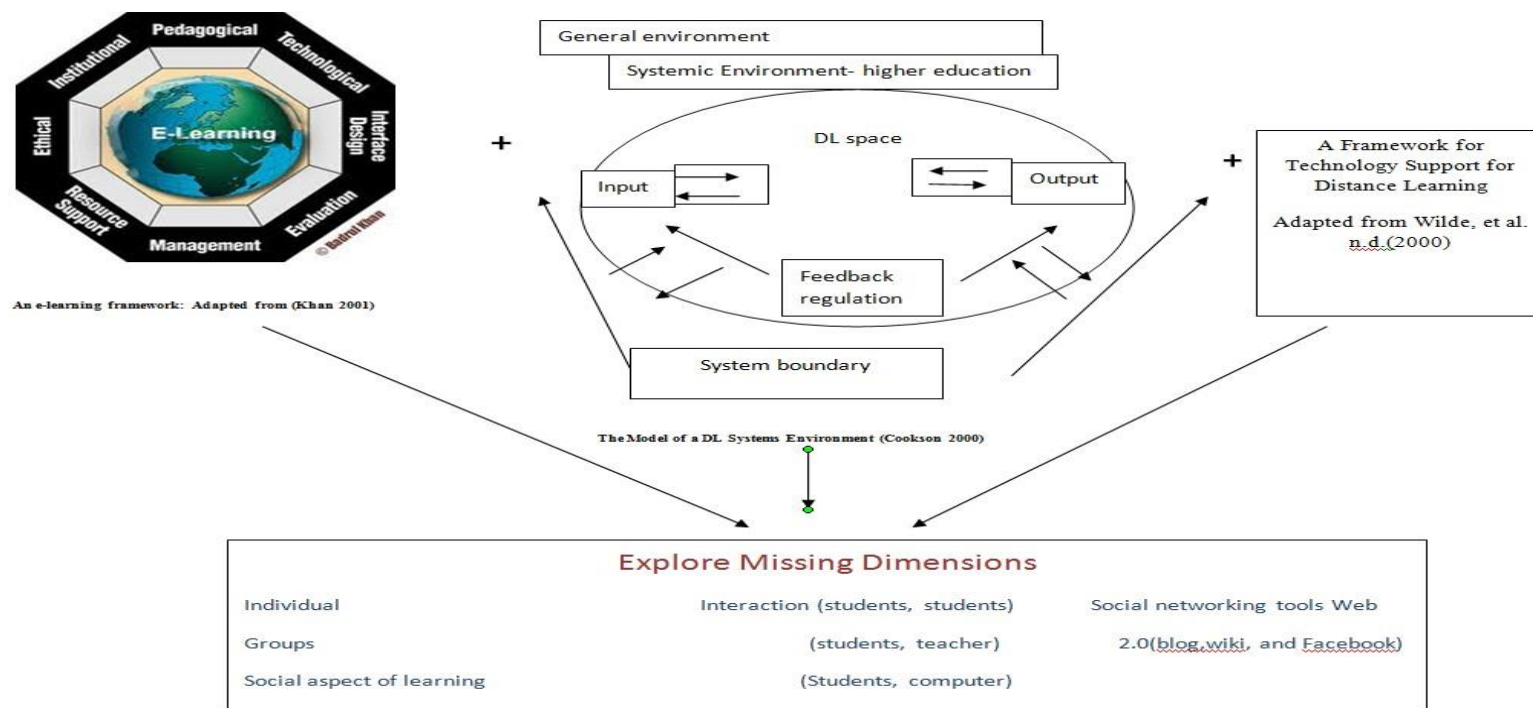
The models proposed by Cookson (2000), Wilde et al. (2000) and Khan (2001) discussed above share a common stance: a distance learning system should be one which is relevant to the needs of both tutors and learners. Primarily, these models focus on distance learning. However, a closer examination of the dimensions and the conceptual understanding of these models also reveals blended learning aspects (distance, online, face-to-face, etc.), thus providing a foundation for this research to build on and develop a new framework which could be used to evaluate blended learning in MBAs. Therefore, these models were used as a theoretical anchor for this research.

The learner and tutor are at the heart of these models. Further, both groups are important stakeholders in the successful projection of a blended learning programme and their input must be sought in designing any such course. All three models have a natural compatibility with the constructivist way of thinking. In the constructivist school of thought, both student and tutor have important roles to play, and are seen more as partners engaged in a collaborative enterprise. This perspective contrasts with the more traditional teacher-directed learning models, in which, as indicated by Rogers et al. (2009), tutors bring their research, skills, experience and knowledge to the students, with students ‘grabbing’ the new knowledge from the teacher and trying to construct new knowledge and combine it with what they already know.

### **3.7 Dimensions Missing from the Models**

Although the above-discussed models (Cookson, 2000; Wilde et al., 2000; Khan, 2001) provide in-depth insights regarding different learning programmes, these models still do not afford significant importance to several dimensions, such as student interaction at the individual and group levels and social and cross-cultural issues are not comprehensively addressed in terms of student-tutor relationships. In terms of student-tutor relationships, Bentley et al. (2012) suggested that UK universities need to

provide new guidance and support to their staff to help foster a more consistent level of contact with off-site students across different units. Another missing aspect is social presence, learners' interpretation of what it is that denotes meaningful experience, and students' communication about what they are expected to learn (their expectations) and what they learn. The potential for these absences to be explored can be clarified by attempting to consolidate the three models in deriving a blended learning MBA programme which could accommodate and compensate for the missing dimensions which arise because of the individual shortcomings of each of the three models (Fig 3.7)



**Figure 3.7: Combining the models from Cookson (2000), Wilde et al. (2000) and Khan (2001) to explore the missing dimensions**

Source: Compiled by the researcher

The above discussion of the three models suggests that contemporary blended learning has several aspects. Having an appropriate understanding of the various aspects of blended learning will allow educators to deliver blended learning programmes within their proper context, which is one of the main objectives of this study. Furthermore, Cookson's (2000) model focuses on distance learning and in particular, on the assumption that the relationship between the distance learning system of any institution and its environment can have a major influence on the performance of the distance learning system as a whole. On the other hand, Wilde et al. (2000) focused on the technical environment within which distance learning systems operate, featuring in particular the technology for course or programme preparation, student support services, delivery, course or programme evaluation, and feedback.

However, Khan's (2001) model focuses on the e-learning aspect of blended learning, proposing eight dimensions for a framework in e-learning. Thus, Khan's (2000) model, though different in focus from the other two models, is still related to these other two models in that e-learning in itself is a tool/technique for distance learning programmes. However, Cookson (2000) and Wilde et al. (2000) are similar in that they both focus on distance learning as an aspect of blended, but however differ in that one considers the environment for distance learning, while the other considers the technology for distance learning. These two models have very important implication for the present study as the formulated research questions are designed to be answered by designing research instruments with questions built around Cookson (2000); Wilde et al. (2000) and Khan's (2000) models. In other words, these models provide inputs for the empirical aspect of this study. In summary, the three models are still complimentary in application and were found highly important for the design of the empirical aspects of the present study.

### **3.8 QUALITY ASSURANCE IN ONLINE AND BLENDED LEARNING ENVIRONMENTS**

A quality assurance (QA) system is a tool for ensuring the quality of an organisation in meeting the needs of consumers (staff and students) (Rosca et al., 2008). QA is also a system for measuring an organisation's performance e.g., what does the university do? Does it create something new compared to other universities? Further, the European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (2009) has suggested that education institutions should demonstrate best practice in meeting new standards and reflecting changing trends. Academic Quality (2015:2) defined QA as “the process for checking that the standards and quality of higher education provision meet agreed expectations”, and quality enhancement (QE) as “taking deliberate steps to bring about improvement in the effectiveness of the learning experiences of students”. Within universities, QA and QE processes are embedded in the everyday life of the institutions.

The Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA) is an independent body which carries out assessments and reports to ensure the quality of academic standards in a programme or specific school in UK higher education or any school around the world that leads to a UK higher education (QAA, 2014). The QAA was established in 1997 in the UK in various locations, e.g., Gloucester (Blackmore, 2005). The responsibilities of the QAA include maintaining the quality standards of higher education to maintain sustainability in the improvement of learning and the management of higher education (QAA website, 2015).

According to QAA strategy (2014), published in June 2014, three main aims should be covered over the three years 2015-2017: ensuring the quality of academic standards; making sure that QAA leadership, e.g., in terms of knowledge and expertise, provides a positive and proactive means of enhancing the quality of HE in both the UK and internationally and meets

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the broad range of needs of the QAA (internationally); and, in order to be an independent body, financial sustainability should be achieved.

In their research on evaluating an EMBA blended learning programme, Martinez-Argüelles et al. (2010) argued that collecting learner feedback should be a central part of strategies for monitoring the quality and standards of teaching and learning for both face-to-face and online learning. The survey review by Bentley et al. (2012), as mentioned previously, indicated that feedback was important to MBA students. In their first survey which was conducted in 2008, they received a low level of student satisfaction (50%) regarding assignment feedback. However, providing more comprehensive feedback on students' assignments and taking initiatives towards this, increased students' satisfaction in the next survey which was conducted in 2009 (from 36% to 46%).

Jara and Mellar (2010) noted that, despite increased research on e-learning, there are only a limited number of studies on its effectiveness, including blended learning. Guri-Rosenblit (2009) held that e-learning has not gained full recognition and accreditation within mainstream education as a high quality alternative since its evolution from distance learning. Meanwhile, Pillay and Kimber (2009) argued that matters of accountability, authority and responsibility within the QA dimension have become more complex. This is partially due to globalisation and the transnational provision of higher education. With respect to QA for online education programmes, Moore (2006) maintained that five elements are required: learning effectiveness, cost effectiveness and institutional commitment, access, faculty (employee) satisfaction, and learner (customer) satisfaction.

Saunders (2003:9) described evaluation as a “purposeful gathering, analysis and discussion of evidence from relevant sources about the quality, effectiveness, and impact of provision, development or policy”. In terms of evaluation, Bentley et al. (2012) reported that EMBA students criticised their programme due to different assignment submission systems for different modules, which caused confusion and was, overall, a time-consuming

process. Their survey results reflect learner dissatisfaction, contrary to the element of learner (customer) satisfaction, which is why Moore (2006) emphasised the requirement for a high-quality online programme. From their work on studying e-learning programmes, Kidney et al. (2007) found that a high degree of merit, quality and success was due to the quality assurance strategies implemented. Their findings were reinforced by Zygoris-Coe et al. (2009), who mentioned that the institution of a well-structured QA process is a worthwhile effort, even if it is expensive and time-consuming.

Similarly, Martinez-Argüelles et al. (2010) argued that the learning process, administrative procedures, teaching materials and resources are four dimensions that are the keys to high-quality course provision. However, these suggestions were not made in the context of UK universities for their MBA programme delivery and effective management, which is the interest of this research. Interestingly, in Bentley et al.'s (2012) blended MBA partnership model review, the reviewers examined a total of 116 valid responses returned from questionnaires which were based on Martinez-Argüelles et al.'s (2010) model of "quality dimensions from students' perspectives". The questionnaires were administered to 257 MBA students, both online and offline, with a 45% response rate. Bentley et al. (2012) reported that the main elements of the questionnaire could be categorised as follows: course administration, teaching and tutor support, teaching materials, e-learning support systems, assignment support and feedback, and students' overall experience of taking the course. All these key elements for the quality measurement of an MBA programme broadly align with the four dimensions of high-quality course provision proposed by Martinez-Argüelles et al. (2010) described earlier in this section.



### **3.9 SUMMARY**

The literature review conducted in this chapter demonstrated that some of the most influential theories of learning since the 1800s include objectivism, behaviourism, cognitivism and constructivism. The tenets of objectivism have a high degree of relevance to MBA courses in which stand-up lectures are employed. In distance/online MBAs, objectivist principles are applied to help learners with fundamental concepts, principles, theories, and guidance prior to their application, as personalised knowledge of fundamental concepts could lead to academic chaos.

The implications of cognitive theory on the other hand include facilitating memory and providing interaction with instructors and peers. However, the constructivist school of thought dominates the MBA and the relevance of constructivist theory to the distance/online MBA is evident in course modules in which learning activities are negotiated, rather than imposed on students. Furthermore, the MBA programme has been delivered through traditional face-to-face learning, distance learning, online learning, blended and flipped classroom learning models. Traditional (face-to-face) learning delivers content in writing or orally. Blended learning mixes online and face-to-face delivery principles. In online learning, most or all of the content is delivered online and typically has no face-to-face meetings.

This chapter further reviewed the models proposed by Cookson (2000), Wilde et al. (2000) and Khan (2001). Cookson's (2000) model describes the relationship or interaction between a distance learning system and the environment in which it operates. Wilde et al. (2000) suggested a matrix that explains the technical environment within which distance learning functions, while Khan (2001) outlined eight dimensions of interrelated and interdependent factors that create a meaningful learning environment and can be illustrated in what is known as the octagonal framework.

Therefore, against the above theoretical background, the next section of this study considers in a critical manner the methodological basis for undertaking

this research as it relates to the formulated aim and objectives of the research.

## **CHAPTER FOUR RESEARCH METHODOLOGY**

### **4.1 INTRODUCTION**

This chapter discusses the different philosophical stances and research methods that can help in the collection and analysis of data, first from a generic context, and secondly for the present study.

This chapter first provides the rationales behind the informed choices that were made regarding the different philosophical stances and research paradigms that the researcher has used, depending upon the nature of the investigation and the research topic. The next section highlights the need and justification for a case study methodology for the present research, focusing on definitions, applications, quality issues, together with alternative quality measures for qualitative research within a generic research environment and specifically for a case study research. The discussion of quality issues further highlights the different measures taken to manage the quality of this research and to minimise bias. The next section sheds light on the research methodology and data collection strategies for this research, along with the reasons for their selection. The final sections discuss the research ethics and the data analysis strategy and methods applied to the data collected to generate knowledge or theory.

### **4.2 UNDERSTANDING THE RESEARCH PHILOSOPHY**

Several researchers (Guba and Lincoln, 1994; Saunders et al., 2012; Bryman and Bell, 2015) have highlighted the importance of properly understanding the philosophical stances of research, because the research philosophy chosen could influence the overall conduct of a piece of research. Furthermore, making appropriate choices regarding the research philosophy is necessary, as these stances inform the choice of a research approach that

conforms to the nature and objectives of the endeavour. Certain tendencies peculiar to the researcher that could affect the conduct of the study should also be understood made known and minimised.

This section provides a detailed discussion of three philosophical stances: ontology, epistemology and axiology. The next sections further highlight their implications for this research.

#### **4.2.1 Ontology**

The main concern of ontology is the nature of reality (Bryman and Bell, 2015). and Blaikie (1993:6-7) defined ontology as “the science or study of being”, and maintained that it can yet be narrowed to a social science context when considering “claims about what exists, what it looks like, what units make it up and how these units interact with each other”. In the opinion of Saunders et al. (2015), ontology can be referred to as a philosophy of research that deals with the nature of reality, while raising questions about the assumptions adopted by the researchers regarding the approach via which the world operates. Clearly, both Blaikie (1993) and Saunders et al. (2015) define ontology from an existential perspective, assessing things such as the nature of reality, as well as things that exist.

Ontology is further divided into two types: objectivism and subjectivism. Objectivists follow natural science rules and maintain that reality is objective and externally given. Objectivists further believe that reality already exists and is independent of social actors. In the opinion of Hedden (2015), objectivism as it relates to evidential support is the thesis that facts regarding the extent to which a set of evidence provides support to a hypothesis are objective an independent of subjective factors such as one’s own language or epistemic values. According to Saunders et al. (2015), objectivism discloses the position in which social entities genuinely exist, external to social actors.

In contrast, subjectivists believe that reality is subjective and constructed by social actors. According to subjectivists, reality is fashioned by social actors and that there are, therefore, multiple realities. Subjectivism is generally

known in terms of individual views, assumptions or claims, as the individuals concerned may judge them to be, even though in actual fact these views or assumptions may be incorrect. In the opinion of ARI (2016), subjectivism can be referred to as the belief or opinion that reality is not a firm absolute, but rather an indeterminate realm that is capable of being altered, wholly or partially, by the feelings, wishes, or whims of the perceiver. However, Saunders et al. (2015) describes subjectivism as social occurrences that are shaped with the use of perceptions and the resulting action of social actors. Clearly, both Saunders et al. (2015) and ARI (2016) agree on the fact that subjectivism entails an altering of reality.

#### **4.2.2 Epistemology**

According to Saunders et al. (2012), epistemology deals with the nature of knowledge and the question of how knowledge can be gained. It describes what makes up knowledge that is capable of being accepted in a field of study (Saunders et al., 2015). Similarly, Eriksson and Kovalainen (2008:14) maintained that epistemology is concerned with “what knowledge is, and what the sources and limits of knowledge are and how knowledge can be produced”. Both Eriksson and Kovalainen (2008:14), Saunders et al. (2012), and Sanders et al. (2015) agree on the fact that epistemology entails an inquisition into the nature, make up, and constituent of knowledge. However, while only Eriksson and Kovalainen (2008:14) places emphasis on the production of knowledge, Saunders et al. (2012) emphasizes the gaining of knowledge.

Epistemology is further concerned with deciding what kinds of knowledge are possible and how we can ensure that they are adequate and legitimate (Maynard, 1994:10). According to Easterby-Smith et al. (2008), epistemology is a philosophical stance which considers views about the most appropriate ways of enquiring into the nature of the world. Similarly, Chia (2002:2) described epistemology as “how and what it is possible to know and the need to reflect on methods and standards through which reliable and verifiable knowledge is produced”. Dawson (2002) claimed that epistemology is the

study of knowledge and is more concerned with identifying the origin of that knowledge. In a similar way to ontology, epistemology can also be divided into two types: in this case, positivism and interpretivism.

The positivist position takes the view that knowledge is valid only if it is based on the observation of external reality. According to Easterby-Smith et al. (2008), positivists believe that reality is fixed, directly measurable, and can be known; there is one truth and one external reality. Positivists hold that this external objective reality can be measured without bias using standardised instruments. Positivists accept that universal or general laws exist, and that theoretical models can be developed that are generalisable, explain cause and effect relationships and lend themselves to predicting outcomes (Hatch and Cunliffe, 2006). In positivism, the idea of reasoning (employing values of reason, truth and validity) should focus on facts gathered through direct observation and experience, and measured empirically using quantitative methods, surveys and experiments, and statistical analysis (Blaikie, 1993; Hatch and Cunliffe, 2006; Saunders et al., 2007; Easterby-Smith et al., 2008; Erikson and Kovalainen, 2008). The goal of positivist research is to achieve a universal truth, rule or explanation that is always true if specified conditions hold. Further, positivists presume an external and theory-neutral world (Eriksson and Kovalainen, 2008). Positivists maintain that to qualify as acceptable knowledge, a phenomenon should be measurable and observable. Further, positivists maintain positions as natural scientists in the research process, using large samples and quantitative data to test a hypothesis or theory. Positivists use statistical and mathematical tools to produce objective findings which have generalisability, high reliability but low validity (Collis and Hussey, 2009).

### **4.2.3 Axiology**

The philosophical stance of axiology is concerned with the values, norms and beliefs that researchers hold and the role they play in the research process (Collis and Hussey, 2009). By treating a phenomenon under investigation as

an object, positivists maintain that the research process is unbiased and value free. Similarly, objectivists are more interested in causal relationships and maintain that a phenomenon under investigation will be unaffected by the research process. Collis and Hussey (2009) criticised these positions and maintained that they suit the natural sciences but are less applicable to the social sciences, which are concerned with social activities and behaviours. This led to interpretivists acknowledging that the values and beliefs of the researcher can render a research process biased and value-laden. On the other hand, Saunders et al. (2012) offered suggestions for how to remove bias and make a research process value-free. For example, researchers should select research methods which can minimise or remove bias and view the research objects from various perspectives.

The three philosophical stances discussed above feed into the overall concepts or views of the world known as paradigms. The research philosophy adopted in this research (which is interpretivism) will form the foundation or essence of the research, which entails the advancement of knowledge within the limits of a definite field. The following section discusses the main justification for the choice of interpretivism as opposed to social constructionism in the present research.

### **4.3 Interpretivism and Rationale for Adoption in Present Research**

The choice of interpretivism in the present study was made and justified based on the following theoretical evidences. First, interpretivists acknowledge social actors and interactions, and the relationship between the researcher and what is being researched (Collis and Hussey, 2009). Interpretivists use small samples, qualitative data and carry out research in an actual setting, which is exactly the focus of this research. Interpretivists use interpretation and usually aim to develop a new theory instead of testing one. The findings of an interpretivist are generally known to be less reliable but highly valid (Collis and Hussey, 2009). According to Smith (1989:85), interpretivism is “based on a constant process of interpretation and

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reinterpretation of the intentional, meaningful behaviour of people – including researchers”. It promotes the necessity for researchers to understand variances that exist between humans in our role as social actors. This brings to light the difference that exist between the conducting of a research among people instead of objects (Sanders et al, 2015). In particular, Smith (1989), Collis and Hussey (2009), and Sanders et al. (2015) agree on and emphasize the relevance of people or subjects in the process of research.

Further, the interpretation of social inquiry is a constructive process and, consequently, the researcher cannot be isolated from the phenomenon investigated, which is exactly the focus of the present research. The interpretivist position is that reality is socially constructed and appeals to the social curiosity of the researcher (Fisher, 2004). In interpretivism, individuals construct an understanding of situations in their own social world that is based on their memories, experiences and expectations as individuals. Gray (2004) argued that the world is too complex to be reduced to a set of observable laws, and that generalisability is a less important issue in interpretivism than understanding the real conditions behind the reality. Incidentally, findings from this study are focused at three case studies, and generalisability is viewed as less vital than the dynamics of the MBA frameworks of the cases being studied. Further, the interpretivist position is concerned with how people relate to the social environment around them and how they function considering the various institutions and processes that govern it. Therefore, Rubin and Rubin (1995) argued that there is not just one reality in the social world, and that researchers understand issues through different meanings.

Interpretivists further believe that understanding and construction of the social world is reinforced repeatedly through experience, allowing individuals to develop interpretations of the world around them. Therefore, this position becomes an appropriate one to take for a research project in which the responses of the participants are largely based on their experiences, expectations and feelings regarding their working or professional



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environment, making it highly subjective. Similarly, Easterby-Smith et al. (2008) observed that much importance is attached to how people communicate (verbally and non-verbally) their thinking and feeling. Eriksson and Kovalainen (2008) further added that the subjective nature of interpretivism, with its emphasis on language, creates a natural association between itself and qualitative research.

The subjective-interpretive research position also places researchers near their subjects, so that they can “interpret their subjective understanding of reality” (Shaw, 1999:60). Since all knowledge is relative to the knower, interpretivists make sense of, or draw meaning from, and create their realities by aiming to work alongside others to understand their points of view (Hatch and Cunliffe, 2006), making this an inductive process. This helps investigators increase their depth of understanding of a participant’s reality. According to Denzin and Lincoln (2003), interpretivists hold the view of the existence of multiple realities. These multiple realities are the results of how everyone constructs her or his own reality.

However, there seems to be enormous similarities between the interpretivist and social constructionism stances of epistemology which many previous literatures have highlighted. First, the role of the researcher within the context of social constructionism is to construct meaningful findings or outcomes by understanding, reconstructing, analysing and critiquing participants’ views (Guba and Lincoln, 1989). Furthermore, social constructionism is defined as “a perspective that emphasizes how different stakeholders in social settings construct their beliefs” (Schutt, 2006:44). Therefore, constructionists are always open to interpretations, as more information becomes available (Carr and Kemmis, 1986). Interestingly, these traits are shared with the interpretivism stance. But scholars believe there is no generally acceptable definition and view of social constructivism (Burr, 2015).

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However, Cunliffe (2008) in a journal of management learning still provide a critical assessment of the subject of social constructionism, helping to understand how it differs from interpretivism in scope and application. Cunliffe (2008) argued extensively that social constructionism assumes that “*social world consisting of self-contained individual actors, each becoming aware, and developing accurate mental images and understandings of the world*” (Cunliffe, 2008:123). While, Cunliffe (2008) mentioned that this position had been challenged by numerous authors within different fields of academics such as sociology (Garfinkel, 1967; Pollner, 1991), anthropology (Clifford, 1986; Marcus, 1986) and philosophy (Derrida, 1976), this assumption still aligns with the position of many other authors. For example, authors like Guba and Lincoln (1989); Schwandt (1998); Saunders et al. (2003); (Guba and Lincoln, 1989) and Shadish (1995:67), Cunliffe’s (2008) all seem to argue in favour of the fact that social constructionism assumes that “social world consisting of self-contained individual actors, each becoming aware, and developing accurate mental images and understandings of the world”.

However, the concept of social constructivism was deemed not suitable for the present study because it’s been found to be more relevant to the development of US business schools’ curricula on this assumption, unlike UK business schools (Cunliffe, 2008). Secondly, social constructionism even while closely related to interpretivism, is highly multifaceted. For example, Cunliffe (2008) argues that social constructivism should be viewed through the lenses of “the nature of social reality” in terms of whether realities are subjective or inter-subjective; the actual processes of socially constructing either of these realities; and the epistemological interests that underlie the process.

Furthermore, social constructivism differs appreciably from interpretivism in that it’s not a synonym of qualitative enquiry, but one which only focuses on answering the questions of, “what is constructed” and “how the construction

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process unfolds” (Chen et al., 2011:130). Social constructivism is further viewed as a stance for research in the sciences, mathematics, technology and psychological spaces (Chen et al., 2011:130), which is not the focus of the current study. Another crucial and major difference between interpretivism and social constructivism on which basis the choice of interpretivism was made is presented as follows. Chen et al. (2011) argue that the main priority for interpretivists is to “understand meaning and intentionality” and not “causality” which is a key consideration for social constructivists.

Furthermore, O’Connor (2015); Yanow and Schwartz (2015); and Creswell (2013) contend that the dominant ontological beliefs of social constructionist is “multiple realities constructed through lived experiences”, which in actual fact is not the direction of the present study, as the focus is to gather data related to a single reality of how blended learning approach is practiced within an MBA context. Put together, all of these theoretical evidences coupled with the nature of the present study form a strong rationale for the adoption of interpretivism as the dominant stance in the present study. The main focus is to compare existing MBA blended frameworks to existing frameworks for the acquisition of meanings and the motives behind these choices, and to use all identified gaps as the basis for the development of a revised MBA learning and teaching model.

Based on the above theoretical discussion, the researcher classified herself as subjective-interpretivist, and that the main purpose for the researcher was to capture a holistic and in-depth understanding of blended learning MBA programmes. Further, using an interpretive paradigm means that the researcher’s understandings of blended learning MBAs will be regarded as the outcomes of the shared meaning of social actors within the case study institutions. Therefore, these theoretical underpinnings provide the rationale for the choice of interpretivism for the present research.

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#### **4.4 RESEARCH PARADIGMS AND RATIONALE FOR CHOICES**

For any empirical investigation, it is imperative to consider relevant paradigms at the start of the research and decide which to adopt. Identifying a research paradigm is necessary because it helps shape the perspectives on the perceptions, beliefs and assumptions on which a study is founded.

The next section discusses paradigms and the types of and divisions between research methodologies and philosophical stances based upon these paradigms.

##### **4.4.1 Paradigms**

According to Guba (1990:17), a paradigm is a “basic set of beliefs which guides actions”. Similarly, Collis and Hussey (2009:55) defined a paradigm as “a philosophical framework which guides how empirical research should be conducted”. As Hatch and Cunliffe (2006) cautioned, different research paradigm choices encourage researchers to study phenomena in different ways. For centuries, only one paradigm was in existence and was known as natural science. However, because of industrialisation and further developments in the world, another paradigm came to be known as social science, which respects human beings and their wider role (Kuhn, 1962; Collis and Hussey, 2009). Hollinger (1994) argued that the natural sciences were proving inappropriate to solving emerging issues and, therefore, beliefs that had guided behaviours and activities for hundreds of years appeared to be inadequate, thus giving rise to social science as a new paradigm. Morgan (1979) argued that paradigms can be applied at different levels. For example, the philosophical level reflects fundamental beliefs about the world. The social level, which is concerned with the researcher and the research process, guides the researcher in how research should or can be conducted, while the technical level is concerned with the techniques and methods a researcher can adapt or implement to carry out a piece of research.

Many researchers (Nurrel and Morgan, 1979; Collis and Hussey, 2009; Bryman and Bell, 2015) have argued that there is no right or wrong

paradigm. However, they also maintained that a paradigm is partially determined by the nature of a piece of research, its aim(s) and objectives, and its philosophical stance. These issues further divide an overall research methodology into two main positions: qualitative and quantitative. However, Nurrell and Morgan (1979) and Collis and Hussey (2009) also highlighted that there are various other research approaches or paradigms between these two positions (Figure 4.1).



**Figure 4.1: Objective and subjective dimensions**

Source: Adapted from Nurrell and Morgan (1979:3)

The above figure shows that an interpretivist takes a subjective stance, known as subjectivism, on ontology and, therefore, chooses a qualitative research methodology. In contrast, a positivist takes an objective stance on ontology and chooses a quantitative research methodology. An interpretivist, subjectivist and qualitative research methodology will be biased and value-laden, whereas a positivist, objectivist and quantitative research methodology will usually be unbiased and value-free due to random sampling and ensuring external validity (Bryman and Bell, 2015). Both quantitative and qualitative research methodologies are discussed further in section 4.3.3.

As the main purpose of this thesis is to explore in depth and evaluate the effectiveness of blended learning as a means of delivering management development in MBA programmes in three UK universities, the ontological stance of this research was subjectivism, firstly due to its exploratory nature in drawing conclusions from interpretation and secondly due to the need to create a new comprehensive framework for blended learning. Thus, it was

against the above theoretical basis that interpretivism was selected as the epistemological stance for this case study research.

The choices regarding the philosophical stances and paradigms made for this research are also supported and positively reinforced by other researchers in the same discipline, such as Leidner and Javenpaa (1995), Hodgson and Watland (2004b), Allan (2007) and Chew et al. (2009) who have all adopted interpretivism and subjectivity in similar studies. This also demonstrates that this research will add further value to the discipline by having explored the phenomenon under investigation from the social actors' viewpoint and in their contemporary context.

Similarly, due to the subjective and interpretive stance of this research, the researcher acknowledges that the research process will be biased and value laden from an axiological perspective. While acknowledging that it is not possible to remove bias completely, this research has adopted various methods and techniques to minimise it, which are discussed under research quality issues (see section 4.5); in particular, how the data were collected and triangulated and the various means of data management and analysis employed (section 4.7). The next section discusses two ways in which research can be conducted: deductively or inductively, and qualitatively or quantitatively.

### **4.3.2 Deductive vs. Inductive Paradigms**

In any research, either one of two approaches can be adopted: deductive or inductive. Further, the choice can be made based upon the nature of the research and its main aim(s) and objectives. However, a researcher can also choose a more mixed approach. According to Bryman and Bell (2015), a deductive approach is mainly relevant to positivism and objectivism and, therefore, adopts a quantitative research methodology. On the other hand, an inductive approach is mainly relevant to interpretivism and subjectivism and adopts a qualitative research methodology.

In a deductive research approach, the starting point is a hypothesis or theory and a researcher to test it further (Bryman and Bell, 2015). In this approach,

the researcher designs and develops testable or quantifiable variables to test them. Furthermore, the deductive approach offers researchers a simple and systematic way of testing a theory or hypothesis. Therefore, the deductive approach is closely associated with positivism (Saunders, 2003).

However, in an inductive approach, the result is a theory or hypothesis (Bryman and Bell, 2015). Here the researcher understands the research context and makes observations to draw conclusions or develop a theory, which was the very purpose of the present case study research. The inductive research approach is largely based upon qualitative data and is less structured compared with the deductive method. Thus, conclusions or theory drawn from an inductive approach are less generalisable compared with those from a deductive process (Bryman and Bell, 2015), which is exactly what the present case study research intends to do. Similarly, due to the subjective and interpretivist stance adopted, findings from an inductive approach are biased and value-laden. In an inductive approach, a theory is developed from the data and their interpretation. According to Marshall (1997:17), “when researchers first begin to open up any new line of enquiry there will be no useful theories available from which to deduce propositions for testing”. Knowledge must begin with collecting facts and then trying to find some order in them.

As the above discussion demonstrates, an inductive approach leads to a qualitative research methodology and a deductive approach to a quantitative research methodology. It was therefore against the background of these theoretical evidences that the need to undertake an inductive approach for the present case study research was based.

### **4.3.3 Qualitative vs. Quantitative Paradigms**

In distinguishing between qualitative and quantitative research, Berg (2001) argued that the former refers to the meanings, concepts, definitions, characteristics, metaphors, symbols and descriptions of things, while the latter refers to the measures and counts of things. Mack et al. (2005)

tabulated the differences between qualitative and quantitative research approaches in certain major areas, including their analytical objectives, the types of questions posed, the data collection methods used, the data produced, and the degree of flexibility in the study design (see Table 4.1). According to Denzin and Lincoln (1998), qualitative research emphasises the process of discovering how social meaning is constructed and stresses the relationship between the investigator and the topic studied. Incidentally, Denzin and Lincoln's (1998) postulation fits the very nature of this study to adopt a qualitative approach. Table 4.1 outlines the main differences between both methodologies.



**Table 4.1: Comparison of quantitative and qualitative research approaches** (Source: Mack et al., 2005:3)

	<b>Quantitative</b>	<b>Qualitative</b>
General framework	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Seeks to confirm hypotheses about phenomena.</li> <li>• Instruments use a more rigid style of eliciting and categorising responses to questions.</li> <li>• Uses highly structured methods, such as questionnaires, surveys and structured observation.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Seeks to explore phenomena.</li> <li>• Instruments use a more flexible, iterative style of eliciting and categorises responses to questions.</li> <li>• Uses semi-structured methods, such as in-depth interviews, focus groups and participant observation.</li> </ul>
Analytical objective	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• To quantify variation.</li> <li>• To predict causal relationships.</li> <li>• To describe the characteristics of a population.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• To describe variation.</li> <li>• To describe and explain relationships.</li> <li>• To describe individual experiences.</li> <li>• To describe group norms.</li> </ul>
Question format	Closed-ended.	Open-ended.
Data format	Numerical (obtained by assigning numerical values to responses).	Textual (obtained from audiotapes, videotapes and field notes).
Flexibility in study design	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Study design is stable from beginning to end.</li> <li>• Participants' responses do not influence or determine how and which questions researchers ask next.</li> <li>• Study design is subject to statistical assumptions and conditions.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Some aspects of the study are flexible (for example, the addition, exclusion or wording of particular interview questions).</li> <li>• Participants' responses affect how and which questions researchers ask next.</li> <li>• Study design is iterative; that is, data collection and research questions are adjusted according to what is learned.</li> </ul>

Bryman and Bell (2015) proposed the following contrast (Table 4.2) between quantitative and qualitative research. This further demonstrates the fundamental differences the data collected using these two approaches.

**Table 4.2: Contrasts between quantitative and qualitative research**

<b>Quantitative research</b>	<b>Qualitative research</b>
Numbers	Words
Hard, reliable data	Rich, deep data
Researcher's point of view	Participants' point of view
Researcher distant	Researcher close
Theory testing	Theory emergent
Static	Process
Structured	Unstructured
Generalisation	Contextual understanding
Macro	Micro
Behaviour	Meanings
Artificial setting	Natural setting

Source: Bryman and Bell (2007:426)

On the other hand, Saunders et al. (2012) maintained that differences quantitative and qualitative data also lead to different means of analysing the data. Table 4.3 presents this differentiation.

**Table 4.3: Distinction between quantitative and qualitative data**

<b>Quantitative data</b>	<b>Qualitative data</b>
Based upon meanings derived from numbers.	Based upon meanings which are expressed by words.
Data collection results in standardised and numerical data.	Data collection results in non-standardised data which require classification into categories.
Data analysis is conducted by the use of statistics and diagrams.	Data analysis is conducted by the use of conceptualisation.

Source: Saunders et al. (2012)

The above tables show that quantitative data are generally regarded as ‘hard’, structured and mostly reliant on numbers, which require mathematical and statistical techniques or software to analyse. On the other hand, qualitative data are regarded as ‘soft’, unstructured and analysed by classification, categorisation and conceptualisation. Since qualitative data are soft and unstructured and qualitative research is based upon subjectivism and interpretivism, these have been subject to many criticisms from the perspective of their quality. Therefore, several researchers have suggested developing quality measures to address these criticisms, which is the topic of discussion in the section below on research quality issues (see section 4.5).

From the differences highlighted by Mack et al. (2005), Bryman and Bell (2007:426), and Saunders et al. (2012), Bryman and Bell (2007:426) and Saunders et al. (2012) emphasize the fact that quantitative research focuses and draws meaning from numbers, while qualitative research focuses and draws meaning from words. On the other hand, Mack et al. (2005) fails to emphasize this fact. Rather, Mack et al. (2005) points to the fact that the data format in quantitative research is numerical while the data format in qualitative research is textual. Therefore, based on the above theoretical

evidences, the current research followed an inductive approach, as was deemed suitable for qualitative research (Gratton & Jones, 2010). However, some inductive processes can also have a deductive flavour: a very specific hypothesis can be deduced from a more general theory by means of data gathering through interviews and other qualitative data collection means. However, this particular study relied on drawing meanings from themes and patterns arising from the data gathered throughout the process of evaluation and analysis and thus the inductive process was ideal. Further, Saunders et al. (2003) argued that an inductive approach presents an opportunity to gain more explanation of what is happening. The themes and patterns in this research were evaluated and analysed, exploring how these themes would assist in the interpretation and construction of knowledge and could eventually lead to the formulation of a framework that would embody logically arrived-at findings. The new framework was then interpreted regarding the previously reviewed literature. This determined how what had been found remained consistent or held true with respect to the literature reviewed. Attempts were also made to explain what could be causing any inconsistencies. In this research, therefore, the opinions and beliefs of respondents, students and faculty staff at three UK universities regarding the blended learning MBA programmes in the institutions concerned were constructed and interpreted. Easterby-Smith et al. (2012) and Gray (2004) also acknowledged that there is a close association between the inductive approach and qualitative research.

Therefore, on the basis that this research and what it seeks to achieve are situated within the field of management science education, albeit at a higher level, it became necessary to adopt qualitative research as the means of carrying out this study. Adopting a qualitative research approach also allowed the researcher to implement a flexible design. This meant that many aspects of the study were not pre-specified and the results could not be predicted with any significant degree of certainty. For instance, the scope of this research was not set too rigidly or too early. Nor were there any premature over-

commitments to theoretical definitions, concepts or positions regarding the phenomenon under study: blended learning on MBA programmes. Further, at all times during the period of data collection and analysis, appropriate adjustments that fell within accepted practices of conducting qualitative research could be made for achieving the objectives of the research. These were important steps to take because, as Gray (2004) observed, qualitative research is distinguished as a highly contextual approach in which data are gathered over long periods and in natural real-life settings.

To summarise this section, this research adopted an inductive qualitative research approach in the anticipation and belief that it was the best approach to use for exploring and evaluating the effectiveness of blended learning as a means of delivering management development in MBA programmes in the context of UK universities. Similarly, an inductive qualitative research also enabled the researcher to address the research questions by collecting and analysing all relevant qualitative data. The above choices are further reinforced by various researchers in the management education discipline. For example, as referred to earlier, Hodgson and Watland (2004a) debated Arbaugh and Benbunan-Fich (2004) regarding identifying appropriate research methods that could be used for studying management courses delivered online. The former contended that researchers should focus more on qualitative methods than on quantitative ones, because collaborative and constructivist learning models drive many of the online learning models. The latter, while not disagreeing with the former about the importance of qualitative methods, cautioned that, as an emerging field, research into online learning should allow for diversity in methods. This is of particular relevance to this current study, given that this research has to do with studying the delivery of MBAs through blended and online-assisted platforms.

#### 4.4 RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Selecting an appropriate research methodology is known to be a difficult task due to the availability of many research options. Further, the literature also presents various criteria for the preference and suitability of one methodology over another. Tables 4.4 and 4.5 highlight various criteria for selecting an appropriate research methodology.

**Table 4.4: Classification of research methodologies according to key research objectives and questions**

<b>Objective</b>	<b>Question</b>	<b>Examples of appropriate methodologies</b>
Exploration	How, why?  How often, how much, how many, who, what, where?	Qualitative <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Experiment</li> <li>• Case study</li> <li>• Participant observation</li> </ul> Quantitative <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Survey</li> <li>• Secondary data analysis</li> </ul>
Explanation	How, why?	Qualitative <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Experiment</li> <li>• Case study</li> <li>• Grounded theory</li> <li>• Participant observation</li> <li>• Ethnography</li> <li>• Case survey</li> </ul>
Description	Who, what, where?  How much, how many?	Qualitative <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Experiment</li> <li>• Case study</li> <li>• Grounded theory</li> <li>• Participant observation</li> <li>• Ethnography</li> <li>• Case survey</li> </ul> Quantitative <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Survey</li> <li>• Longitudinal</li> <li>• Secondary data analysis</li> </ul>

Prediction	Who, what, where?	Qualitative <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Experiment</li> <li>• Case study</li> <li>• Grounded theory</li> <li>• Participant observation</li> <li>• Case survey</li> </ul>
	Who, what, where, how much, how many?	Quantitative <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Survey</li> <li>• Longitudinal</li> <li>• Secondary data analysis</li> </ul>

Source: Ellram (1996:98)

**Table 4.5: Relevant situations for different research methods**

<b>Method</b>	<b>Form of research question</b>	<b>Requires control of behavioural events</b>	<b>Focuses on contemporary events</b>
Experiment	How, why?	Yes	Yes
Survey	Who, what, where, how many, how much?	No	Yes
Archival analysis	Who, what, where, how many, how much?	No	Yes/No
History	How, why?	No	No
Case study	How, why?	No	Yes

Source: Yin (2014: 9)

Tables 4.4 and 4.5 demonstrate that research methodology can be selected in accordance with several criteria, such as the level of control over the research participants, a focus on a contemporary context, the form of the research

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questions and the research objective. For the present study, the case study methodology was selected based on the following theoretical justifications. Case study research is widely described as an extensive examination of a single instance of a phenomenon of interest within a specific population of interest, and could be suitable for the formulation of new theories (Voss et al., 2002). Case study methodologies have been applied in many management oriented studies, including for example, the work of Hu et al. (2004) entitled "*Customer Knowledge Management – A Case Study of Taiwan’s Plastic Industry*" and that of Lewis et al. (2011) who studied the energy and maintenance management processes of organisation. Nevertheless, a critical disadvantage and drawback in the use of case study methodology is the difficulty in replicating their findings in different management organizational contexts (Hussey and Hussey, 1997; Mangan et al., 2004).

More specifically, Yin (2014) argued that case study is a suitable research methodology for conducting social science research when the research questions start from ‘how’ and ‘why’. Further, case study can be employed when the researcher has no control, is not required to have any control over the research participants and the researcher wants to conduct research in the actual and contemporary context of the research. Yin (2014:16) further defined a case study as “an empirical inquiry that investigates a contemporary phenomenon within its real-life context, especially when the boundaries between phenomenon and context are not clear”. Yin (2014) also differentiated case study research from other methods. For example, the focus of history is non-contemporary events; the ability of a survey to deal with the contemporary context is extremely limited; and case study uses different methods, such as documents, observations and interviews, which are not available in most of the other research methods.

Therefore, based upon the above discussion and tables, the researcher reached the conclusion that case study best suited this research as a research methodology because the researcher has no control on UK universities or on students and the focus is on the contemporary context. These criteria are also



positively correlated with the interpretivist, exploratory, inductive and qualitative research methodology. The following section discusses case study as a research methodology for this research in greater details.

#### **4.4.1 Case Study Research Methodology**

Cohen and Manion (1989, cited in Bassey, 1999) defined case study as a methodology which closely observes the characteristics of individual units, such as a person, group or community, to analyse various phenomena in relation to that unit of study. Further, case study captures the complexity of a single case and offers several advantages to researchers. For example, Denscombe (1998) argued that case study allows the use of multiple sources of data and a variety of research methods to explore the research questions, which, in turn fosters the validation of data through triangulation.

Using case study can offer substantial advantages in the information or data gathering process. Yin (2014:16) argued that case study can be used for both qualitative and quantitative studies and identified this as “an empirical enquiry to investigate a contemporary phenomenon within its real-life context, especially when the boundaries between phenomenon and context are not clear”. Yin (2003) also asserted that the ability to use triangulation gives case study research a greater chance of making findings or conclusions more compelling and accurate. Morris and Wood (1991) also commented that case study is a more effective approach for gaining a deeper understanding of a phenomenon being investigated. Originally, case study was developed and applied within the social sciences, such as in psychology, sociology, anthropology and economics. However, it is now widely applied in other areas, such as environmental studies, social work, education and business studies.

Several researchers (Merriam, 1998; Miles and Huberman, 1994; Yin, 1994; Stake, 1995, 1998; Gillham, 2001) have described how a case study should have a ‘case’ which is the object of study. For this study, the ‘case’ was observing the conduct of a blended learning MBA programme. The ‘case’ to be

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studied was defined when it was determined that the various blended learning and teaching approaches on MBA programmes in three different UK universities were what was to be observed and referred to as three case studies, instead of observing the students themselves or the institutions or even the staff at the institutions, even though all these were important aspects of observing a blended learning MBA programme. The research was not primarily about comparing the three UK universities themselves; nor did it concern the students or compare students from the three UK universities. Even though the universities and students were an important part of studying and comparing the blended learning MBA programmes of the three UK universities, they provided a context in which to situate the MBA blended learning programme. The blended learning programme could not be separated from the context in which it was occurring; it was bound to its context.

Baxter and Jack (2008:546) proposed the idea of a “bounded context”, which helps in determining “what a case was about” and, most importantly, “what the case was not about”. They also held that a common pitfall associated with case study is the tendency for case study researchers to attempt to answer a question or topic that has too many objectives for one study. Stark and Torrance (2005) also addressed this issue and argued that it was essential to define a boundary around a phenomenon: what to include and what to exclude. Therefore, to avoid such pitfalls, the bounded context for this study was established by ensuring that the research objectives did not distort what this study set out to establish. This aspect of the conduct of the study sat well in agreement with Stake (1995) and Yin (2003), for whom bounding cases prevents such problems of distortion of research objectives (Baxter and Jack, 2008). Different authors have prescribed various ways of bounding cases. Baxter and Jack (2008) recounted several such prescriptions, including that of Creswell (2003), who described bounding by time and place. Similarly, Stake (1995) described bounding by time and activity, and, lastly, bounding by definition and context was suggested by Miles and Huberman (1994). The

literature in this field has described various types of case study. Table 4.6 presents the most common types.

**Table 4.6: Types of case study**

<b>Type of case study</b>	<b>Description</b>
Explanatory case studies	In this research, existing theory is used to explain and understand a phenomenon.
Descriptive case studies	This form is intended to describe a phenomenon, practice or process.
Experimental case study	This form examines the difficulties in implementing new strategies, practices or techniques in a firm and evaluates the resulting benefits.
Illustrative case studies	This form of research is intended to illustrate new or possibly innovative practices or processes adopted by a particular company or organisation.
Intrinsic case study	Undertaken to better understand one particular case in depth. Here, the case does not demonstrate a particular trait or represent other cases, but is undertaken due to an intrinsic interest.
Instrumental case studies	Here a particular case is examined, mainly to provide insights into another issue or to redraw a generalisation.
Collective case study	Here the researcher jointly studies several cases in order to investigate a phenomenon, population or general condition. This is also a type of instrumental study but is extended to several cases, which may or may not be similar.

Sources: Scapens (1990), Stake (1995) and Yin (2014)

Stake (1995) sheds light on three particular types of case study: intrinsic, instrumental and collective. In the context of this research, collective case

study is of particular interest. According to Stake (1995), collective case studies are more appropriate for multiple-case studies because they explore the similarities and differences between several cases that depict a certain phenomenon. The researcher further refers to collective case study as instrumental study, extended, however, to several cases and cases that may or may not be similar. Although Stake (1995) iterates the fact that collective case studies emphasizes the difference and similarities that exists among cases, the author fails to iterate the fact that the cases contained in a collective case study may or may not be related. However, Goddard (2016) believes collective case study entails more than a case, which may or may not be physically collocated with other cases.

On the other hand, explanatory case studies are used to answer questions that help explain what causes certain situations to exist but may be too broad or complex for experimental studies (Yin, 2003, cited in Baxter and Jack, 2008). In exploratory case studies, cases are conducted to explore phenomena with no clear single set of outcomes. Although Yin (2003) provides an explanation regarding the type of questions that exploratory case study seeks to answer, the author fails to identify the type of research within which exploratory research is utilized or engaged. However, Streb (2016) describes exploratory case study as a process that examines diverse phenomena that are characterized by a lack or an absence of detailed preliminary research, especially as it relates to hypothesis that are developed and can be tested.

Descriptive case studies, however, narrate a situation or phenomenon and the real-life context in which it plays out (Yin, 2003, cited in Baxter and Jack, 2008). However, Yin (2003) fails to iterate the type of research within which the descriptive case studies will be most appropriate for. In the opinion of Mills et al. (2010), the descriptive case study is a case study that is detailed and focused, in which questions and propositions regarding a phenomenon are carefully examined and spelt out at the outset.

Therefore, this research combined exploratory and descriptive case study because it sought first to explore and then to describe different learning and teaching frameworks in the MBA programmes in three UK universities.

#### **4.4.2 Single vs. Multiple Case Study Research Methods**

Another important debate regarding the case study research method is its design: whether a case study should be single or multiple. In this research, a case study method was used and is commonly used in the areas of education, management and social studies (Burgess, 1985; Merriam, 1998). Furthermore, case study as a research method best suited this research because the researcher had no influence regarding the UK universities and students concerned and the focus was on the contemporary context. Various researchers (Eisenhardt, 1989; Saunders et al., 2012; Yin, 2014) prefer multiple case study over single due to its strengths in making contrasts and cross-comparisons and enabling replication. Yin (2014) presented the following situations in which a single case study is appropriate:

- ❖ For a critical case in which a researcher is testing a theory with controlled parameters.
  
- ❖ When a case demonstrates a unique or extreme example of a significant theory.
  
- ❖ When a researcher can gain access to or observe, which was not possible in the past, and the context demonstrates a revelatory case.

However, none of the above criteria were suitable for this research because the researcher was not testing a theory. Further, the UK universities and MBA programmes did not represent extreme cases, neither was it impossible to gain access in the past. Furthermore, multiple case study enables a researcher to carry out analytical generalisations, compare and contrast and is more suitable for developing a theory. Therefore, a multiple case study design was selected for this research (Eisenhardt, 1989; Yin, 2014). However, some requirements, such as resources, time, access and the researcher being the

sole researcher in PhD, were some of the constraints in conducting this multiple case study.

A critical debate in case study research is regarding the number of cases to include. Several researchers maintained that there is no ideal number (Eisenhardt, 1989; Yin, 2014). However, Eisenhardt (1989) recommended four to ten, Perry (1998) suggested two to four as a minimum and 15 as a maximum, and Yin (2014) maintained that a researcher should have at least two cases. Based upon the above discussion and considering the PhD constraints of time, access and resources, the researcher selected three UK universities for multiple case study to explore the different learning and teaching methods in their MBA programmes. In terms of criteria, it was decided that the UK universities must have an accredited MBA and have different learning and teaching methods (on campus as well as online). This would allow the researcher to explore the different learning and teaching methods in the MBA programmes in depth.

This would also ensure that the selected case study universities were well known and part of UK higher education.

The above discussion demonstrates that multiple case study is more beneficial than examining a single case. Furthermore, multiple case study was adopted because it enabled the examination of MBA blended learning cases from three different UK universities. The choice of multiple over single case study in this research is justified by Yin (2003), with his observation that the evidence and conclusions that emerge from multiple-study designs are more reliable and convincing than those based on single-case designs, and thus the findings are more likely to be generalised. Other studies within the MBA field that have employed multiple case studies approach include the works of Elliott and Robinson (2012); Robinson (2006); Ly et al. (2015); Myers (2013); Bowman and Thompson (2013); Zhao and Ferran (2016); and Supmonchai and Rompho, (2013). These authors employed multiple case studies for a research on MBA programmes in different University contexts.

Similarly, for the present study, findings from the multiple case studies were replicated across three institutions by using the same procedure to understand the variations, as well as the areas of convergence, in the blended learning MBA programmes in the three UK universities. Another advantage of multiple case study was that it became possible to understand the blended learning MBA programmes uniquely and in depth for each of the three universities, while at the same time relating each of the unique cases to each other.

The university setting and the students are the drivers of an MBA blended learning programme; the university drives the programme by providing the platform for the model (the supply side). On the other hand, students drive the programme as the recipients of the programme, and represent the demand side of the blended learning MBA product. The researcher would not, therefore, have could explore various aspects of learning and teaching methods for MBAs without the context in which the blended learning phenomenon was happening (Baxter and Jack, 2008).

Case study is also criticised as a research method due to its lack of generalisability. However, Yin (2014) argued that the researcher might not want generalisability, and that there is potential to generalise case study findings to a wider set of theories using analytical generalisation. Finally, case study helped this study gather and share deep insights and details about the blended learning MBA programmes across three UK universities.

#### **4.5 RESEARCH QUALITY ISSUES**

Research paradigms and philosophical stances outline a research process and the procedure for conducting research, and result in different measures of research quality and ways of ensuring the credibility and validity of the overall research process and findings. However, there has been a large amount of criticism about the use of traditional measures, such as validity, credibility and generalisability, in qualitative research. Critics argue that these measures were originally designed for quantitative research and are not,

therefore, suitable as measures of qualitative research quality. For example, Bryman and Bell (2007:410) argued that

The issue of measurement validity almost by definition seems to carry connotations of measurement. Since measurement is not a major preoccupation among qualitative researchers, the issue of validity would seem to have little bearing on such studies.

However, the researcher will first discuss traditional quality measures of generalisability, reliability and validity and then alternative quality criteria of credibility, transferability, dependability and confirmability.

Generalisability is concerned with the question of whether the findings of a piece of research can be generalised to another context. Generalisability is known as a quantitative research quality measure, but, when applied to the quality of qualitative research, the measure is known as external validity. The following sections discuss reliability and validity before moving on to consider alternative quality criteria.

#### **4.5.1 Reliability**

According to Bryman and Bell (2015), reliability poses the question of whether the same research conducted by another researcher in the same context would produce the same results. Therefore, reliability examines the consistency of a research process. Easterby-Smith et al. (2012) argued that a researcher can check reliability in three ways, by asking three questions:

- ❖ Do the measures provide the same results in other instances?
- ❖ Can similar observations be attained or made by another researcher?
- ❖ Is there clarity in how sense was made or reached from the data?

They argued that if the answer to the above questions was yes, then it meant that the data collection and the research process were highly reliable.

Observer and participant errors and biases generally have an impact on reliability. To reduce participant errors, it is recommended that the researcher asks the same question of all the respondents and further makes



sure that the respondents use the same response categories (Saunders et al., 2012). In order to ensure reliability in this research, the researcher made sure that the respondents understood what the researcher was asking and then the researcher asked the same question using the same language of all the participants. Further, the purpose of the research, information confidentiality and respondent anonymity were again explained so that the respondents would not give biased responses to reflect a good image of themselves or simply not share information. Observer (researcher) bias was reduced by selecting appropriate methods of data collection and triangulation. For example, the research data were collected using semi-structured interviews and an e-survey, which were further triangulated by documents. Similarly, detailed discussion of the research method, data collection and eliciting respondents' feedback regarding interview transcripts were also carried out to overcome observer bias.

#### 4.5.2 Validity

The main concern of validity is whether research findings truly represent what is really and actually happening in an actual context or situation (Collis & Hussey, 2009). On the other hand, Saunders et al. (2012) described reliability as the concern that the findings of a piece of research are about what they seem to be about or not. Table 4.7 presents types of validity described by various researchers.

**Table 4.7: Types of validity**

<b>Types of validity</b>	<b>Description</b>
Internal validity	Concerned with whether the researcher has demonstrated a causal relationship between two factors or what is determined as a cause actually produces what is interpreted as the effect, by demonstrating that other plausible factors cannot explain the relationship.

External validity	The extent to which research findings can be generalised beyond the immediate context or setting in which the research was conducted. Yin (2014) proposed that a case study researcher can pursue analytical generalisation, which means that the researcher can generalise findings to a broader set of theories.
Construct validity	Reflects the extent to which the measurement in question actually operationalises the concepts being studied or actually measures the presence of the construct it is intended to measure.
Face Validity	The extent to which a measure apparently reflects the content of the concept in question and is valid for the participants themselves.

Sources: Collis and Hussey (2009), Saunders et al. (2012), Yin (2014) and Bryman and Bell (2015)

The above researchers maintained that it is hard, for any research, to satisfy all the validity quality criteria. Furthermore, some research methods are strong in one type but weak in another, such as quantitative research, where a survey would be strong in external validity but weak in internal validity. On the other hand, qualitative research is strong in internal validity but weak in external validity. Therefore, a number of researchers (Collis & Hussey, 2009; Saunders et al., 2012; Yin, 2014; Bryman & Bell, 2015) recommended using multiple methods and perspectives in a single research methodology to reduce validity limitations.

Since the nature of this research is qualitative, it is imperative to ensure internal and face validity. For this reason, the research included participants such as MBA students and MBA programme and module leaders. Similarly, all the questions in the interview guide and e-survey were relevant to the research subjects. It is important to mention that, due to the qualitative nature of this research, complete external validity and generalisability is not possible; the findings of this research will only be valid for the participant UK universities.

The concepts of reliability, generalizability, and validity are terms that are pertinent in research. In the opinion of Leung (2015), the concept of generalizability involves ascertaining the degree to which the discoveries gotten from a research can be widely applied to other research that share comparable theories as well as similar models that are comparable in nature. Here, generalizability of a study or research to another study or research is judged by comparisons that prevail between the time, people, place, and other social contexts. On the other hand, validity refers to the suitability of the tools, data, and processes that are being employed. Irrespective of whether the question which the research is out to answer is binding for the result that is desired is dependent on the choice or verdict on methodology that is appropriate for providing an answer to the research question, the suitability of the design for the methodology, the suitability of the sampling and data analysis, and the suitability of the outcome and conclusions for the sample and context (Leung, 2015).

Reliability entails the capacity to repeat the results and processes being obtained (Leung, 2015). The purpose of reliability is the steadiness that is capable of being obtained. A margin of irregularity in results is permitted in research if the consistency in methodology and epistemology produces data that are comparable but contradictory in richness and quality within scopes that are similar (Leung, 2015). As regards the application of generalizability, validity, and reliability to academic research, these concepts are vital in assessing and ensuring the quality of research materials being produced (Leung, 2015). Hence, these concepts will be applied in this research in order to ensure the quality of findings made in this research.

#### **4.6 ALTERNATIVE QUALITY MEASURES FOR QUALITATIVE RESEARCH**

The traditional quality measures of generalisability, validity and reliability were developed for quantitative research approaches and are not considered

appropriate for qualitative research. Therefore, researchers (Lincoln and Guba, 1985; Bryman and Bell, 2015) have proposed alternative quality measures for qualitative research: credibility, transferability, dependability and confirmability. This section discusses these quality measures in more detail.

#### **4.6.1 Credibility**

The credibility of a research work is a measure of the authenticity of the study. Guba and Lincoln (1985) and Bryman and Bell (2007) described credibility as synonymous with internal validity. Internal validity refers to how well a test measures what it is purported to measure.

For internal validity, the opinions and responses collected during the interviews in this research were returned to the participants after their transcription to be authenticated by the respondents themselves; this is also known as respondent validation. Further, the participants of the research process, which included students and staff, were invited to corroborate the outcome or results of the data processing and ensuing analysis. The participants were encouraged to evaluate the final data analyses and the deductions drawn from them. This was done to determine whether the results were truly reflective of their experiences as students on a blended learning MBA programme and their comments were sought.

Triangulation, the term given to the process of combining several data collection methods, provides an important way of ensuring the internal validity of case study. Triangulation was carried out during the data collection as well as at various other stages of this research (Denzin, 1978). For example, data were collected during 11 semi-structured interviews with MBA programme and module leaders in three different case studies. These interviews were combined with the online survey of MBA blended learning students studying at the three UK universities. The data were further triangulated with documents in the three UK universities of their MBA programmes.

### **4.6.2 Transferability**

The idea of transferability examines whether the findings of a research work can be applied to another similar situation. Bryman and Bell (2007) likened transferability to external validity, which poses the question of how well the findings, conclusions, and new knowledge developed would be mirrored or could be said to hold true for another situation in similar contexts and circumstances. The greater the ability of the findings of a piece of research to be projected onto new situations, the greater their transferability and the higher their integrity. For transferability, various researchers (Lincoln and Guba, 1985; Bryman and Bell, 2015) recommended providing *thick description* of each stage in the research process to facilitate transferability.

The transferability of this study was enhanced by providing thick description in terms of its scoping, sample selection, data collection and analysis. One issue in transferring results from one situation to another is the importance and role of local variations. Local variations exist within different individual contexts, and render them dissimilar. Each context, no matter how similar when taken at a global or general level, will still have some subtle nuances which mean that the original context cannot be exactly replicated when transferred to another setting in another context. In effect, transferability is about making generalisations about a phenomenon to different contexts, and is more of a predictive exercise. Transferability was also important for this research because it had the aim of using the results from the three UK universities to seek to establish a similar model in Saudi Arabia; albeit one that suits local Saudi contexts.

### **4.6.3 Dependability**

Dependability is a measure of how consistent findings remain over time. Lincoln and Guba (1985) referred to dependability as being parallel to reliability. Kirk and Miller (1986) argued that the dependability of a piece of research can be manifested in three ways: first, its consistency or ability to remain the same when repeatedly measured; second, its ability to remain

stable over a period of time; and third, the similarity of the measurement of a finding within a given time period.

The dependability of this study was tested and demonstrated using the same technique that tested and verified the credibility of the research findings. The fact remains that establishing the credibility of this research also demonstrated its dependability by default, since dependability is a precondition of credibility. This point is supported by Lincoln and Guba (1985:316), who observed that “since there can be no validity without reliability (and thus no credibility without dependability), a demonstration of the former is sufficient to establish the latter”. A second test of dependability was that this study required that independent reviewers scrutinise the process and the findings to ascertain their consistency. Lincoln and Guba (1985:316) called this an “inquiry audit”. In order to ensure the possibility of an inquiry audit and enhance dependability, complete records of all the phases of this research process were kept in an accessible manner. Further, for the inquiry audit and to provide trackable variance, all the evidence (interview quotations, the interview guide, e-survey questions, etc.) are provided in this thesis.

#### **4.6.4 Confirmability**

Lincoln and Guba (1985) argued that confirmability is a quest for neutrality. However, this term is a misconception in qualitative research because the research methodology cannot be separated from the researcher who selected and utilised the various methods and techniques. Since the work of qualitative researchers requires getting close to the participants to investigate a phenomenon, it is important to show that the findings are free from the researcher’s biases.

In order to ensure the confirmability of this research, Lincoln and Guba’s (1985) recommendations were followed. For example, by acting in good faith and making sure that the researcher’s biases and values did not contaminate the results or any stage of the research process. For this reason, the researcher made the raw data, analysis notes, process notes and preliminary

development information available for others to examine. The researcher has highlighted various methods and techniques for how traditional as well as alternative quality measures were implemented in this research. However, although Yin (2014) argued that alternative quality measures can be applied to qualitative research, he suggested four quality tests particularly for case study research as shown in table 4.8: construct, internal and external validity, and reliability.

**Table 4.8: Case study tactics for four design tests**

<b>Test</b>	<b>Case study tactic</b>	<b>Phase of research in which the tactic occurs</b>
Construct validity	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Use multiple pieces of evidence.</li> <li>• Establish a chain of evidence.</li> <li>• Have key informants review the draft case study report.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Data collection</li> <li>• Data collection</li> <li>• Composition</li> </ul>
Internal validity	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Perform pattern matching.</li> <li>• Perform explanation building.</li> <li>• Address rival explanations.</li> <li>• Use logic models.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Data analysis</li> <li>• Data analysis</li> <li>• Data analysis</li> <li>• Data analysis</li> </ul>
External validity	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Use theory in single-case studies.</li> <li>• Use replication in multiple case studies.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Research design</li> <li>• Research design</li> </ul>
Reliability	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Use case study protocol.</li> <li>• Develop a case study database.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Data collection</li> <li>• Data collection</li> </ul>

Source: Yin (2014:45)

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#### 4.7 DATA COLLECTION STRATEGY

For this research, a case is defined as one UK MBA education institution. As a unit of analysis, three UK education institutions were selected for the purpose of this research. Further, the selection of the unit of analysis was based upon the following two criteria, to reach an in-depth understanding of a blended learning MBA programme:

- ❖ The UK education institutions must have an accredited MBA.
- ❖ The UK education institutions must have different learning and teaching methods, e.g., online learning, distance teaching and face-to-face learning.

Based upon the above discussion and criteria, the following case study institutions were selected for the purpose of this research:

- ❖ **Case Study A (CSA):** a green, self-contained university located on a 60-acre site in the English West Midlands. According to the World University Rankings by Subject (2015) for Business and Management Studies, CSA is in the first 100 universities from a quality standards perspective. This ranking highlights the world's top business schools based on academic reputation, employer reputation and research impact. In the UK, CSA ranked within the first 30 universities in the University League Table for 2016, with its Business and Management School ranking within the first 20 management schools for the same year (The Complete University Guide, 2016). Internationally, CSA is recognised by top accrediting bodies and in independent rankings for the quality of its teaching and the employability of its graduates. To CSA, accreditation is a stamp of quality and prestige for the business school and its programmes. It prides itself on being among the 1% of business schools worldwide with triple accreditation: the accreditation bodies are the AACSB, EQUIS and AMBA. In 2013, 76 students were enrolled on the MBA programme at CSA. For this research, two interviews were conducted at CSA: the first with the MBA Programme Leader (B); the second with the Course Director (M), who also has distance learning MBA roles.



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- ❖ Case study B (CSB): a traditional university located in the north of England. It is regarded as one of the leading research-oriented UK universities and is known for key research breakthroughs and scientific inventions. CSB is ranked within the first 70 universities in the League Table Rankings for the UK, and is in the 551-600 range in world rankings (QS, 2015). The university has AACSB and AMBA accreditations, which provides graduates with an internationally recognised qualification, greatly enhancing the value of this degree. Its MBA accreditation is designed for business professionals and entrepreneurs who wish to equip themselves to become confident and responsible leaders and study as part of a dynamic, international community of students. CSB offers taught MBAs in Hong Kong, Singapore, Bahrain and Oman, a one-year CSB MBA and a two-year part-time EMBA. In the 2013/14 academic year, the total number of students on the MBA programme was around 209 for the three different models. Nine students were taking full-time and part-time MBAs, while 200 students who were overseas undertook the EMBA, which means that the class sizes for overseas MBAs were larger than for the UK-based MBAs. Six interviews were conducted at CSB for this research with the following individuals: the MBA Programme Leader (D), the Director of the International MBA Programme (T), a Module Leader and recently appointed MBA Programme Leader (K), the Module Leader for research methods for the MBA (J), a member of the MBA administrative and support staff (H), and the Director of Learning and Teaching (A).
  
  - ❖ Case Study C (CSC): is located in London. CSC is very attractive to business people and professionals as the provider of their MBA qualification due to its prime location in the heart of the city. CSC is regarded as the original blueprint and an exemplary model for industry and practice collaboration. Today, CSC is among the first 100 universities in the 2016 League Table Rankings for the UK. Three interviews were conducted at CSC with the following individuals: the MBA Programme Leader (S), and two MBA module leaders (F and R).

The CSC MBA programme focuses on developing confident, capable business leaders who can meet the challenges of succeeding in a global business environment. MBA students at CSC can undertake an eight-week internship and graduates have been described as taking up influential roles within key and growth industries, both in the UK and overseas. The school's MBA programme emphasises professional development and enhancing students' ability to work at the highest levels in a company. This is done through structured programmes of tailored, one-to-one mentoring that focus on learner-specific issues and career service support. It has an AMBA accreditation for both its full-time and part-time programmes. Its 2013/14 enrolment totalled 130-140 students on MBA programmes for the three different models.

The first step in the data collection process was to identify the target respondents and the sampling technique. Purposive sampling was adopted for the purposes of this research. Ritchie and Lewis (2003) argued that purposive sampling is well-suited to small-scale and in-depth studies. According to Schutt (2006:155), in purposive sampling, each sample element is selected for a purpose, usually because of its unique position. Purposive sampling may involve studying the entire population of some limited group or a subset of a population.

Onwuegbuzie and Collins (2007) suggested that the sample size in qualitative research should not be so large that it becomes difficult to extract thick, deep and rich data. At the same time, as noted by Sandelowski (1995, cited in Onwuegbuzie and Collins, 2007), the sample should not be so small that it is difficult to achieve data saturation (Morse, 1995; Flick, 1998), theoretical saturation (Strauss and Corbin, 1990) or informational redundancy (Lincoln and Guba, 1985). Semi-structured interviews were conducted in this research. Overall, 11 semi-structured interviews were conducted with MBA programme leaders and personnel. Further details of the semi-structured interviews and the interviewees are discussed in section 4.7.1.

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According to Schutt (2006:155), in purposive sampling, as referred to above, each sample element is selected for a purpose. Schutt (2006) further argued that a purposive sample can be a “key informant survey”, which targets individuals who are particularly knowledgeable about the issues under investigation. Bearing this in mind, an online survey was conducted with 35 MBA students from across the three UK universities. All the statements included in the survey were measured on a 4-point scale: strongly agree, agree, disagree, and strongly disagree. Complete details of the questionnaire are discussed in section 7.4.2. Online and offline documentation was also considered in this research, e.g., journal websites, and university documents e.g., MBA handbooks, were used to capture an understanding of the three universities and their MBA blended learning programmes.

Additional information regarding the material consulted is provided in section 4.7.3. Similarly, Patton (2002) believed that greater attention is given to a sample chosen purposely for its potential to yield insight and rich information sources, making the sampling of research participants purposive and targeted, and sampling is not usually generalised among the sample population. Onwuegbuzie and Collins (2007) argued that if the goal is not to generalise to a population but to obtain insights into a phenomenon, individuals, or events, which is in line with the goal of this study, then the researcher purposefully selects individuals, groups and settings for this phase to maximise understanding of the underlying phenomenon. Here, individuals, groups, and settings are considered for selection if they are “information rich” (Patton, 1990:169).

In this research, purposive sampling was used to ensure that the respondents had deep and relevant understanding and experience regarding a blended learning MBA programme. The sample population in this study was, therefore, selected purposely to include respondents knowledgeable about the MBA blended learning programme, which further deemed that valuable data that could enrich and inform the study would be collected. The following table

presents the main respondents in this research and the rationales for their selection.

**Table 4.9: Respondents and the reasons for their selection**

<b>Respondents</b>	<b>Rationale for selection (purposive sampling)</b>
MBA programme leaders	Their effective role in and importance to the research aim and to establish how they evaluate the effectiveness of blended learning in an MBA programme. Further, to identify what different evaluation techniques they are using for MBA programmes. Finally, to explore and make recommendations to improve/further develop their teaching and learning frameworks for their MBA programme.
MBA module leaders	The importance of their role as module leaders and to identify what kind of learning and teaching techniques they use in the MBA programme. Further, to explore how they evaluate different kinds of MBA programme.
MBA students	To identify the factors which have an impact on students' development and to identify which positive or negative impacts an existing learning and teaching framework can have on them.
Course Director - Distance Learning MBA (at CSA only)	The importance of this individual's role in and relevance to the research topic. This would help to identify the positive or negative aspects of distance learning and teaching and establish what criteria she/he applies to this kind of model. Further, to explore whether a face-to-face element exists in that particular university.
Director of Learning and Teaching (at CSB only)	The individual's position and role in the university regarding the research topic and to identify the different teaching and learning techniques used in the MBA. Further, to understand her/his point of view regarding MBA programme delivery or further development of the teaching and learning frameworks for the MBA programme.

Source: Compiled by the researcher.

As the above table shows, a course director was involved in this research as a participant, but only from CSA. This was due to the fact that only the CSA has a course director and the other two case studies did not feature this role. However, this presented an opportunity for the researcher to take advantage of talking to someone who has a great deal of experience in distance learning. Therefore, the Course Director from CSA was included as a research participant.

Similarly, the above table also shows that a director of learning and teaching was involved as a research participant but only from CSB, as the researcher did not have access to such a role at CSA and CSC. Therefore, the researcher included the Director of Learning and Teaching at CSB as a research participant. Interestingly, the researcher found this participant to be very informative with regard to exploring different aspects of blended learning in the MBA programme, as presented in the findings chapter.

The next sections discuss the individual data collection methods that were used to collect data for this research and how they all augment and complement each other.

#### **4.7.1 Semi-structured Interviews**

Various types of interview are described in the literature. However, to collect data for this research, semi-structured interviews were preferred to the other types. Collis and Hussey (2009) argued that structured interviews are linked to a positivist philosophical stance and suit quantitative research. On the other hand, unstructured interviews are difficult to compare and contrast in analysis and are more a conversation. Similarly, group interviews are very hard to manage for a single PhD student and require a great deal of resources and time (Denzin and Lincoln, 2000; Saunders et al., 2012; Bryman and Bell, 2015). Therefore, semi-structured interviews seemed an appropriate data collection method for this research.

In a semi-structured interview, the researcher has a specific list of themes or questions regarding the particular research topic to be covered, which is further referred to as an interview guide. Usually, semi-structured interviews allow the researcher or the interviewee to explore and explain new events, issues, patterns and specific forms of behaviour (Bryman and Bell, 2015). They further allow the researcher to compare and contrast different themes because the nature of the structure will ease the analysis process. Bryman and Bell (2015) further argued that if a researcher is conducting case study research, the researcher will need the structure that is provided by semi-structured interviews. This was another reason for semi-structured interviews seeming an appropriate choice for data collection for this research.

Another issue in data collection regards the number of interviews to be conducted or knowing when to stop collecting data. An overall consensus in the literature is that a saturation level has been reached when no new information, concept or theme emerges and previous information starts to be repeated (Bryman and Bell, 2015). Therefore, the researcher was more interested in reaching saturation level than in imposing any condition for the number of interviews. Therefore, for in-depth information, exploration and new insights, 11 semi-structured interviews were conducted overall.

The data collected during the semi-structured interviews were further supported and triangulated using documents. The information obtained from documents was further organised in the form of an interview transcript and included in the analysis. The researcher was not given any documents by any university; however, she had opportunities to examine various documents during visits and the information gathered is included in the analysis. Therefore, recording information from documents helped to further enrich the interview data, triangulate, enhance validity and reliability, and remove bias.

It was difficult for the researcher to gain access to the UK universities for data collection. The researcher spent four months attempting to gain access to three UK universities which had accreditation and offered different learning

and teaching techniques. Finally, the researcher's supervisor helped her in accessing the three UK universities considered in this research. However, the researcher benefited from this waiting time by conducting pilot interviews and e-surveys and further improving the interview guide and questionnaire. Following several recommendations for the self-transcription of interview data for in-depth understanding of the data and the context (Miles et al., 2014; Bryman and Bell, 2015), the researcher transcribed the interviews herself.

A number of researchers (Saunders et al., 2012; Yin, 2014; Bryman and Bell, 2015) have recommended developing an interview guide if the researcher is collecting data by conducting semi-structured interviews. Denzin and Lincoln (2000) maintained that interviews have become the most powerful and common tool for understanding human beings. However, they argued that their frequency of use has caused them to become an approach that is taken for granted and cautioned that researchers should be careful when conducting interviews because these are interactional encounters that can shape the nature of the knowledge generated from them.

Bryman (2012) reminded researchers that an interview guide should not be treated as a means of conducting a structured interview. Instead, it should be treated as a somewhat structured list of topics, issues or concepts. On the other hand, an interview guide should not be too specific, as this can close possibilities for exploring different insights. Similarly, an interview guide should address areas of research interest, themes and issues, but from the perspective of the interviewees. Bryman and Bell (2015) further advised that the questions in an interview guide must follow a certain level of order in relation to the research subject areas. However, they maintained that this order could be changed based upon interviewee responses, interests and judgements and when new insights emerge. Various researchers have argued that multiple kinds of questions can be asked in qualitative research. However, most researchers have suggested the following types of questions

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for inclusion in an interview guide (Bryman, 2012; Yin, 2014; Bryman and Bell, 2015):

- ❖ *Introducing questions*: introducing each other and setting the scene by relaxing the environment, stating the purpose of the interview, the treatment of the interview data and measures taken to ensure confidentiality.
- ❖ *Follow-up questions and probing questions*: asking the interviewee to elaborate an answer and following up what has been said through a direct question.
- ❖ *Indirect questions*: these are asked to gain an individual's own view.
- ❖ *Silence*: instead of asking something, the interviewer pauses to signal that the interviewee has an opportunity to reflect upon and amplify an answer.
- ❖ *Initial open-ended questions*: the main purpose of these questions is to ease the environment and lead the conversation to start. Questions could include: What events led to.....? What was your life like prior to....?
- ❖ *Intermediate questions*: these questions aim to explore the main topics, issues and areas of interest. Such questions include: How did you feel about.....? When did you first learn about it? What immediate impacts did.....have on your life?
- ❖ *Ending questions*: these questions are intended to capture the last but important thoughts of the interviewee and to present an opportunity to add or modify previous statements. For example: How have your views about....changed? If you had your time again, would you choose to work for this organisation? In order to be an ethical researcher, it is advised (Bryman and Bell, 2011; Yin, 2014) that the interviewer should thank and state that she/he appreciates the interviewee's time and cooperation with the research.

Bryman (2012) also highlighted that an interview guide may contain questions regarding values, beliefs, culture, groups and organisations. It is, therefore, recommended to vary the questions in terms of their type and the kind of



phenomenon the researcher is exploring. Bryman further advises not asking double-barrelled, complex or leading questions, and discourages the use of jargon and complex theoretical terminologies.

Many researchers have highlighted the importance of the end stage of an interview guide (Saunders et al., 2012; Bryman and Bell, 2015). At the end stage, the researcher can summarise her/his understanding to seek feedback from the interviewee. This stage can further help in exploring and probing further responses from the interviewee, which will contribute to removing bias and minimising incomplete responses. Bryman and Bell (2015) further advised that when an interview is completed and the recorder has been switched off, the researcher should take notes on any ongoing debate that the interviewee might continue after the interview. This is because the interviewee might feel more relaxed and less threatened and want to say something important when the recorder is switched off which could be equally useful as data in the analysis process.

The above discussion shows the important role of the researcher as an active participant and listener, responsive but not intrusive, and focusing on what the interviewee is saying and doing (Bryman and Bell, 2015). All these suggestions and recommendations were integrated in the interview guide preparation for this research. However, following several recommendations from the literature to conduct a pilot study to test the quality of an interview guide, the researcher also carried out a pilot study for both the semi-structured interviews and the e-survey.

The researcher conducted the first pilot interview with one of her PhD colleagues. The researcher's supervisor attended the pilot interview to offer feedback. The second pilot interview was conducted with an MBA programme leader from another university. Conducting the pilot interviews proved very useful in terms of restructuring the semi-structured interview guide. For instance, the order of the interview questions was changed, some questions

were re-written and information was added or deleted based upon the pilot interviews. The final interview guide is attached in Appendix A.

The researcher visited all the case study institutions to conduct the interviews. Furthermore, a digital recorder was used to record the interview conversations so that the researcher could concentrate on actively listening to each interviewee. However, the interviewees had permission to switch off the recorder if they wished to do so. Finally, the interviews were transcribed for analysis purposes. Overall, 11 semi-structured interviews were conducted with MBA academic staff and the average time of each interview was 45 minutes. Complete details of the interviewees and the interview times and locations are provided in Appendix B.

#### **4.7.2 Questionnaires**

Questionnaires (online surveys) were used to collect information from the students who participated in this study. Questionnaires are tools for gathering and documenting information about a subject (Bryman and Bell, 2015). The questionnaires used in this study included clear guidelines for their completion and spaces for answers to a certain degree of detail (Collis and Hussey, 2009; Saunders et al., 2012).

In a report released by the University of Sheffield (2014), questionnaires allow or aid feedback from a large number of students, particularly in a case where it is impractical to gather feedback with the use of other methods that are resource intensive. This same report from the University of Sheffield argues that structured questionnaires enable or aid the exploration of trends and patterns which aid the description of what is occurring in the L and T context, while providing a measure of the opinion of respondents, attitudes, perceptions, and feelings about issues of particular concern to the evaluator. In summary, questionnaires help to spot trends and patterns that deserve additional exploration using qualitative methods.

The researcher administered the pilot questionnaire on an e-survey website: eSurve.org. This study employed online questionnaire based on the following theoretical reasons. The use of online surveys for interpretivist studies has been mentioned in many previous studies. For example, Walsham (2006) argues that surveys (offline or online) are very useful data sources in interpretivist studies. Furthermore, Walsham (2006:323) mentions that online surveys are perfectly valid inputs into interpretivist studies. This position has also been validated by other authors like Mingers (2003); Kaplan and Duchon (1988); and Kaplan et al. (2003) who all used online surveys within an interpretivist study. The pilot study was administered to six PhD colleagues in order to gain useful feedback. The researcher received responses from all six: four by email and two face-to-face. The feedback from the pilot study helped the researcher to clarify some issues with the items in the questionnaire, including having numbers for the questions and reframing some of the sentences. This process further helped to ensure the data collection quality and remove bias, as discussed in a previous section regarding research quality issues (see section 4.5). The final version of the questionnaire can be seen in Appendix D.

The online questionnaires were designed to be self-administered, since the respondents were to complete them at their own pace at different times, and were administered online in keeping with the theme of the blended model. Overall, 35 students took part and completed online questionnaires. The researcher also passed a consent form, which included a survey link, to each MBA programme leader in the case study institutions so that they could forward it to their MBA students. (An example of the consent form can be seen in Appendix C.)

The use of questionnaires allowed several tasks to be achieved much more easily. First, the questionnaires allowed the collection of individual responses, which helped in categorising respondents' attitudes and experiences towards the blended learning MBA programme in an efficient and straightforward manner. Administering the questionnaires online allowed respondents to be

reached over a much wider spread at a relatively low cost, with the flexibility for these to be completed at their own pace. The questionnaires were designed by setting clear targets for the type and nature of the responses required. The respondents were assured of the confidentiality of their identity and of the integrity of the process, and were instructed clearly so that they knew exactly what was expected of them for each question. The questions had value for the research objectives in a clear and easily understandable manner, were numbered to guide the respondent, and similarly themed questions were grouped together. A funnelling technique, one that starts with general questions and progressively narrows to more specific queries, was employed. One of the advantages of this technique is that it helps respondents ease into the process in a logical and gradual way. There are a number of e-survey sites available. However, the researcher found eSurv.org to be the most useful because it can include unlimited questions and is free. It was also easy to design the questionnaire and, if the researcher had any queries, a help option and service were also available on the site.

#### **4.7.3 Online/Offline Documentation and University Websites**

The researcher also carried out document analysis to support data collected during the semi-structured interviews. Different documents were downloaded online (from university websites), in libraries and from the business schools involved. The findings chapter further demonstrates the analysis of the information gained from the documents. The researcher also made field notes regarding various documents which it was not possible to copy or take away and the information is also used in the analysis. When data are collected during semi-structured interviews or by e-survey and further supported by documents, this raises concerns from the research ethics perspective. Therefore, the next section discusses research ethics issues.

Thus, the three methods used in this study were semi-structured interview, questionnaire and online/offline documentation and University websites. Incidentally, this qualitative study was built on the interpretivist philosophy

and backed up by the theory of induction as earlier explained. All of the above three methods were found to be complementary to one another. For example, only 11 people were interviewed and the use of offline and online documents were deployed as additional sources of information because they helped to triangulate the results of this study. Furthermore, the questionnaire helped to overcome some of the limitations in the use of interviews in that the researcher was able to collect individual responses, which helped in categorising respondents' attitudes and experiences towards the blended learning MBA programme in an efficient and straightforward manner; and secondly because the questionnaires allowed respondents to be reached over a much wider spread at a relatively low cost, with the flexibility for these to be completed at their own pace.

#### **4.8 RESEARCH ETHICS**

Data collected during semi-structured interviews and surveys and triangulated using documents raise an important issue of ethics in research. Mertens (1998:23) observed that ethical issues form an "integral part of the research planning and implementation process". Similarly, Capron (1989) argued that respect for people, beneficence and justice should guide any kind of research. Following the suggestions of Orb et al. (2000), this research not only recognised the rights of the respondents to be notified of the study, but the respondents were also informed of the purpose of the study and their role within it, further elaborating what the implications of their participation, if any, would be. Participants were also informed of their right to indicate their inability to respond to any question that they felt uncomfortable answering and that their intentions would be respected. This practice is in line with Kvale (1996), who highlighted its importance when a researcher discusses the principle of 'informed consent'. Informed consent is a process of striking a balance between over- and under-informing (Kvale, 1996). Striking the right balance empowers participants and respondents as autonomous entities who

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can voluntarily accept or refuse to participate in a study. Munhall (1988), Field and Morse (1992) and Kvale (1996) saw consent as an issue of the negotiation of trust, in which continuous renegotiation is required.

According to McCauley (2003:95),

Ethical responsibility is essential at all stages of the research process, from the design of a study, including how participants are recruited, to how they are treated through the course of these procedures, and finally to the consequences of their participation.

The study pursued all efforts to protect the identity of the respondents as an ethical obligation. In order to achieve this, the real identities of the respondents were replaced with pseudonyms or were given labels. Respondents who were quoted verbatim were assured of their anonymity in terms of their true identity in the publication of the research. Their approval for the featuring of their exact words was sought before the research was published. The researcher also completed a university ethics form for this research, and both the researcher and her supervisor signed the form. The researcher only commenced data collection after the approval of the ethics form from the University Ethics Committee. In addition, the following measures were employed in order to ensure that an ethical approach was taken to research data collection and use:

- ❖ Consent was taken from the case study education institutions and students. (Examples of the consent forms are shown in Appendix C.) However, the researcher did not submit the form to the students herself; the researcher emailed it to the MBA programme leaders in the three case institutions and asked them to forward it to the students.
- ❖ Respondents were allowed to withdraw consent at any time before the submission of the thesis if they felt any doubts later. The researcher's contact details were also given to the respondents.
- ❖ University guidelines for data protection and confidentiality were followed.
- ❖ Respondents were allowed to suggest an interview date, time and place. The basic motive behind this was not to disturb or place an extra burden on the academic staff during their busy working hours and to arrange

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interview times that were in accordance with their convenience and availability.

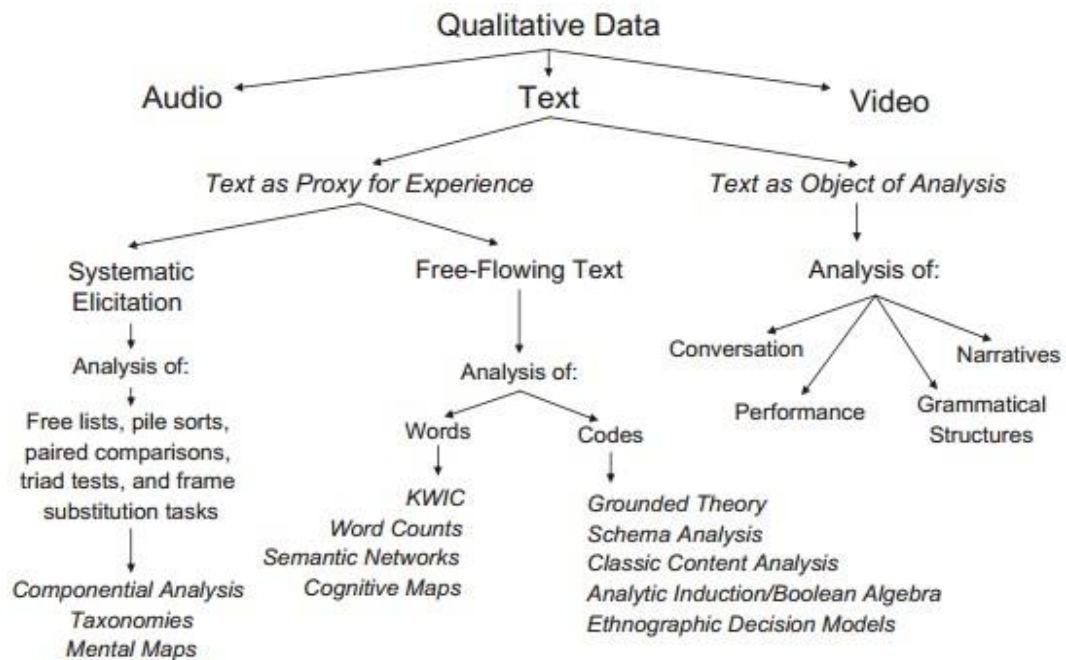
- ❖ The interview guide was emailed before the interviews and respondents were permitted not to answer any question if they wanted to do so for any reason.
- ❖ The interviews were transcribed and the transcripts sent to the respondents to establish if they wanted to add or delete information for any reason.

The British Educational Research Association (BERA, 2004) indicates that, since human participation is involved in discipline-related research, ethical issues have significant implications which need to be carefully considered. Hence, as stated above, the participants in this research were informed of the nature and purpose of the study. According to McCauley (2003:97), “confidentiality means that the researcher can match names with responses – for example, a face-to-face interview – but ensures that no one else will have access to the identity of the respondent”. Thus, two main issues were considered in this research: confidentiality and anonymity. In terms of anonymity, “the researcher will not and cannot identify the respondent” (McCauley, 2003:97). Therefore, the researcher disguised the actual names of the case study institutions and the participants to ensure both confidentiality and anonymity. Similarly, the case study universities are referred to as case study A (CSA), case study B (CSB), and case study C (CSC), and the participants are referred to using letters, e.g., interviewee B and interviewee S.

#### **4.9 DATA ANALYSIS METHOD**

According to Denzin and Lincoln (2000), a qualitative researcher deals with the verbal and written data of human experience, which also consists of transcribed verbal data. On the other hand, Tesch (2013) made a distinction between linguistic and sociological traditions in terms of text. According to Tesch, the linguistic tradition treats text as the object of analysis and the

sociological tradition regards it as a window into the human experience. Similarly, Ryan and Bernard (2000) described a qualitative data analysis technique that demonstrates qualitative data as text and further text as an object of analysis (Figure 4.2).



**Figure 4.2: Typology of qualitative techniques**

Source: Ryan and Bernard (2000)

Silverman (2013) argued that human beings mostly rely upon conversation and talk (narratives) for their daily activities. Therefore, a researcher's field data are in three forms: texts, talks and field notes, and always in linguistic form. Silverman (2013) further argued that interview data are simple narratives of the respondents, rather than exact reality. Further, the researcher has to utilise respondents' narratives in drawing conclusions or making certain theoretical claims. Silverman's (2013) arguments are also in line with Denzin and Lincoln (2000), who claimed that interview transcript



data are social productions which are produced, used and shared in a socially organised manner.

Consequently, interview transcription data are not true representations of organisational routines or decision-making processes within those organisations from which data are collected. However, they are situation-specific constructions and a particular type of representation, which is produced by certain conventions and understandings. Therefore, these documents (interview-transcribed data and data from e-surveys) should be treated or studied through an appropriate method, such as narrative analysis (Denzin and Lincoln, 2000; Silverman, 2013).

Hence, the researcher believes that the interview transcripts form a simple subjective understanding of the respondents regarding different learning and teaching frameworks in three UK universities regarding their MBA programmes, and these transcripts were subjected to the narrative analysis method for theory or proposition building (Denzin and Lincoln, 2000). Hence, it is the researcher's job to find new knowledge from the interview transcripts' stories, events and practices by using the narrative analysis method.

A number of researchers have argued that the narrative analysis method is useful for past stories, events, processes and experiences. However, Bryman and Bell (2015) argued that the narrative analysis method is equally useful and valuable for analysing current stories, organisational processes, and people's experience and life events. Furthermore, Clandinin and Connelly (2000:20) maintained that the narrative analysis method is useful for qualitative research methods because of its emphasis on "collaboration between researcher and participants, over time, in a place or series of places, and in social interaction with milieus".

Further, this research engaged respondents on an individual level to understand their experiences as students on a blended learning MBA programme; therefore, the narrative analysis method was an appropriate fit

to the nature and objectives of this research in the aspects of interviews (Randolph, 2007). By the adoption of the narrative analysis method, the respondents provided data through recounting their experiences as participants of the phenomenon of the blended learning MBA programme in their own institution. However, the online-surveys were analysed using basic descriptive statistics such as proportion of respondents per question as a gauge of respondents' opinions to formulated research questions. The use of descriptive statistics such as proportion of respondents or counts of respondents that "agree" or "disagree" with a survey question has been found appropriate in interpretivist qualitative studies (Sandelowski and Barroso, 2007; Sandelowski, 2001 and Chang et al., 2009).

Summarising the discussion in this section, the researcher treated qualitative data as text because the interviews were transcribed into text; text was treated as an object of analysis (Tesch, 2013). The next section summarises the main choices outlined in this chapter.

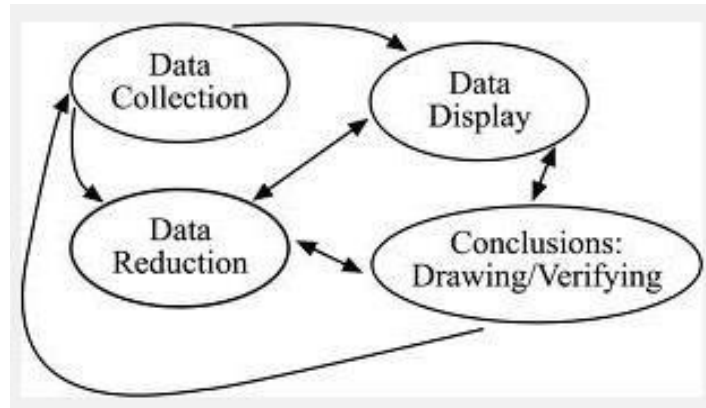
#### **4.10 DATA ANALYSIS STRATEGY**

Data analysis is regarded as being at the heart of theory building in the case study research method (Miles et al., 2014). However, compared with analysing quantitative data, it is also known to be a very difficult and complicated task due to less well-developed tools and strategies for analysing qualitative data and drawing conclusions from them (Eisenhardt, 1989; Yin, 2014). A number of researchers (Eisenhardt, 1989; Yin, 2014) have suggested collecting and analysing data at the same time because data analysis needs a chain of evidence. Similarly, researchers such as Lincoln and Guba (1985) and Miles et al. (2014) have recommended documentation as the first step in data analysis. Therefore, the data collected in this research during the semi-structured interviews were transcribed in detail with all the relevant information about the three universities and the various learning and teaching models on their MBA programmes.

On the other hand, Eisenhardt (1989) maintained that conducting data collection and analysis at the same time would also enable a researcher to manage large amounts of data collected by semi-structured interviews and a number of other methods. In order to explore multiple insights in data, Glaser and Strauss (1967) further advised data collection, coding and analysis at the same time. Their recommendation is intended to be helpful in enhancing the flexibility of data collection by making changes and adjustments in the collection and analysis process. Similarly, Eisenhardt (1989) argued that the collection of data and their analysis, along with those from observations, field notes and documentation, at the same time further helps researchers to gain ongoing thoughts and examine aspects beyond the obvious picture.

Thus, the researcher adhered to the above recommendations in collecting and analysing the research data at the same time. This was done by following the interactive model for qualitative data analysis suggested by Miles et al. (2014) and further elaborated in this section. Semi-structured interview transcripts and data from e-surveys, documents and all other sources were used for in-depth exploration and evaluation of the different learning and teaching techniques in the MBA programmes in the three UK universities.

Similarly, the above discussion is further incorporated in a qualitative data analysis strategy proposed by Miles et al. (2014); also known as the qualitative data analysis interactive model and used for this research (Figure 4.3).



**Figure 4.3: Qualitative data analysis - interactive model**

Source: Miles et al. (2014)

Miles et al. (2014) divided qualitative data analysis into the following three steps:

- ❖ *Data reduction*: this step consists of editing, correcting and simplifying the data, so that the researcher can then focus on the abstracted information for further analysis. This was done by reading the interview transcripts, identifying any irrelevant information and open coding.
- ❖ *Data display*: this step consists of organising and making a compressed assembly of the data, which can further help the researcher to draw conclusions. Data mapping and structuring are tools which are used here to draw conclusions. Thus, this step allows the researcher to reach verifications of conclusions using various methods. This step also enables the researcher to assess whether more data or information is required to reach a conclusion. This was done by axial and selective coding, and forming sub-categories/sub-themes and major categories/ major themes.
- ❖ *Conclusion drawing and verification*: this step consists of the identification and interpretation of common patterns and themes in the data. This was done by the interpretation of the findings and drawing conclusions.

The above discussion demonstrates how data collection and analysis can run at the same time in an iterative and interactive way. This further necessitates

a data collection strategy which can enable the researcher to answer the research questions and fulfil the research objectives.

Another very important step in data analysis is coding. According to Saldaña (2013:3), a code is “a word or short phrase which symbolically assigns a summative, salient, essence-capturing, and/or evocative attribute for a portion of language-based or visual data”. On the other hand, Miles et al. (2014) argued that codes facilitate data analysis because they pull the most relevant information together from multiple sources. Hence, various sources of information helped the researcher in this research process to explore and highlight the most important and interesting events in the research subjects available in the data sources and then to categorise them, hence increasing the overall reliability of the data analysis process (Voss et al., 2002). Thus, by comparing each event or incident with previous events or incidents in the same category, the researcher further developed the theoretical properties and dimensions of the categories. Hence, the codes served as a data reduction technique because all the relevant information was first coded and then categorised (Voss et al., 2002).

This research adopted the three-step coding technique described by Corbin and Strauss (1990) because of its reported usefulness and heavy implementation in qualitative data analysis. Their proposed three-step coding technique assists researchers in refining codes and categorising them further. Similarly, the proposed technique guides the researcher in how to move on from the initial to the main categories. The following is a discussion of the three-step coding technique, which was also followed in this research:

- ❖ *Open coding*: in this step, the different data sources are fragmented and taken apart. Different concepts are then identified and analytically developed in terms of their dimensions and properties. Further, names are given to individual ideas, sentences, events and observations. This was the first step in the analysis process in this study, in which the researcher coded each sentence in the interview transcript. The researcher not only coded complete sentences, but carefully assessed if

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any single word could be coded due to the interesting insight it might offer.

- ❖ *Axial coding*: this step is based upon the first. Here, data are put together in new ways to link and regroup categories in a rational manner. In this step, the researcher grouped different codes into sub-categories based upon their similarities and differences.
- ❖ *Selective coding*: in this step, a core category is selected and related to other categories. The researcher designed the major categories/themes based upon their further similarities, differences and pattern matching. In essence, this step was based upon the previous one and further combined sub-categories which were designed in the previous step to establish the major categories.

This process enabled the researcher to reduce the data, develop concepts and categories, and led to the drawing of conclusions and verifications which were further examined, in accordance with Miles et al. (2014) as discussed in this section. Various researchers (Bazeley and Jackson, 2013; Miles et al., 2014; Bryman and Bell, 2015) have also reported the usefulness of the manual analysis of transcribed data if interviews were conducted in small numbers. For example, manual analysis enables the researcher to remain in the context, understand the interview and response situation, and what was taking place during the interview (Miles et al., 2014; Bryman and Bell, 2015). Therefore, considering the small number of interviews (11), the researcher manually analysed the transcription data. There was also the danger of losing the actual context of the data by using NVivo (Bryman and Bell, 2015). Researchers have also suggested that if the volume of data is small, then it is better to code it manually (Bryman and Bell, 2015).

#### **4.11 SUMMARY**

This chapter discussed various philosophical stances and provided the justification for the choices made. It was concluded that this research is subjective, interpretive, exploratory, inductive and qualitative in nature. This research focused on an interpretivist approach, which helped the researcher to explore the concept of blended learning in MBA programmes by interacting with academic staff and students within a multiple case study environment.

Data were collected during semi-structured interviews and an online survey, and were further supported and triangulated by documents. In order to improve the quality of the data, a pilot study was conducted. The pilot interviews and pilot questionnaire helped the researcher to assess and evaluate the effectiveness, usefulness and validity of the approach to data collection. Overall, 11 semi-structured interviews were conducted with MBA academic staff at three case study institutions in the UK, and 35 MBA students from three case study institutions in the UK participated in the online survey.

Data analysis for the interview segment was based upon Miles et al.'s (2014) interactive model and interpretivism was used to interpret the findings, while data analysis for the online survey was based on the use of descriptive statistics as a means of determining respondents' opinions by their proportion of responses to individual survey questions. The researcher also focused on similarities, differences and pattern matching for cross-case analysis and to make generalisations or propositions. Finally, table 4.10 presents a summarised and final version of the choices made in this study and their relationship to the research objectives and questions.

**Table 4.10 The relationship between the research objectives, research questions, data collection methods and data analysis.**

<b>Research objectives (ROs)</b>	<b>Research questions (RQs)</b>	<b>Data collection methods</b>	<b>Data analysis</b>
To critically review the concept of blended learning in MBA course delivery for management development and the extent of effectiveness of this approach in UK Universities.	How effective is “blended learning” as a means of delivering management development in MBA programmes ?	<i>Literature review</i>	<i>Created diagram (see page 84)</i>
To identify and evaluate existing theoretical frameworks for learning and teaching in MBA programmes and to compare and contrast this with existing MBA frameworks within three UK Universities	What existing theoretical framework for learning and teaching are relevant to the MBA programmes in UK universities selected in this research?	Interview, Document (Printed and websites) and Survey	<i>Narrative analysis method, Used Miles et al’s interactive model and I have used open, Axial and selective coding, Descriptive statistics.</i>
To critically investigate and	What are the existing	Interview, Document (Printed and websites)	<i>Narrative analysis</i>



<p>evaluate existing pedagogies for learning and teaching part time and full time MBA programmes and the extent of alignment between these pedagogies and theoretical frameworks</p>	<p>pedagogies for learning and teaching part time and full time MBA programmes in UK Universities and how do these pedagogies align with existing theoretical frameworks?</p>	<p>Survey</p>	<p><i>method, Used Miles et al's interactive model and I have used open, Axial and selective coding. Descriptive statistics.</i></p>
<p>To develop a theoretical framework that can be used by practitioners and managers of MBA programmes in UK Universities to improve and market their approaches to blended learning</p>	<p>What theoretical framework can be used by practitioners and managers of MBA programmes in UK Universities to develop and market their approaches to blended learning?</p>	<p>Interview, Document (Printed and websites), Survey</p>	<p><i>Narrative analysis method, Used Miles et al's interactive model and I have used open, Axial and selective coding Descriptive statistics.</i></p>

Against the above background, the next chapter reports the main findings of this research based on the summarised information in table 4.10 as well as on all the discussed methodological choices for the study.

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## **CHAPTER FIVE FINDINGS**

### **5.1 INTRODUCTION**

This chapter presents the main findings of this research. Following the data collection and analysis, four main themes were identified in support of the main aim of the study which was to evaluate the effectiveness of blended learning as a means of delivering management development in Master of Business Administration (MBA) programmes.

The four findings regarding the effectiveness of blended learning as a means of delivering management development in Master of Business Administration (MBA) programmes are organised below under academic frameworks between sections 5.2-5.5. Thus, for the first research question that formed the basis of the first research objective, the focus was to critically investigate “blended learning” as a means of delivering management development in MBA programmes in three UK Universities, focusing on the impact of the regulation in the individual universities, the influence of AMBA, and their individual course design and delivery, which demonstrates the extent to which any of their MBA programme offers blended learning. These findings are discussed in section 5.2. For the second and third research questions which focused at investigating existing theoretical and conceptual frameworks for learning and teaching that are relevant to MBA programmes in UK universities and investigating existing pedagogies for full and part time programmes,

the findings are discussed in section 5.3 and 5.4. For the findings regarding the theoretical framework used by practitioners and managers of MBA programmes in UK Universities to develop and market their approaches to blended learning, the focus was on examining how they market their MBA programmes, how language is used in marketing MBA programmes and the

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differences between marketing, educational and academic terminology. These findings are discussed in section 5.5.

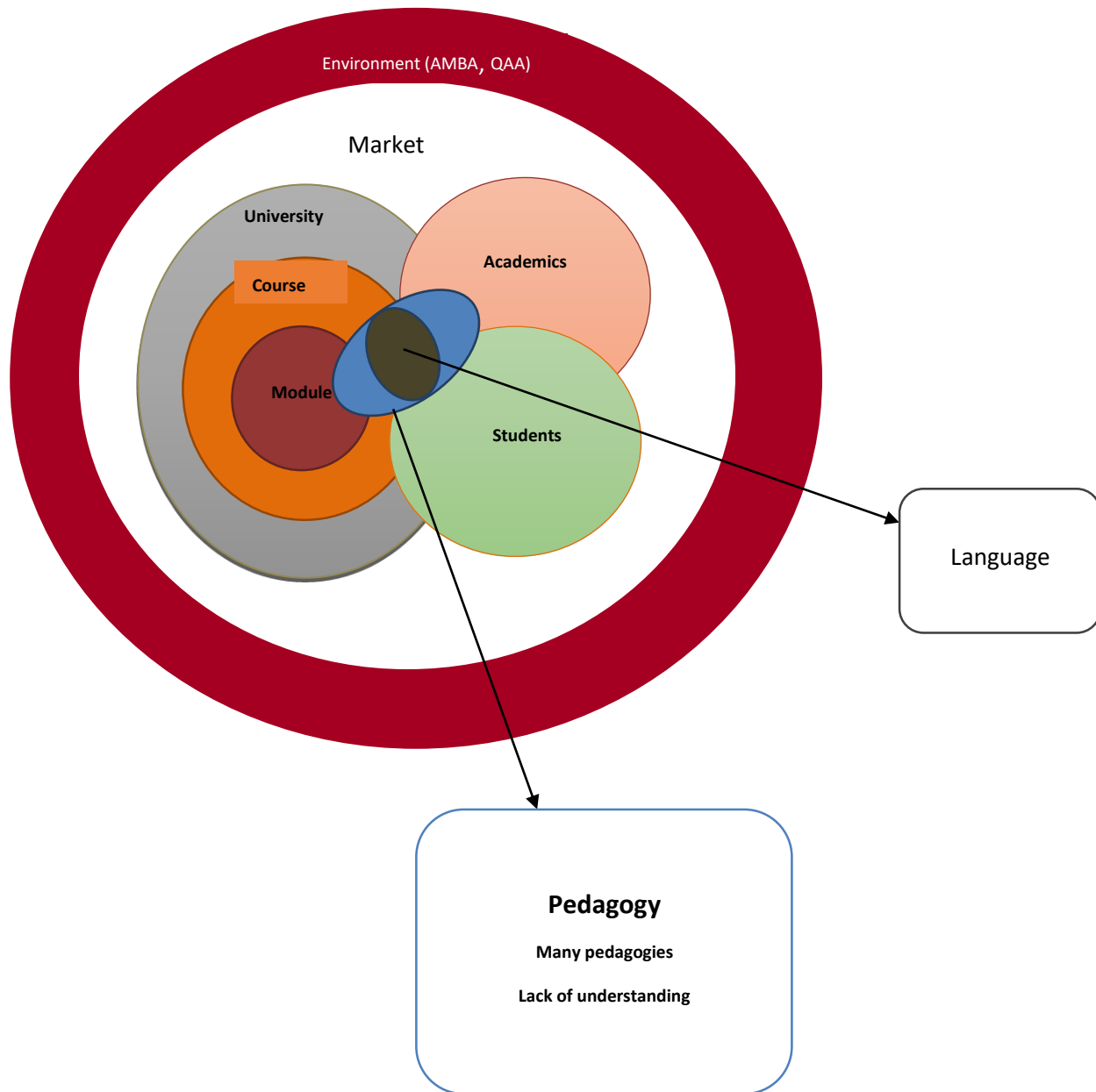
## **5.2 BLENDED LEARNING AS A MEANS OF DELIVERING MBA PROGRAMME**

This section sheds light on the sub-themes relating to evaluating the dynamics of “blended learning” as a means of delivering management development in MBA programmes in three UK Universities. The following sub-themes are presented in this section and demonstrate the extent to which an MBA programme offers blended learning:

- ❖ Academic frameworks (i.e., the impact of the regulation undertaken in the individual universities).
- ❖ The influence of AMBA. Individual course design and delivery

### **5.2.1 MBA Programme Frameworks**

This section presents findings regarding MBA frameworks from an individual as well as a cross-case analysis perspective. Figure 5.1 highlights the context of and the main players in the MBA programmes in the case study universities.



**Figure 5.1: Main context, players and themes in the MBA programmes in all three case study institutions**

The main themes from Figure 5.1 are clarified below:

- *Environment*, e.g., politics and MBA accreditation.
- *Marketing*, i.e., how the case study institutions market their MBA programmes.
- *University*, e.g., the regulations by which the business schools operate their MBA programmes.
- *Course*, e.g., the design and delivery of individual courses.
- *Module*, e.g., learning outcomes, technological use in each module and feedback.
- *Academic*, i.e., the academic perspective, including professional identity frameworks such as academics' roles and disciplines.
- *Students*, i.e., students' perspectives, including learner preferences and interaction.

Table 5.1 highlights the sub-themes of the seven main themes listed above.

**Table 5.1: Framework of MBA programmes**

<b>Environment</b>	<b>Market</b>	<b>University</b>	<b>Course</b>	<b>Module</b>	<b>Academic</b>	<b>Students</b>
EN1: General environment (political, economic and social, in the UK and internationally)	MA1: The marketing of the MBA programmes (website, brochures, etc.)	UN1: Institutional (learning and teaching strategy, academic framework regulation, business school)	CO1: Individual courses presenting different ways of integrating a curriculum	MO1: Learning outcomes	AC1: Academic disciplines	ST1: Student interaction
EN2: QAA	MA2: Effect of AMBA on the marketing of an MBA (e.g., some programmes may deliver a significant part of the learning experience at a distance, ranging along a spectrum from offering one section or module of the course online, to 'blended learning', to 'distance learning' in its purest sense).	UN2: Instructors' tools, e.g., VLE	CO2: Resource support	MO2: Assessment	AC2: Academics' underlying pedagogy	ST2: Learner experience (maximum of three years' work experience)
EN2: AMBA		UN3: University marketing	CO3: Technology used	MO3: Feedback	AC3: Language	ST3: Learner-centred approach of MBA pedagogy
EN3: International HE				MO4: Technology used		

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The above table shows that the first theme, environment (EN), consists of external factors, such as the general political, economic and social characteristics which act as drivers or barriers to accommodating the operations of setting up and running an MBA programme successfully. Furthermore, AMBA, as the accreditation body, provides assurance for students of their acquiring the finest business education and provides credibility to business schools for their programmes on an international scale. AMBA accreditation, therefore, greatly influences how a business school runs its MBA programme. In addition to international HE as a sub-theme of environment, the MBA programmes at the three case universities were found to draw a large number of international students at the higher education level. Attracting international students and meeting their particular needs influences the kinds of choices made by business schools in running their MBA programmes.

In contrast, the remaining five themes are relevant to the internal environment of the MBA programme. The marketing (MA) of an MBA involves business schools promoting their MBA programmes through websites and brochures to influence prospective students' decision making in business school selection. AMBA also influences the marketing of an MBA programme. For example, some programmes may deliver a significant part of the learning experience at a distance, ranging along a spectrum from offering one section or module of the course online, to 'blended learning', to 'distance learning' in its purest sense.

As part of the university (UN) provision of an institutional strategy and the policy framework regulations by which business schools operate their MBA programmes, the individual university is important in providing tools, such as a VLE and structures for MBA instructors and students. In terms of modules (MO) explaining the learning outcomes, what is gained by studying for an MBA and assessment, this includes feedback and the use of technology. Regarding the presentation of courses (CO), the resources that are made available to support these courses and the specific technologies



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required to deliver each independent course also influence the quality of MBA programmes.

The environment (see Figure 5.1 and Table 5.1) consists of the UK as a whole. AMBA is the accreditation body and the QAA is the regime under which the case study institutions operate. The market reflects the way in which an MBA programme is marketed, as it appears on the case study universities' websites, brochures and other documents and press releases. Regarding the university theme, the findings show that each university has its own rules and regulations. The course theme reflects the techniques of integrating curriculums and material types (such as textbooks and DVDs), and is discussed further in section 5.2.3. The modules in MBA programmes are a combination of different subjects. The next section presents details of the structure of MBA programmes in terms of their core and optional modules in each of the case study universities. Regarding the academic theme, the findings show individual academics' perceptions and different academics' underlying pedagogies, and reflect the way in which different sub-themes affect academics' perceptions. The following section presents a discussion of MBA programme frameworks from a case-by-case and cross-case analysis perspective.

**Case study A:** CSA is a green, self-contained university located on a 60-acre site in the English West Midlands. The findings show that the MBA programme at CSA is delivered by three different models: through a full-time programme, a part-time evening executive programme, and an online programme. Students on the full-time programme complete within one year (12 months). The full-time MBA programme requires students to take four modules in a term, aggregating to 12 modules in total at the end of the programme. Of the 12 modules, 10 are core and two are elective. Students have the option to choose their two electives from a variety of alternative modules in which to specialise, as mentioned by the Course Director (interviewee M):

*We have a full-time course that students complete in a year, doing four modules in a term. Of those 12 modules, 10 were*

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*modules that have to be done, two are electives, they can choose from a variety of alternative subjects in which to specialise.*

The part-time MBA programme at CSA takes two years to complete and students study two modules per term. Lectures are scheduled mainly in the evening, apart from those occasions on which a 'study day' is organised for students to have class sessions for a whole day. This happens once each term. The students on the part-time evening MBA programme are full-time working professionals, the majority of whom live within 50 miles of CSA. The findings demonstrate that face-to-face teaching does not offer any flexibility regarding whether the students are full-time or part-time. As mentioned by interviewee M,

*If students are doing a face-to-face course of whatever sort, then of course students have to be there on time for the lecture, there is no flexibility, either part-time or full-time, there is no flexibility.*

The findings show that the online MBA programme started at CSA in January 2012, with a view to opening up the programme, not only to individuals/students living (at least) 50 miles away from CSA, but for all students around the world who are interested in following a professional programme. The online MBA programme takes two years and three months (27 months in total) to complete, with students undertaking two modules a term. Further online MBA features include a one-week residential session in July each year designed to build students' personal and professional development. In this way, students attend a residential session at CSA in their first year and with a partner institution in their second year to participate in a two-day business simulation exercise. Students also undertake a three-day personal development course and attend revision sessions for the completed modules. The residential session offers students the chance to meet academic staff and peers with whom they have been working remotely.

At an average age of 30, many students on the online MBA at CSA have lower- to middle-level management roles, although a few have upper-level management experience. Materials are made available to students online and are accessible at all times. Even though its website markets the CSA

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programme as “fully online”, it is actually a blended learning programme because, as per AMBA recommendations, an online MBA programme must contain 120 hours of face-to-face coursework. Figure 5.2 presents the overall structure of the MBA programme at CSA in terms of its core and optional modules.

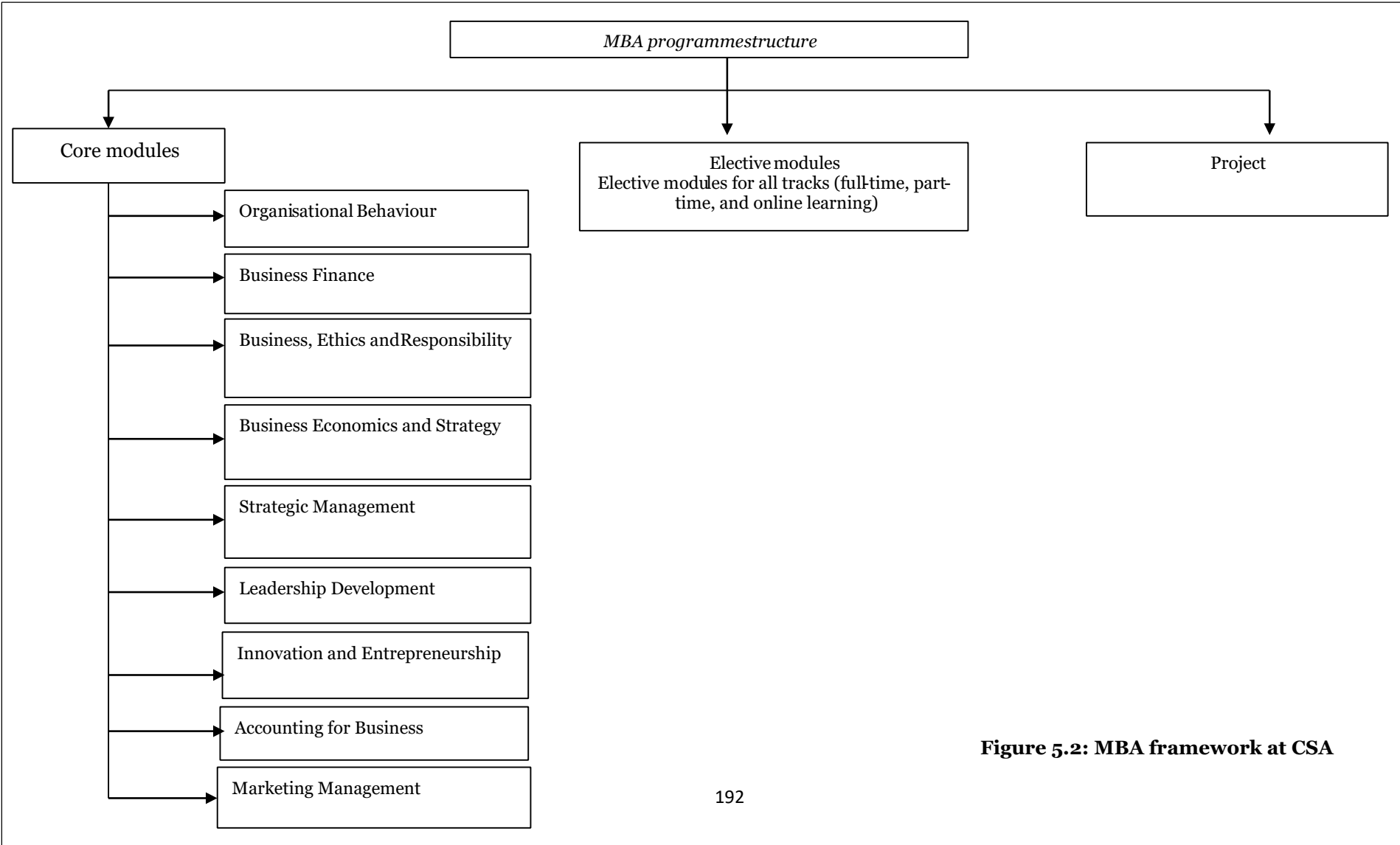


Figure 5.2: MBA framework at CSA

**Case study B:** CSB is a traditional university located in the north of England. Six interviews were conducted at CSB for this research with the following individuals: the MBA Programme Leader (D), the Director of the International MBA Programme (T), a module leader recently appointed as MBA Programme Leader (K), the Module Leader for the research methods for the MBA (J), a member of the MBA administrative and support staff (H), and the Director of Learning and Teaching (A).

CSB has a full-time MBA programme, which runs for 12 months. CSB also offers an EMBA programme for full-time practising managers, usually of middle to senior level, which is of two streams:

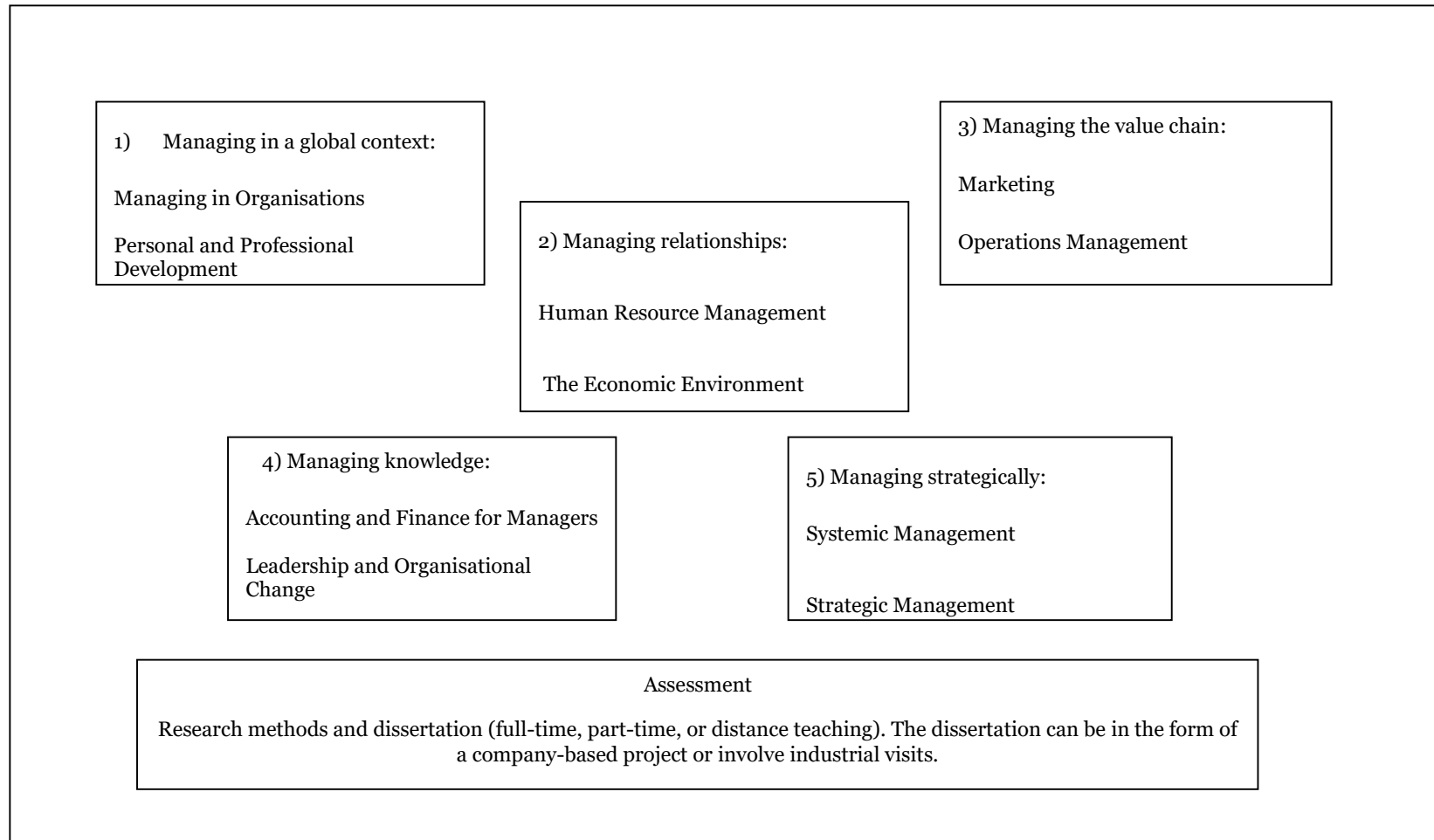
- The CSB-based Executive MBA programme, which takes place at its main campus in the UK.

The overseas Executive MBA, which takes place in overseas locations other than the CSB main campus; for example, in the Middle East and Asia. The programme module delivery schedule for CSB's overseas EMBA is such that, every six weeks, members of the faculty are flown out from CSB to teach. Students have four out of the intervening six weeks between lecture days to do assignments. Further, the class sizes for the overseas MBAs are larger than for the UK-based MBA.

The full-time, part-time and overseas Executive MBAs have the same input in terms of objectives and learning outcomes. Similarly, all the courses use the same course delivery modules and techniques in teaching and learning, such

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as case studies, workshops, seminars and the VLE (eBridge). The CSB strategy for its MBA is organised around five key interconnected subjects, such that learning in one area or subject can be associated with and can deepen understanding in all the others. Subject areas such as finance, marketing and strategic management focus on the main functional areas in business to develop specialist expertise. The programme cultivates a broad perspective on the management of complex organisations, decision making and the skills needed to operate effectively in a dynamic international context. The findings show that CSB has the MBA programme structure shown in Figure 5.3.



**Figure 5.3: MBA programme structure at CSB**

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It was also found that both the full-time and part-time programmes offer students the opportunity to develop themselves and their knowledge further through exchange programmes with partner business schools abroad. The main difference found between the EMBA and the full-time MBA was that the full-time programme had more optional modules from which to choose, while the modules on the Executive programme were fixed. The findings also show that the CSB EMBA programme runs a total of 12 core modules in 18 months, with an MBA dissertation which can be conducted as a company- or internship-based project.

The CSB MBA programme does not use distance learning, e-learning or blended learning delivery models. However, the interviewees mentioned that such models have been required and requested by a number of both tutors and students, as the MBA Programme Leader (interviewee K) commented:

*No, we do not. We should not, I'm also responsible for equipment for the MBA and we get a lot of, we get a lot of offer requests for distance learning, why? Because of the cost because of the investment it takes in both time and cost to prepare materials.*

On the other hand, interviewee S argued that distance learning, e-learning and blended learning were not yet available at CSB because people (module leaders and lecturers) found it difficult to change traditional ways of teaching and learning. Furthermore, students, particularly those in off-campus locations, want to see their lecturers live. The findings also show that time and financial costs were the main barriers to transferring learning and teaching to other models, as mentioned by interviewee K:

*The investment in time and cost investment required to make these delivery models a reality is huge and that needs to be sorted first.*

However, some respondents also mentioned that blended learning might be an option in the near future.

One respondent at CSB also had concerns regarding the MBA cost structure. Interviewee K described his experience:

*If dropouts occurred, the likeliest cause would be because of cost and the workload of the programme.*



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**Case study C:** CSC is located in London and is very attractive to business people and professionals as the provider of their MBA qualification due to its prime location in the heart of the city. Three interviews were conducted at CSC with the following individuals: the MBA Programme Leader (S), and two MBA module leaders (F and R).

The CSC MBA programme focuses on developing confident, capable business leaders who are able to meet the challenges of succeeding in a global business environment. MBA students at CSC have the opportunity to undertake an eight-week internship and graduates have been described as taking up influential roles within key and growth industries in both the UK and overseas. The school's MBA programme emphasises professional development and enhancing students' ability to work at the highest levels in a company. This is done through structured programmes of tailored, one-to-one mentoring that focus on learner-specific issues and career service support. It has an AMBA accreditation for both its full-time and part-time programmes. Its 2013/14 enrolment totalled 130-140 students on MBA programmes using the three different models. The MBA programme delivery system at CSC has two standards of delivery: full-time and Executive (part-time). Both standards use similar teaching and learning techniques and facilities, including online tests, an online package, face-to-face meetings and a VLE (Blackboard).

The findings show that CSC has an integrated MBA programme. This integrated MBA programme comprises the teaching of a combination of subjects in one module, or teaching across disciplines. Although the full-time programme is a one-year course, students are further required to write a dissertation, so the programme actually runs for about two years. The CSC part-time MBA programme is such that a module is completed within two months, spread over four weekends,

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two weeks apart. Figure 5.4 demonstrates the main modules for the MBA programme at CSC.

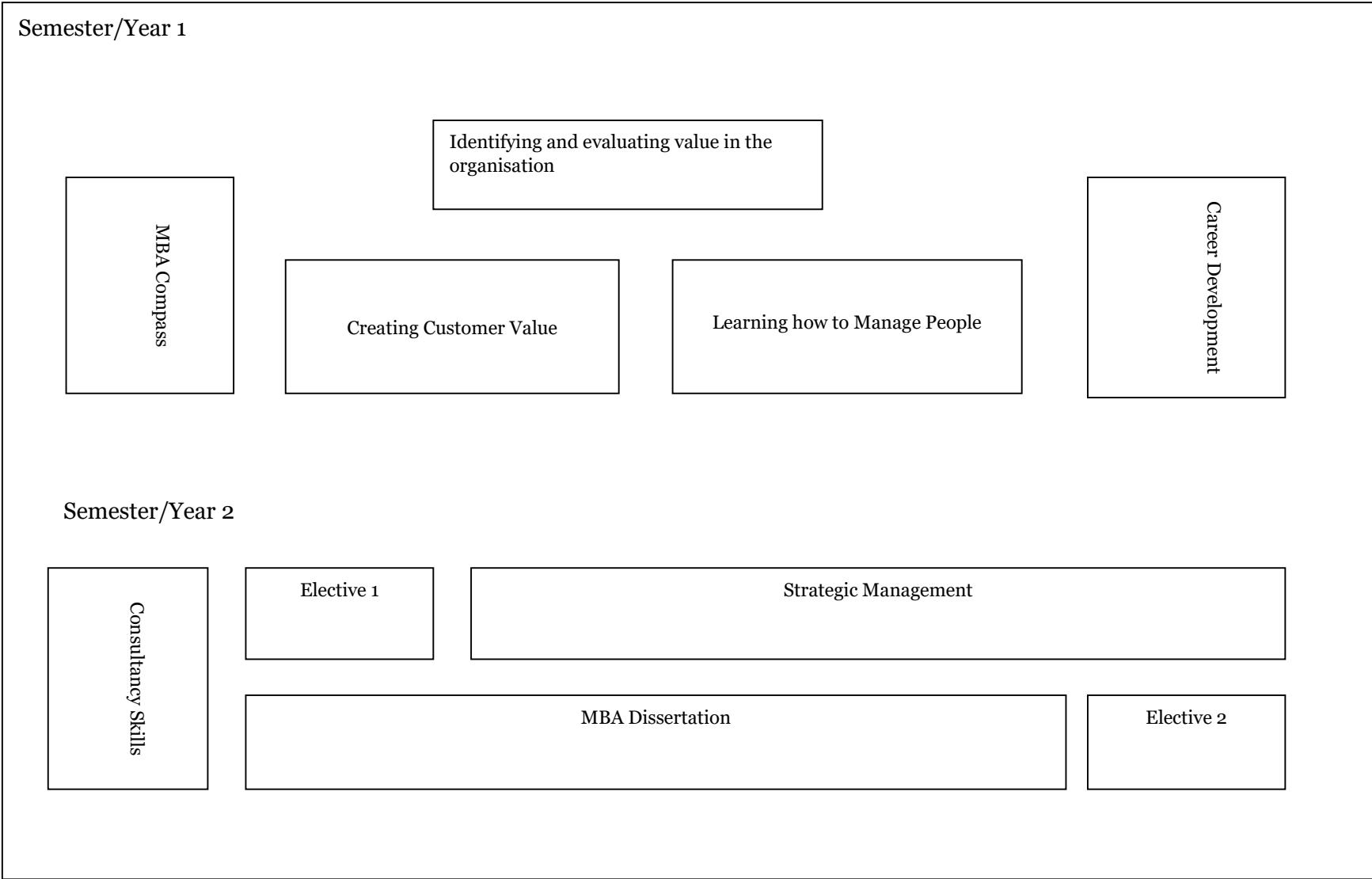


Figure 5.4: Integrated curriculum at CSC

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The respondents at CSC referred to the integrated MBA programme as an innovative programme which helps students to build and develop multifunctional knowledge and is, at the same time, convenient for the lecturers to teach, as mentioned by interviewee S:

*[We] have a very integrated programme here in the way of the teaching across disciplines, you have small class sizes, you've got excellent facilities including group work, you've a wide range of elective choices, some of which are quite innovative.*

It was found that the CSC MBA programme integrated subjects such as marketing, operations management and economics in one module, as shown in Figure 5.4.

Students on the EMBA programme at CSC are considered to be part-time. The full-time programme has four days of class time, during which students work on different topics in class. The EMBA students attend classes once a fortnight on Fridays and Saturdays: on Fridays from 1.30 to 9 pm and on Saturdays from 10 am to 5 pm. Therefore, the Executive programme takes place over two years and the full-time over one year, and both sets of students are required to write a dissertation.

The findings also demonstrate blended learning at CSC, particularly for its accounting and finance subjects, whereby most of the material is available online for the students, as mentioned by interviewee R:

*The blended learning can be demonstrated by the online accounting and finance package, where students have access to the core material 24 hours a day; 7 days a week...there are online tests, online quizzes and multiple-choice exercises with about as much as two-thirds of the syllabus covered there.*

The above shows a non-face-to-face aspect of blended learning.

When considering the findings in this section from a similarities and differences perspective, it was found that, in terms of face-to-face learning and teaching, the CSA had face-to-face tutorials and workshops. CSA offers 120 hours face-to-face and students should also attend at the university once a year. However, face-to-face learning and teaching is the main

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communication tool at CSB. Similarly, the MBA course content is also based upon face-to-face contact. On the other hand, CSC uses face-to-face contact in the application process, as they are further trying to add value to this aspect whereby students need to engage with people in person.

In terms of blended learning, it can be argued that CSA does not offer pure online learning because students have face-to-face learning with tutors for 120 hours. In terms of blended learning, full-time students at CSC liked blended learning but, at the same time, did not want to see a reduction in face-to-face communication. Further, CSC is moving towards blended learning as it applies a theory aspect using blended learning delivery techniques, i.e., a VLE.

In terms of online learning, CSA markets itself as offering purely online learning but, as an accredited programme, this is blended learning. Further, there is no distance teaching at CSA; there is also no pure online learning at CSB. On the other hand, CSB offers distance teaching for MBA programmes, which respondents referred to as the 'flying faculty' at CSB. The single most striking observation to emerge from the comparison of the findings was that although CSB offers three models of MBA, the researcher noticed that the highest number of students who were enrolled at CSB were studying on the overseas Executive MBA course: 200 out of 209 students. However, CSC does not use online learning or distance teaching.

In summary, the findings from the interviews and the universities' websites indicate that each case study has its own strategy for its respective MBA programmes, e.g., online learning and distance teaching. Thus, the three case studies consider face-to-face learning in different types of module delivery within the technology used (blended learning).

### **5.2.2 The Influence of AMBA**

The analysis of the higher education profile was explained in the literature review chapter (see section 3.2). It was noted that QAA and AMBA play an important role in quality assurance by setting guidelines and regulations for

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higher education institutions. However, the researcher could not find a role for or impact from QAA in MBA education in the research participant case studies. The respondents made passing reference to QAA but analysis of the data could not produce this or make any contribution to the findings. Perhaps the respondents were more familiar with AMBA due to its relevance to MBA education. However, this also reflects the respondents' perceived importance of AMBA at their institutions. Since the respondents maintained that QAA had an input as an external factor, the researcher concluded that QAA and AMBA were both constituting elements of the external environment that have an impact on MBA education. Therefore, this section presents findings only in terms of AMBA.

***Association of MBAs (AMBA):*** the literature review highlighted the different roles of AMBA in the UK. However, the findings show that AMBA has posed stringent requirements, which are having a negative impact on potential MBA students by limiting their flexibility, as opposed to AMBA's own claims that their accreditation helps in ensuring the quality and standards of the programme and its stakeholders (students and the institutions). Interviewee T described the following:

*We are not reaching those numbers at the moment and that has implications for things like AMBA accreditation, because if we don't get into the 20s we may lose it, so at the moment there is some thought about maybe combining the, for full-time students with the Executive students, possibly to get the numbers up, we found that even has a negative impact on the university [CSB].*

Further, although this might be true from the quality and standards perspective, findings regarding its impact on students demonstrated that it is also limiting their flexibility. Similarly, interviewee S also highlighted the negative impact of AMBA at the international level:

*I think the growing number of AMBA-accredited MBAs in India, plus the debacle with some restrictions, which has impacted on the potential students; we have seen a sharp decline in the number of Indian students on the full-time MBA. We have found that even in the part-time cohort [CSC].*

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Similarly, the findings show that one consequence of the influence of AMBA on all three case study institutions is their need to conform to AMBA accreditation standards for MBA programmes, which is limiting the case study universities' ability to attract more students and offer flexibility. For example, the respondents at CSA mentioned that MBA students are required to have at least three years' work experience in order to be granted admission to an MBA programme. Interviewee B mentioned the following in her interview:

*Because we are AMBA accredited, they have to have at least three years' experience, whereas other masters are pre-experience - as I said to you [CSA].*

As stated above, no such experience is required for admission to a master's programme. This has a negative impact on students who want a professional qualification, such as an MBA, but whose application will be rejected due to their lack of experience. On the other hand, a university that wishes to enrol as many students as possible needs to conform to AMBA requirements. Another example of the negative impact of AMBA was mentioned by interviewee B, who stated that, as an accredited AMBA programme, a minimum of 120 hours of face-to-face contact was strongly recommended (and is actually a requirement) to augment the online sessions, as well as commenting that AMBA considers webinars to be face-to-face programmes and that these are part of the online MBA programme at CSA. However, a minimum face-to-face requirement is challenging for many MBA respondents. For example, the respondents from all the case study universities mentioned that it might not be possible for an MBA student to attend classes due to busy working days in their organisations, as most of the MBA students are managers and organisational professionals.

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### 5.2.3 Individual Course Design and Delivery

This section presents an analysis of the findings from the perspectives of the individual course design and delivery of MBA programmes. Findings in this section discuss in particular the provision of prior training, the use of VLEs, cultural diversity, the use of web 2.0 technologies, module-level features and lecturer-student interaction. The discussions in this section further focus on how these elements have contributed to the course design and delivery of MBA courses in each of the case studies presented.

**Case study A:** the findings from CSA indicate that advancements in communication technologies, the internet in particular, have revolutionised the internal environment of universities and contributed to the success of offering online and distance learning MBA programmes. This has further facilitated blended learning and teaching on MBA programmes. Similarly, the shift to an online-based system at CSA was occasioned by the availability and efficiency of the internet infrastructure, which has made online learning technically feasible. This shift offered MBA students the opportunity and possibility to combine full-time work and education, circumventing the need for travel visas to pursue higher education in foreign countries. The findings show that the acceptance of online learning has made it easier to gain access to learning from around the world. Thus, the findings from CSA show that, due to changes in the internal environment of universities, the academic frameworks are changing as well, with a major shift to blended learning and teaching.

*Provision of prior training:* although interviewee B at CSA pointed out that there was a department dedicated to helping and training staff for teaching, learning or any other aspect, the respondents maintained that no specific training was provided before the online system was introduced at CSA. Therefore, the course leaders did not know everything they needed to know, leading to them having to learn on the job. Interviewee M described the following:



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*I was taught how to use Blackboard but the training was not as part of a deliberate training programme at [CSA].*

On the other hand, interviewee M admitted to not knowing much about it before but had found the experience “pretty amazing”.

*The use of virtual learning environments:* the respondents at CSA mentioned that the university used Blackboard as the main VLE for its MBA programme. Blackboard is also used for the most important communication matters and materials in order to prevent the confusion that may arise as a result of using a number of different learning environments, as mentioned by interviewee B:

*Say for the full-time MBA, for instance, their Blackboard content is a series of PowerPoint slides in which the lecturer gives any associated reading materials that go with it and a reading scheme for the course. In terms of the virtual content, that's simply a recording of the lecture.*

Some of the useful functionalities of the Blackboard system discussed in the literature were also mentioned by the respondents, such as discussion boards and the platform for organising webinars. The findings also suggest that the course leaders were the main beneficiaries and users of the Blackboard system, as mentioned by interviewee M:

*Course leaders resolve to persist with Blackboard or whatever it evolves into, or its equivalent, as the main tool for teaching and learning.*

However, some of the respondents also described limitations to the Blackboard system. For example, interviewee M stated that

*Blackboard lacks the functionality of software like PowerPoint, in terms of using animation to control the flow of information to students.*

Another limitation of Blackboard was highlighted by interviewee A:

*We never have the version of Blackboard we need, and you know, for example, we say we would like to have Blackboard mobile and at the moment we have a sort of test.*

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*Cultural diversity:* the respondents at CSA mentioned that one of the main barriers to students' active engagement or class participation was their fear of getting something wrong. Therefore, the findings suggest that cultural sensitivity is an important issue in students' engagement, as well as being more interactive or passive in class. The respondents also mentioned that some students from certain cultures are hesitant to speak in class and much of the time feel more comfortable being quiet due to their cultural backgrounds.

Interviewee M further highlighted that

*Online students overcome their cultural difficulties a lot quicker compared to the face-to-face programme, because it is more anonymous, or at least it is perceived as such.*

According to the respondents at CSA, overcoming cultural difficulties was deemed to help enrich learning. Some of the ways to overcome cultural differences and their impact, as mentioned by the CSA respondents, are the formation of informal study groups, where online students who live in the same city can connect and share their experiences together, and in crosscultural learning, in which students mix with each other and learn and discuss solutions from different cultural perspectives.

*Use of web 2.0 technologies:* the findings from CSA demonstrate that professional networking platforms such as LinkedIn are used but at the individual level, not for teaching purposes. The findings further suggest that LinkedIn is particularly popular among alumni for networking with their peers. The respondents at CSA also mentioned that Skype is a medium with which CSA is prepared to work. However, the respondents seemed to have less favourable attitudes towards social networks such as Facebook and Twitter, as mentioned by interviewee M:

*The reticence to use social networks like Facebook and Twitter was due to the lack of control over these platforms and the lack of privacy that the CSA felt they would have.*

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The findings from CSA also show that Facebook and other social networks are not formally part of the CSA MBA online programme for communication and networking or for course delivery. Interviewee M further mentioned that

*Social media is frowned upon in principle, chiefly because the CSA has no editorial control on social media content.*

On the other hand, interviewee B mentioned that

*[CSA] allows the use of social media like Facebook as a means of advertising the university to the world, whilst rejecting its use as a conduit for academic exercises.*

It was found that students formed their own social networks and communicated with their peers at an individual level, as reported by interviewee B:

*We do not use it systematically online. I think students themselves form their own Facebook.*

*Module-level features:* the findings show that a mix of tools and techniques were used at CSA for the delivery of its MBA programme. However, the respondents mentioned that the use of slides was the most common method in use for lectures. Further, instructional sessions were a mix of lectures and tutorials, typically lasting for about three hours. Media tools such as YouTube or others that are deemed relevant can be used to demonstrate important cases under study, as mentioned by interviewee M:

*If you're making a particular point and there happens to be something on YouTube that's relevant, you might just show them that. If there is a particular video that illustrates a case, you may show them that.*

The findings from CSA show that the university mostly used the following tools and techniques for its MBA programme delivery:

- ❖ Case study
- ❖ Open and group discussion
- ❖ Module handbooks
- ❖ Slides for lectures

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❖ Webinars

*Lecturer-student interaction:* the findings from CSA show that Blackboard is used as the main platform for lecturer-student interaction and communication regarding MBA programme delivery. The respondents also mentioned that Blackboard played a collaborative function in organising group videos for as many as six students. Therefore, it builds a community of learning by facilitating student-lecturer engagement and interaction and through emails and webinars. Highlighting the benefits of the discussion board on Blackboard for lecturer-student interaction, interviewee B commented that:

*Discussion boards provide interactions in greater detail.*

The findings also demonstrate that CSA uses Blackboard to send emails to students for both the face-to-face and online MBA programme models. It was also found that face-to-face meetings were encouraged and face-to-face sessions were also held once a year, for one week. The respondents also described some other means of lecturer-student interaction/communication at CSA, such as tutorials and meetings with dissertation or project supervisors and a seven-hour-a-week window for appointments to meet tutors face-to-face for online programmes. However, text messaging and video conferencing were not used to communicate during MBA programme delivery. Lecturers' personal accounts, as well as their university accounts, could also be used as a means of lecturer-student interaction.

*Course delivery challenges:* the findings from CSA highlight the following challenges which lecturers face in online MBA programme delivery:

- ❖ The online format takes time for lecturers to become accustomed to it because of the lecturers' lack of online system understanding, as well as a shortage of skills.
- ❖ Managing an online system and developing lecturing skills in using such a system requires both time and constant effort.

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- ❖ Respondents also mentioned that some lecturers sometimes found it uncomfortable to switch to online or technology-based teaching and learning modes. This was due to the fact that they were used to content-based teaching methods and the level of effort, time and resources now required made this transition difficult for them.
  - ❖ Respondents also mentioned online engagement, constant interaction and discussion as challenging, less effective and efficient, and time-consuming.
  - ❖ Assessing students in an online setting without seemingly favouring one type of student over another is also a challenge.
  - ❖ Translating a face-to-face module into an online format is also challenging, particularly when trying to model the online format to be as close as possible to its original face-to-face counterpart. Interviewee B had attempted to do this by structuring a module in terms of assessment, group work for students, the presentation of case studies, and organising webinars and asking questions.
  - ❖ Lack of an appropriate communication system for the lecturers who are using an online system for the first time was also mentioned as a challenge by the respondents.
  - ❖ Respondents also mentioned that creating an online module is in itself a major challenge.

*Student preparation:* the respondents from CSA also highlighted the process of preparing students for an online module. Respondents mentioned that new students undergo a three-week induction process to familiarise themselves with an online module. This enables them to learn how to use the system for various purposes and to build speed. Interestingly, respondents mentioned that the tutor-student relationship affects students' performance. According to interviewee B, in terms of using online/blended learning,

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*The teacher-student relationship builds trust and inspires students, consequently they put in extra effort. At the same time, the tutor also puts extra effort into thinking how students' chances of success can be increased.*

*Respondents' suggestions for the improvement of MBA programmes:* the findings demonstrate that, whether studying face-to-face or online, students' feedback is the main tool for evaluating the success of an MBA programme. For an online programme, students complete an online module feedback form at the end of their module. The respondents at CSA made the following suggestions for improving the MBA programme:

- ❖ Better tools for communication that would give accurate information on students' progression.
- ❖ A proper online electronic submission system to aid coursework.
- ❖ Improving the induction process.
- ❖ Extending the international reach through joint ventures with foreign universities.
- ❖ Putting a proper Executive MBA together aimed at senior management and using online material.

*Parameters for evaluating the MBA programme:* the respondents at CSA mentioned the following parameters for evaluating the CSA MBA programme:

- ❖ Students' feedback upon the completion of each module.
- ❖ A once-a-term meeting that would include the MBA Course Director and a committee of academics and students to gain students' views on various issues.
- ❖ Peer review, in which lecturers would undertake a formal review of the other lecturers' tutorial sessions.

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- ❖ The Centre for Learning and Professional Development to provide training and consultation for academic staff to up-skill people in various areas.

The researcher also found that the above parameters are all standard UK university QA practices. A possible explanation is that either the case study institution has nothing new or different, or the respondents are not familiar with or knowledgeable about all the parameters.

**Case study B:** the findings from CSB show that limitations and the lack of technology at the university led the institution to offer two kinds of Executive MBA: 1) Executive on-campus, and 2) Executive off-campus, which is also called an Overseas Executive MBA. In essence, the lecturers at CSB travel overseas for face-to-face teaching (distance teaching). The following are the findings regarding the main elements of the individual course design and delivery at CSB.

*Provision of prior training:* interviewee K at CSB mentioned that no specific training was provided before applying distance teaching at CSB. Further, this interviewee did not feel particularly passionate about training at his age:

*No, not at my stage.*

All the other interviewees maintained that they were using the same techniques for all types of MBA, with no extra or special technology for distance teaching. The respondents at CSB maintained that there was no urgent need for training courses. According to interviewee D,

*We are using eBridge for all three types of MBA.*

*Use of virtual learning environments:* the respondents at CSB mentioned that Blackboard had been replaced by an open source system: eBridge. According to the respondents, the university had taken this initiative to save costs because eBridge, as an open source system, was cheaper and some functions were even free to use. Interviewee A commented that

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*eBridge is now used at CSB, it's free and it has the same functionalities.*

Surprisingly, interviewee S mentioned that CSB was still using the Blackboard system, although, in reality, this is not true, as the university had changed from Blackboard to the eBridge system three years earlier. This indicates that interviewee T still thought in terms of the old system (Blackboard): “*We are using Blackboard for all three types of MBA*”. This also shows a lack of knowledge and awareness regarding the virtual learning environment at CSB.

*Use of web 2.0 technologies:* with regard to the use of web 2.0 technologies in teaching and learning on the MBA programme, the findings from CSB show that there is no use of any social or professional platform for any purpose at the university. The respondents further mentioned that there was no nearfuture consideration for the use of such platforms for any teaching or learning on the CSA MBA programme. Interviewee D commented:

*I think students do it almost on an informal basis, really, both Facebook and LinkedIn tend to be informal.*

*Module-level features:* the findings from CSB show that a mix of teaching and learning techniques was used for the delivery of its MBA programme. The most common techniques were lectures, case studies, the module handbook and email interaction. It was also found that face-to-face teaching was an important technique for all three kinds of MBA at CSB. Even though CSB offered distance teaching, there was still a face-to-face element to teaching and learning. Interviewee T reported:

*In the teaching context, in teaching it's all face-to-face, I would say 95% and the remaining might be some email interaction.*

Further, interviewee J mentioned the following:

*Different lecturers adopt different approaches, everybody uses PowerPoint, case studies, I think it varies between modules, and some use more case studies, others less.*



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The findings from CSB show that the university mostly used the following tools and techniques for its MBA programme delivery:

- ❖ Case study
- ❖ Open discussion with some videos
- ❖ Group discussion
- ❖ PowerPoint presentations
- ❖ Handouts
- ❖ Seminars

*Cultural diversity:* the respondents at CSB mentioned that they faced more difficulties in communicating with part-time than with full-time students. One of the reasons for this difference that the respondents mentioned was that most of the part-time students were managers and did not like being treated as students. The respondents also mentioned that students from different cultural backgrounds on an MBA programme work very well, add and share knowledge and exchange experiences with each other. Interviewee D highlighted that:

*It is so important to hear about other cultures, to have your mind opened to other people and how they deal with things and how things work in other countries differently, that is one of the most important things.*

*Course delivery challenges:* the findings from CSB also show several challenges and difficulties being faced in distance teaching by lecturers on MBA programmes. The following are the most-cited challenges and difficulties mentioned by the respondents at CSB:

- ❖ Respondents mentioned that distance teaching was not a cost-effective form of education. Interviewee D mentioned that “*distance teaching does not reduce cost; you know it costs a lot of money to send lecturers overseas with the hotel, flight, and the taxi*”.

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- ❖ Respondents also mentioned that with online and distance teaching the lecturers misunderstand students' personalities, are less motivated and less encouraging.
  - ❖ The social aspect is an important dimension on MBAs that is a major challenge to replicate online. The MBA Programme Leader, interviewee D, supported this view: *"Yes, I think the social aspect is a big gap in elearning, and online learning I do not know how to address that and Skype does not because I contact on a one-to-one basis, I do not use another method, that's the main problem"*.
  - ❖ Interaction and networking with colleagues are a main and key aspect of an MBA programme. However, with distance teaching or any online programme, it is a greater challenge because it is difficult to replicate the interaction dimension in an online environment.
  - ❖ Lack of knowledge and skills in using IT was also mentioned as a major challenge for some of the lecturers who are interested in applying blended learning in their module.

*Students' preparation:* the findings from CSB demonstrate many stages in preparing new students who enrol on an MBA programme. Respondents described the induction week for new students to introduce them to the strategy of the programme. However, respondents mentioned that module leaders and students' relationships also influenced the performance of students, both full-time and overseas, as mentioned by interviewee T:

*I am talking from an overseas perspective, I think there's good interpersonal relationships when they get to the dissertation stage because they get one person who they can contact and speak with over email..... full-time students, they would find it easier to come and knock on the door of a lecturing member and speak to them.*

Similarly, interviewee A mentioned the following:

*Well the essential point is the contact, really, where the students see books and a welcome letter and the whole page of materials on who will be teaching the module to them, to the classroom experience then into the classroom experience, then to introduce the lecturer and so on. That is the way to get to know who is the module leaders and so on.*

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*Lecturer-student interaction:* the findings from CSB indicate that face-to-face interaction and the use of emails are the main means of interaction between lecturers and students. The respondents further mentioned that these two sources, face-to-face and email contact, are used for both full-time and part-time MBA student-lecturer interaction and communication. There are various features of interaction on the MBA programme: 1) interaction is a crucial dimension in the MBA because students start the programme with their own experience, and thus interact with each other and with module leaders to construct and exchange new knowledge; and 2) MBA students can be senior managers in their country, have a wide range of knowledge in their field and are willing to present this to and interact with other peers to show how they deal with ideas from their own cultural perspective.

*Respondents' suggestions for the improvement of the MBA programme:* the findings demonstrate that, whether face-to-face or online, students' feedback is the main tool for evaluating the success of an MBA programme. Students on an online programme complete an online module feedback form at the end of the module. The respondents at CSB made the following suggestions:

- ❖ Link theory and practice more effectively.
- ❖ Invest in blended learning by learning from those who have been conducting such programmes for a long time. Test and evaluate blended learning and increase its proportion if possible, as well as trying to reach more people in a more cost-effective way.
- ❖ Recruit the right staff: knowledgeable, trained and experienced.

*Parameters for evaluating an MBA programme:* the respondents at CSB mentioned the following evaluation parameters. Parameters of programme evaluation which have been discussed in the literature were also mentioned by the respondents:

- ❖ A module evaluation questionnaire for students' feedback at the completion of each module (this would be an evaluation of the module).

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- ❖ Students' alumni feedback (this would be an evaluation of the overall programme).
  - ❖ A once-a-term meeting that would include the MBA Course Director and a committee of academics and students to gather students' views on various issues.

**Case study C:** the respondents at CSC mentioned the availability of technology and how technology was opening up new possibilities in the field of education as a major force which was driving CSC towards blended learning. Another important factor mentioned by CSC respondents in steering the institution towards adopting blended learning in its programme delivery was the need to overcome the constraints of having to be physically present in more than one place at the same time. Hence, technological advancements were paving the way towards blending learning and teaching at CSC.

*Provision of prior training:* the respondents at CSC mentioned that there was no formal training for lecturers or course leaders in blended learning techniques and the respondents maintained that whatever they had learned regarding blended learning was through their own effort and practice. On the other hand, interviewee F argued that CSC had been approached by another university by contacts who offered the possibility of starting blended learning.

In the context of CSC, interviewee F mentioned that:

*The IT department has enough equipment and know-how, which could be very helpful in showing lecturers and course leaders what to do to set up an online learning and teaching, blended learning and teaching model.*

*Use of virtual learning environments:* at CSC, it was found that there was widespread use of Blackboard and its discussion board and blogging features. The respondents also mentioned that CSC used the Blackboard system for its MBA programme as a platform for setting up groups, so that individual groups could be emailed to share information or send feedback quickly, for

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announcements, uploading and displaying course material, arranging reminders of lecturers' schedules, and for administering assignments.

*Cultural diversity:* the findings from CSC correspond with those from CSA. The respondents at CSC also mentioned that cultural differences play a main role in students' engagement and interaction. For example, interviewee S mentioned that:

*Some students are more outspoken in class than others and more confident.*

Therefore, cultural diversity and its impact on students' learning, as well as teaching, emerged as one of the main findings for this research, leading to the consideration of cultural diversity in designing and developing learning and teaching frameworks.

*Use of web 2.0 technologies:* the findings regarding the use of social or professional networks at CSC corroborate those from CSA. The respondents at CSC mentioned that social networks such as Facebook are not an official part of the CSC MBA programme for communicating or interacting, although they can be used individually by both students and faculty members to connect with each other. In interviewee S's view,

*Facebook is a social platform rather than a learning tool.*

The findings demonstrate that among social and professional networks, the use of LinkedIn is mostly encouraged among students, rather than faculty members. However, the findings also suggest that the use of LinkedIn is particularly encouraged at CSC for its MBA programme alumni connections, although not as official CSC policy.

*Module-level features:* in terms of module-level features, the findings from CSC corroborate those from CSA and CSB. CSC also uses various tools and techniques for its MBA delivery programme. However, the respondents at CSC seemed more informative about the individual course level. For example, interviewee F described how,

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*The delivery technique used for the MBA programme is based upon the ideas of engaging and interactive lecturer-led processes, for example for our Economics module.*

Interviewee F further mentioned that

*The use of case studies with guest speakers coming in is done in the Operations Management module.*

The findings from CSC further suggest that the giving of presentations using slides and lecture seminars is also common for MBA programme delivery at CSC. Interviewee S further pointed out that:

*Many modules also use blogs and wikis.*

The findings show that CSC was following a lecturer-centred approach because students had not done prior reading and could not engage in and contribute to MBA programme delivery, thus forcing the lecturer to lead the process.

The findings from CSC show that the university mostly used the following tools and techniques for its MBA programme delivery:

- ❖ Case study
- ❖ Lectures
- ❖ Case studies
- ❖ Module handbook
- ❖ PowerPoint
- ❖ Seminars

*Students' preparation:* the respondents from CSC mentioned that the students' preparation for blended learning was important for new students to know and understand what they needed to do before starting the lectures, as mentioned by interviewee R:

*There's a whole process about preparing students but also preparing the staff. So I think before you go into blended learning, there is quite a lot of preparatory work which is necessary because the danger is, if you do not do that, people just put in blended learning to replace a bit of lecture with really very*

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*little thought on how it fits in, how it's integrated, how it adds to the programme and it becomes, you know, a bit of YouTube rather than saying it in the front.*

Interviewee S, who is also a programme leader, supported the previous statement about students' preparation for blended learning:

*Maybe we have not done the preparation for students for using blended learning correctly, we just started to run pilot blended learning without any previous awareness for students.*

*Lecturer-student interaction:* the findings from CSC suggest that face-to-face meetings are the main tool for lecturer-student interaction and communication, as referred to by interviewee S:

*Scheduled face-to-face meetings are the main means of communication on the MBA programme here at CSC.*

The respondents at CSC also mentioned that Blackboard was used for emails and programme- or module-related announcements. Skype was also used as a discussion board at CSC. However, the lecturers still faced problems if they intended to use Skype or the discussion board with some of the international students due to the time differences, as mentioned by interviewee S:

*Even nowadays with the likes of Skype, the time differences can make it difficult for staff, for an academic, if you are dealing with Chinese students or any of that area, the time differences can make it very difficult so then email or some sort of wiki, blog or something becomes the way.*

*Course delivery challenges:* the findings from CSC suggest that the major points of concern regarding an online module are technical faults and internet crashes. Setting up an online module was viewed by respondents as the most daunting task. Further, fear of the unknown and the sheer newness and uncertainty attached to an online system were regarded as the main reasons course leaders and lecturers were unwilling to try setting up their courses online and adopting blended learning. In addition, there was the issue of getting content online, which was addressed by introducing online aspects of blended learning gradually, by incrementally introducing more online material and information.

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*Respondents' suggestions for the improvement of an MBA programme:* the findings demonstrate that, whether face-to-face or online, student feedback was the main tool for evaluating the success rate of an MBA programme. Students on an online programme complete an online module feedback form at the end of the module. Respondents at CSC made the following suggestions:

- ❖ Better training and development of the staff in blended learning and teaching.
- ❖ An effective induction process that encourages students to undertake independent study.

*Parameters for evaluating an MBA programme:* the respondents at CSC mentioned the following evaluation parameters:

- ❖ Collecting data from students at the beginning of the MBA programme, at the end of the programme and, if possible, three years after the end of the programme to gauge students' perceptions, experiences and development.
- ❖ Feedback from employers and professional associations, as well as programme evaluation questionnaires.
- ❖ Through sustained (triple) accreditation, increased numbers and increased revenue.

However, interviewee S further argued that quality assessment must be done in a longitudinal sense; ideally, over a four-year period.

#### **5.2.4 Summary**

Summarising the findings in terms of similarities and differences between the case study institutions (CSA, CSB and CSC), it was observed that no particular training was provided to the academic staff at any of the institutions, although interviewee F at CSC was trained by another university. Regarding the module-level features, Table 5.2 demonstrates that face-to-face communication is becoming more important on MBA programmes



because people value and appreciate human contact. There are different methods in use at the case study institutions for face-to-face teaching and learning purposes, such as group work, case studies and seminars. Despite CSA's claim that the institution has online learning, it still values face-to-face methods, as there is a one-week residential session each year for students' personal and professional development. Table 5.3 shows the course delivery methods used via the VLE found in the three case study institutions.

**Table 5.2: Module delivery for face-to-face methods**

<b>Face-to-face methods used in teaching and learning</b>	<b>CSA</b>	<b>CSB</b>	<b>CSC</b>
Presentations	√	√	√
Case studies	√	√	√
Presentations	√	√	√
Group work	√	√	√
Face-to-face	√	√	√
Lectures	√	√	√
Seminars	√	√	√
Tutorials	√	√	√

**Table 5.3: Course delivery methods used via the VLE**

<b>VLE methods used in teaching and learning</b>	<b>CSA</b>	<b>CSB</b>	<b>CSC</b>
VLE (Blackboard)	√	×	√
eBridge	×	√	×
Discussion board	√	√	√
Recorded lectures	√	×	×
Webinars	√	×	×

Email	✓	✓	✓
Announcements	✓	✓	✓
Lecture slides	✓	✓	✓
Online package	✓	✓	✓
Videotapes	✓	×	×
YouTube	✓	✓	✓
Skype	✓	✓	✓
Module handbook	✓	✓	✓

**Legend:** ✓ = methods used; × = methods not used.

Table 5.3 above shows that VLE methods are used for both teaching and learning purposes at the three case study institutions. With the expectation of social networks such as Facebook and Twitter, all three case study institutions had interactive platforms on their MBA programmes. Further, CSA and CSC used Blackboard and CSB used eBridge, both of which have discussion boards, email and course material presentation facilities for both synchronous (realtime) and asynchronous student-student or student-lecturer interaction on the MBA programme.

Further, cultural aspects are also becoming a matter of interest at the three case study institutions because culture plays a significant role in students' engagement and has a great impact on students' learning and on teaching. For example, a lack of engagement was mentioned due to students' hesitation in speaking or preferring to be quiet in class because of their cultural background. Another major challenge mentioned by the CSB respondents was the difficulty in dealing with part-time students, because most of them were managers in their own country and did not particularly like being treated as students.

Regarding course delivery challenges at the three case study institutions, the following can be seen as the most important:

- ❖ The amount of time and effort required to develop module materials.
- ❖ Lack of confidence in overcoming potential technical problems.

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- ❖ Lack of experience and skills in e-learning.
  - ❖ Lack of training in online/blended learning technologies in terms of designing modules and suitable online platforms and the upgrading of the computer systems at the various institutions.

The findings further highlight the benefit of interaction in various forms at the case study institutions. For example, a VLE is used as a main tool between student-lecturer interaction and student-student interaction via email, discussion boards, and webinars, and tutorial and dissertation meetings are the means of lecturer-student interaction. It was shown that face-to-face and the VLE played a significant role and were considered as the most important tools for lecturer-student and student-student interaction at CSB and CSC. Regarding the students' preparation at the case study institutions, the findings indicate that induction is helpful for students to learn about the course strategy and module-level features, especially for overseas students.

It was also found that feedback is an important element in ensuring and evaluating the effectiveness of the MBA programme at the case study institutions. However, the evaluation parameters used by the case study institutions were found to be similar to those discussed in the literature review (see section 2.8).

In general, VLE platforms and web 2.0 technologies were found to offer students a greater degree of control over when and where they could access module material, as well as helping module leaders to evaluate students' performance. VLE platforms and web 2.0 technologies helped students in learning and students found them relatively easy to use. Furthermore, there were few differences regarding the use of technology systems at the three case study institutions, notwithstanding the fact that some module leaders were of the opinion that there was still room for improvement, particularly with the version of Blackboard used, for example, the respondents mentioned that mobile Blackboard is a requirement. Moreover, the most important communication methods used within the MBA programmes at the three case

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study institutions to support learning and teaching were Skype and discussion boards. One-to-one Skype meetings were used between MBA students and their supervisors at the dissertation stage. However, professional network platforms such as LinkedIn were mostly used among alumni for interaction, rather than for teaching and learning purposes. The use of professional networking is considered an individual matter and the case study institutions encouraged students to use LinkedIn to connect with fellow colleagues and alumni. The researcher concludes that webinars are a communication tool for presenting seminars, lectures, and presentations over the internet and thus represent a learning community. CSA used webinars for online MBA students as a tool for enhancing teaching and learning, and students could ask, receive answers and gain feedback at the same time (synchronous). A comparison of the academics' experiences at the three case study institutions is shown in Table 5.4.

**Table 5.4: Comparative summary of academics' experience at the case study institutions**

	<b>CSA</b>	<b>CSB</b>	<b>CSC</b>
<b>Academics' experience: Agreement</b>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. VLE: <b>Blackboard</b></li> <li>2. Communication methods: <b>Skype</b></li> <li>3. Technology for enhancing learning and teaching: <input type="checkbox"/> Videotapes <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• YouTube</li> <li>• PowerPoint</li> <li>• Email</li> <li>• Discussion boards</li> <li>• Webinars</li> <li>• Recordings of lectures</li> </ul> </li> </ol>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. VLE: <b>eBridge</b></li> <li>2. Communication methods: <b>Skype</b></li> <li>3. Technology for enhancing learning and teaching: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• YouTube</li> <li>• PowerPoint</li> <li>• Email</li> </ul> </li> </ol>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. VLE: <b>Blackboard:</b> Used as a platform to design group works.</li> <li>2. Communication methods: <b>Skype, online discussion.</b></li> <li>3. Technology for enhancing learning and teaching: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Web 2.0 wikis, blogs</li> <li>• Online package (for two modules: Finance and Accounting)</li> <li>• Videotapes</li> <li>• YouTube</li> <li>• PowerPoint</li> <li>• Email</li> <li>• Discussion boards</li> </ul> </li> </ol>

<p><b>Academics' experience:</b></p> <p><b>Disagreement</b></p>	<p>1. Blackboard:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Does not satisfy some modules' needs, e.g., Accounting.</li> <li>• Lack of software functionality, e.g., lack of the use of animation.</li> </ul> <p>2. Social networking:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Web 2.0 technology</li> </ul>	<p>1. eBridge:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Lack of capacity.</li> <li>• Shortage of academics with a background using IT.</li> </ul> <p>2. Social networking: Academics do not support any</p>	<p>1. Blackboard:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Technical problems e.g., internet crashes.</li> <li>• Downloading material (learning material).</li> </ul> <p>2. Communication methods:</p>
	<p>e.g., blogs, wikis.</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Social networking e.g., Facebook.</p>	<p>of the social networks as a tool for learning and teaching.</p>	<p>Academics face problems with communicating with some international students due to time differences.</p>

Source: Compiled from the researcher's analysis of CSA, CSB and CSC.

The above table shows that the academics at the three case study institutions appreciated a VLE as the main system used for implementing blended learning approach for MBA programmes due to its flexibility and functionality, e.g., discussion boards and emails. Further, various technologies were used to enhance blended learning and teaching in the MBA programmes, as mentioned above, such as YouTube and PowerPoint. However, all the case study institutions agreed upon the usefulness of social networking platforms, e.g., Facebook and professional networks, e.g.,

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LinkedIn, which were not currently being used for blended learning and teaching purposes.

### **5.3 Evaluating the Existing Theoretical Frameworks for Learning and Teaching MBA**

This section presents two sub-themes of the main findings regarding existing theoretical frameworks for learning and teaching in MBA programmes within three UK Universities including: curriculum and module design and students' reflections (experience) on academics' perspectives. In this research, the academic conceptual framework (ACF) of the MBA programme was explored following the analysis of data collected during semi-structured interviews, online surveys and the case study institutions' documents (online and offline). The findings show that the ACF consists of curriculum and module design and students' experience as the main themes. This statement was confirmed by interviewee A, who reported that it operated

*in lots of different directions and it's important to have space within an MBA curriculum where you see what students are demanding and then doing this and you give students some ways to express their demands, which makes sense of why we're doing this and why this is happening and why this is important, and a module along systems gives the space to do that at [CSB].*

In terms of students' experience, students' feedback is used to design or modify different modules. Thus, the student experience also becomes an integral part of the academic conceptual framework. Interviewee F mentioned the following:

*I always get feedback from students to see how it could improve and what they like and what they did not like at [CSC].*

Interviewee J agreed with this opinion:

*Well I think it's important to know you're delivering a good product and you need feedback to see how you could improve and you know because maybe they're suggesting that we're not covering an important area, which we would then need to build*

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*in. So you know, it's all about getting feedback and improving your product. You can't stand still at [CSB].*

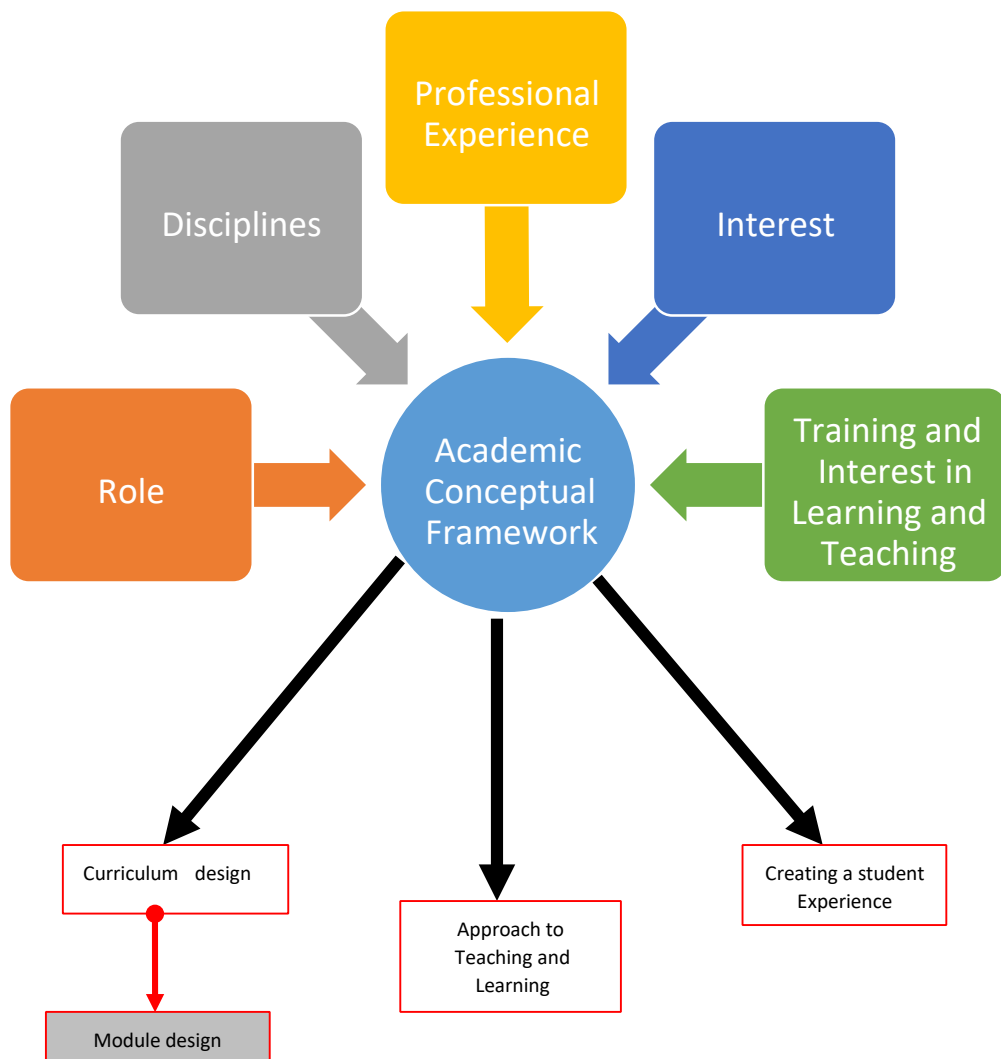
Before this research extends its argument to academics' perspectives on curriculum and module design and students' reflections on this, the following section highlights the role/identity/designation and responsibilities of the participating academics and their views regarding blended learning.

### **5.3.1 Academic Respondents: Their Identity/Role and Views on Blended Learning**

This section presents the findings regarding the role, identity and responsibilities of the academic respondents and their views regarding blended learning. This section also highlights the similarities and differences of such dimensions between the three case studies.

The professional identity of academics (PIA) is defined by Marcelo (2009:910) as highlighting "four revised characteristics that are relevant shaping teacher professional identity. First, professional teacher identity is an evolutionary process that draws on the interpretation and re-interpretation of experiences". Despite the increase in research regarding the PIA in different areas, such as nursing, little attention has been paid to the PIA in business education, particularly on MBA programmes. Therefore, the purpose of this section is to present findings about the PIA of the MBA academics and students' perspectives at the three case study universities. The findings in this section show a number of PIA dimensions (Figure 5.5).





**Figure 5.5: PIA dimensions relating to the academic conceptual framework**

Source: Compiled by the researcher

As shown in the above figure, the findings of this research demonstrate five dimensions of the PIA: (1) role, (2) disciplines, (3) professional experience, (4) interest, and (5) training and interest in learning and teaching. There follows a description of each PIA element with respect to each case study.

### **Case study A**

*Academics' role:* the findings show that most of the interviewees at CSA played two roles: some of them were MBA programme leaders and responsible for the academic side as well as being module leaders, and others

directed curriculum development, etc. In this research, two specific questions were asked of the CSA participants: Q1: How long have you been working on the MBA programme? Q2: Can you tell me about your role? The researcher received the following answers.

Interviewee B had been working on the MBA programme since October 2004. She had two main roles: she was Director of the MBA programmes at CSA, as well as being responsible for the *academics and content* of the programme and working on strategy. She described her situation as follows:

*My current role is actually Director of the MBA programmes and I'm responsible for the academic side and the strategy.*

Interviewee M had been working for over 10 years, which included four years at CSA. Interviewee M had two main roles: teaching the postgraduate Business Strategy module and running an online MBA programme:

*My role? I have two. I teach business strategy to postgraduates and I also run the online MBA course, so those are all my two main roles.*

*Disciplines:* the academics at CSA had different disciplines. Interviewee B's discipline is management consultancy and training, while interviewee M's discipline is engineering: *"My background is engineering, so I enjoy the maths"*.

*Professional experience:* the findings for CSA demonstrate the significance of experience, not only for MBA students, but also for the academics in different respects. This supports the teaching and learning techniques. Interviewee M confirmed the following:

*Well, basically it's to try and deliver a mixture of sound theoretical background tempered with people who have had industrial experience, so because we're talking about a social science, we're talking a little bit of science and an awful lot of art, then the teaching method has to reflect that.*

*Interest:* in this research, interest suggests the tendency of an MBA programme and module leaders to learn or want to know something. The respondents at CSA demonstrated a variety of academic interests. This

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research investigated the impact of the interest of academics on the PIA. Furthermore, interest could mean the books that have influenced a particular academic or the preferred model used as a technique for teaching a specific module. For example, interviewee B's role was to teach marketing and social networking. However, she was interested in using Twitter techniques in her module:

*Social networking for marketing is important, yes, but you will not believe me, I do not do that because, in order to be able to do all that, we need to have capacity in terms of administration to support all that and we do not have it, so we have to say thinking down to the students, and we try to, because I'd love to tweet them, because I tweet and I think.*

Interviewee M showed another type of interest:

*Most recently I would say books about complexity theory, that's a particularly interesting one.*

The previous interviewee was referring to an area of interest that may reflect his background. This point is discussed under MBA pedagogy (see section 5.4).

*Training and interest in learning and teaching:* even though there is a department at CSA to help and train MBA staff in teaching and learning, the respondents confirmed that no specific training was provided for the academics. However, the three universities all provide staff development in learning and teaching that includes online and blended learning. This suggests the respondents' lack of knowledge of what resources are available for them for training and development, but could also show that the case study institution is unable to provide sufficient information to the lecturers on what resources are available for them for their training and development. This refers to both online and face-to-face learning using the same techniques and nothing in addition. However, the expression "*pretty amazing*" was uttered by interviewee M, who is the Course Director of the distance learning MBA programme and demonstrates the importance of training. The findings also show that the training for teaching and learning was a fundamental aspect for MBA academics at CSA and would affect the

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PIA from a different aspect, e.g., module design and delivery. The assumption was that if the university provided good training for the MBA programme and module leaders to enable them to use different learning and teaching techniques, either for face-to-face or online learning, this would add value to the programme. Thus, each academic would follow her/his own interests from a variety of techniques after training. However, because no specific training was given to the MBA programme or module leaders before they applied online learning, the Accountancy module leader preferred face-to-face techniques, as interviewee B supported the above claim: “*Oh, my module only works face-to-face*”.

### **Case study B**

*Academics’ role:* the research involved six participants at CSB, all with different roles, in addition to being leaders of different modules. In 2013, interviewee D was the MBA Programme Leader at CSB. However, her role now was primarily to develop the MBA curriculum and focus on programme development to make sure it was up to date and relevant to the target audiences.

Interviewee T had two main roles: he was the Overseas MBA Programme Leader as well as the Module Leader for Leadership and Organisation. He had been working on the MBA programme since 1994.

Interviewee J was Module Leader of Research Methods for MBA students. He had been on the MBA programme for over 20 years. He had played a fundamental role in the MBA programme at CSB in developing the Research Methods module. His role is further discussed in section 5.4.

Interviewee A’s role was Director of Learning and Teaching. She had been working for more than 10 years on the MBA programme due to her position and role in the university regarding research topics from different aspects, e.g., the different learning and teaching techniques used on the MBA programme at CSB.

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Interviewee H's role was different from those of the above-discussed participants. Hers was an administrative role in providing support to MBA students throughout the yearly programme. She had been working on the MBA programme for one year.

Interviewee K's role was MBA Programme Leader and he was also a module leader for the full-time, part-time and overseas MBA programmes. He had spent 12 years on the MBA programme at CSB.

*Disciplines:* the findings in this section demonstrate the disciplines apparent on the MBA programme and among the module leaders at CSB. Interviewee D was from the marketing discipline and took a further part in decision making. Interviewee T was from the organisational behaviour and human resource management (HRM) disciplines. Interviewee J came from the accounting and finance disciplines. Interviewee A was from the systems thinking discipline and further dealt with complexity from a systems perspective. Interviewee H was not clear about her discipline. However, the last participant, interviewee K, was from a mechanical engineering discipline.

*Professional experience:* the findings in this section show that the MBA programme and module leaders at CSB had a variety of professional experience, e.g., industry experience. Interviewee D had wide experience in developing the curriculum of an MBA programme.

Interviewee T was a practising manager in industry, managing an electronic engineering design development department working with both hardware and software:

*Having previously been a design engineer and managing large groups of people, I thought I needed to understand more about the social side effects.*

Interviewee J had professional accounting experience in his discipline. He had also tried to develop the research methods on the MBA programme using different learning models. Similarly, interviewee A had professional experience in systematic learning, which is in line with her current discipline: systems thinking. Interviewee K had professional experience in mechanical

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engineering and also worked for another university which was involved in online learning, so he had a lot of experience in using webinars.

*Interest:* the findings from CSB show that interviewee D's interest was strongly linked to her disciplines, such as marketing, communications and decision making. Interviewee T had a deep interest in the academic field, despite the fact that he had professional industry experience. Further, he had a strong link with the researcher's area of research, as one of his publications is closely related to this research. Whereas, interviewee J's interest was in examining different educational models, e.g., Kolb's model, and he had developed a Research Methods module using the learning cycle. Finally, interviewee A's interest was in systematic pedagogy, which involves using system theory.

*Training and interest in learning and teaching:* training is considered important for MBA programme and module leaders due to its potential impact on the learning and teaching approaches of the lecturers. Interviewee A stated that "*yes, social networking in marketing, it's a very powerful tool*". In the teaching context, a VLE (eBridge), emails, announcements, and face-to-face contact are used in the three different MBA models with no specific or different techniques for distance teaching.

For interviewee J, distance teaching at CSB involved travelling to an overseas location to teach students face-to-face, whilst distance learning referred to a situation in which the educator and the students are geographically separated and depend on the use of technology for the instructional process. This definition of distance teaching and its distinction from distance learning was similar to those given by interviewees T, A and K.

The findings in this regard also demonstrate that some of the respondents were not familiar with recent developments or changes in teaching and learning methods. For example, as interviewee T at CSB commented, "*we are using Blackboard for all three types of MBA*". However, the findings show that CSB had changed from Blackboard to an eBridge system three years earlier.

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**Case study C**

*Academics' role:* this section presents the findings regarding the participants' roles at CSC. Interviewee S had been working on the MBA programme for five years. She had three main roles: 1) Director of the MBA programme, 2) teaching the Strategic Management module, and 3) playing an essential role in MBA strategy, as she mentioned in the following:

*I am the Director of the MBA programmes and that takes 50% of my time and really the Dean of the school's responsible, but I'm responsible for the strategy, all strategic and operational aspects of all about the MBA programmes, and I spend the other 50% of my time as an academic, I do teach on the Strategic Management module.*

Interviewee R had been working on the MBA programme since 1997, and was currently the Deputy Director of the MBA programme. He also had responsibility on the academic side, as he was Module Leader for Evaluating Value and Social Enterprise. Interviewee F had been working on the CSC MBA programme for four years and her role was Module Leader for Creating Customer Value.

*Disciplines:* the findings from CSC show that interviewee S's discipline was strategic management, interviewee R's discipline was economics and entrepreneurship, and interviewee F's discipline was marketing.

*Professional experience:* the findings from CSC show that interviewee S had gained professional experience from different positions in different places. She had also worked in industry as a software developer for over 15 years. She also had a great deal of experience in two positions: 1) MBA Programme Leader and 2) strategic and operational management on the MBA programme. Interviewee R had professional experience in social entrepreneurship and experience of working on the MBA programme for 18 years. Interviewee F had professional experience on the academic side, particularly in strategic marketing and marketing management. Furthermore, she had sound experience in a VLE (Likebook) other than

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Blackboard, so if she tended to use a VLE, she would use Likebook because she had already applied it in undergraduate modules.

*Interest:* the findings outlined in this section demonstrate that interviewee S's interest was along the same lines as her discipline, which is strategic management, as she was interested in blended learning and in using technology to enhance learning and teaching techniques:

*One thing I'm interested in learning about is CourseRA (Course Remote Active). This technique is more for e-learning and distance learning.*

Interviewee R was interested in extending his discipline and was developing the MBA programme at CSC. He was part of a different blended learning group and was interested in using different technologies to enhance teaching and learning.

Interviewee F's interest was in marketing, which includes strategic marketing and marketing management. The findings also demonstrate that she was interested in the health care environment.

*Training and interest in learning and teaching:* the findings for this section demonstrate that training is an important element for MBA staff, particularly if the university is planning to adopt different models of learning and teaching, e.g., blended learning. The application of technology in this context should be considered from different aspects, such as: 1) adopting new techniques to enhance learning is not easy; it might be an area of interest for most of the staff but, if they apply it without training, it will be difficult; and 2) the university's capacity to apply good-quality teaching without technical problems.

In the context of teaching, MBA staff should be prepared to use different teaching and learning techniques if the programme leader fundamentally changes the teaching and learning model, because any changes need time for preparation. Interviewee R supported this:

*Well the training is important, people need to be prepared for that, they need to understand it, they need to be able to adapt to it*



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*and use it to maximise its potential, rather than people in some sort of add-on or substitute start doing things. I suspect that's going on, where people do a bit of, you know, I'll do a wiki, do a blog, without really understanding it, just as a bit of variety.*

Whereas, findings from interviewee F demonstrate that training was important for both MBA academic staff and students. She further believed the following:

*I think also the students themselves need training, or maybe training's not the right word, but they need to appreciate blended learning and the pressures it puts on them, because at the present they are coming here expecting face-to-face teaching, they often come from cultures where they are used to the teacher imparting knowledge, they absorb it, regurgitate it.*

Further, most of the MBA staff were busy with research publications, teaching modules, and improvements in areas of interest. Little attention was paid to blended learning by academic staff due to the lack of training.

Responses from the interviewees about the MBA programme at CSC featured the blended learning theme significantly. As interviewee F claimed:

*Blended learning at CSC is simply being able to use electronic resources within and outside the classroom for learning and teaching.*

Interviewee F further defined blended learning, by arguing:

*It's a combination of things. It's being able to use, say e-electronic resources within the classroom and outside the classroom and sort of using different approaches to teaching.*

The findings also suggest that blended learning at CSC primarily supports teaching and learning. However, the blended learning model is not yet fully developed, as mentioned by interviewee F:

*We are using blended learning to support learning and teaching, it's not developed.*

Initially, blended learning was piloted for part-time students. The blended learning at CSC was influenced by how technology continued to change teaching and learning. The interviewees' responses suggested resistance among fellow lecturers to introducing technology in module delivery because

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they tended to want to keep their old ways. The interviewees' responses affirmed that they felt blended learning was appropriate for the MBA programme because the online aspects of blended learning would help students to access the instructional process who may not have the time to be physically present in class. The responses were inclined towards the view that the face-to-face aspect of blended learning provided an opportunity to maximise the time students spent on the application of principles to real-world cases to strengthen the MBA programme. The findings further indicate that individual module leaders and tutors could opt to adopt blended learning in their various modules as they found appropriate.

In summarising this section on examining the similarities and differences between the three case study institutions, it was found that the majority of the MBA academics in the three universities had worked in the MBA programme for over 10 years. It was found that all the academics in the three case study institutions came from different disciplines, e.g., strategic management, marketing, accounting and finance. Two academics at CSA and CSB had the same discipline: engineering. The professional experience of academics played a fundamentally important role in the MBA programme. Although interviewee K at CSB had a great deal of experience in using webinars, he did not use it or think to apply it; this was due to the limitations of the technology used and the lack of the academics' experience in using technology at CSB, following the replacement of Blackboard with eBridge. In addition, they still used traditional teaching and learning techniques, e.g., face-to-face contact and the VLE, for the three different MBA models. However, the findings from the three case institutions show that no specific training was provided to the MBA academic staff to help them use technology in their modules. Thus, with such a lack of training, the academics preferred to use traditional learning and teaching techniques, employing simple technology to deliver their modules.

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### **5.3.2 Curriculum and Module Design from the Perspectives of Academics**

This section discusses the findings from the three case study institutions regarding their underlying motives for designing the modules and curriculums for their MBA programmes. This section also discusses how an MBA programme plays an important role in professional managers' development and how the design of a module and curriculum has an impact on students' personal lives and their ability to play different roles, such as managers and leaders, from the perspectives of academics. Therefore, this section discusses the findings regarding the rationales and motives behind designing an MBA module and curriculum from the perspectives of academics.

#### **Case study A**

The case study findings show that the development of the capabilities of MBA students as managers was a major objective of the full-time, part-time and online MBA programme models at CSA. The respondents also maintained that there were no differences in career outcomes between graduates of an online MBA programme and those from the traditional full-time programme. Interviewee B confirmed the above statement:

*No, I think the difference is between the full-time and any part-time, so the full time because they tend to be younger, they have given up a job, so the initial career anyway may be different.*

In discussing the module on CSR, the respondents mentioned that being a good manager also meant being responsible to society, and that manager students are taught this on the CSA module. However, the findings also demonstrate that module-specific claims, such as contributing to the students' managerial development and impact on society, are debatable. As mentioned by interviewee M:

*The MBA programme has Leadership Development as a module, as is Creative Decision-making for Effective Change, and Global HR Management, Micro Global Management and an Ethics module, though the value of these modules are open to debate.*

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The respondents also mentioned that case studies and simulations are some of the techniques that CSA uses in its MBA programme modules to develop the students' managerial skills. These tools are designed to build students' confidence to lead. The findings also demonstrate that group work is used on the MBA programme at CSA for students' development as managers. In group work, the leadership role rotates among the students so that every student can experience a leadership position and its characteristics.

It was found that the MBA programme at CSA was designed to create global managers and various mechanisms were adopted in the modules to further this. For example, various exercises were designed for the students to build their creativity by undertaking unusual tasks, such as writing reflective journals to build students' self-awareness and to make them more self-critical.

As mentioned by interviewee B:

*Companies specifically look for MBAs to develop managers because those companies are aware that the MBA programme does not train specialists (as in the case of MSc programmes), but managers.*

Furthermore, the respondents at CSA linked the quality of the Executive MBA with its ability to help students apply what is learnt in class to the workplace, as mentioned by interviewee M:

*The Executive MBA is good for managers if they can connect theory with practice; engaging with the practice of management and applying theories in the workplace, which may create a new and different experience.*

The respondents also argued that the MBA programme not only had an impact on professional and workplace lives, but also had significant impacts on the students' personal lives. As mentioned by interviewee B:

*An MBA programme affects students' lives and helps make decisions along with value to the professional lives of students.*

The respondents at CSA mentioned that students were drawn to the online programme because of the flexibility it offered. It was found that students

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who tended to travel a lot because of work were able to fit online learning into their schedule in a way that other models of the programme did not allow. Students were also able to network with others around the world. Taking the online programme was also cheaper, due to the fact that students were able to learn whilst keeping their jobs and at times that were convenient to them. Students only had to attend tutorial sessions, which take place once a fortnight or once a month, depending on the particular module.

### **Case study B**

The findings from CSB corroborate those from CSA in terms of the role of an MBA in a professional manager's development. The respondents at CSB mentioned that an MBA programme provides opportunities for management development because it brings students' practical management experience to the course and so provides an opportunity for students to share with and learn from each other. The respondents at CSB also mentioned that, although the objective of an MBA programme is to develop future managers, the success of this objective is still debatable and difficult to measure. Most of the respondents referred to the ability of an MBA programme to make better leaders. However, there is no simple, clear evidence for this assertion.

According to interviewee D,

*It remains a fact that programme modules are designed to do just that, and so results as to coming out a better manager depend on the students themselves.*

### **Case study C**

The findings from CSC show that the main objective of an MBA programme and its modules is to build managers, leaders and professionals with an ability to lead. According to interviewee F,

*Students can build confidence and ability to lead by active debates based on sound theory. For example, the Leadership module, which builds confidence to lead.*

The respondents at CSC maintained that the university's MBA modules are well designed for the purpose of producing leaders. For example, interviewee F mentioned that

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*The MBA had enough in theory to produce better leaders.*

Similarly, interviewee S mentioned:

*Producing better leaders is the main reason for taking the MBA programme and so modules are designed for the same purpose.*

The findings from CSC show that students were interested in having more electronic resources to access course material, particularly those students who worked full-time and were on the Executive programme. The findings from CSC further demonstrate that students liked to download and watch or access learning material on smartphones, tablets and similar devices. The respondents at CSC expressed similarly positive attitudes towards blended learning. There was little apprehension regarding students' online or mobile learning, as many of the students had smartphones, tablets and other devices and recognised the benefits of blended learning.

Summarising the above discussion of the findings, the MBA was considered the most important and valuable programme at the case study institutions. However, it was also found that the respondents could not manage to articulate its importance and value explicitly, perhaps due to lack of knowledge and the case study institutions' inability to inform, train and develop their lecturers regarding the different perspectives of MBA programmes. The findings further demonstrate that the case study institutions had different underlying motives for designing their MBA programme curriculum and modules; for example, developing students' managerial skills and confidence, building their self-awareness and enabling them to be more self-critical, as well as furthering their leadership skills. The findings further demonstrate that soft skills, e.g., leadership, negotiation, and being self-critical, are also important for MBA students to be able to meet practical life requirements. Further, the findings from the three case institutions link the quality of the Executive MBA with its ability to help students to apply what is learnt in class to their workplace environment. Although the common objective of the three case study institutions was to develop future managers and make better leaders, most of the respondents

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mentioned that this objective was still debatable, difficult to measure and there was no simple, clear evidence for it.

### **5.3.3 Students' Reflections on Academics' Perspectives (Survey Results)**

This section presents the survey results for the respondents' (students') experience or their reflection on the academics' perspectives. This section further highlights the similarities and differences between academics' perspectives in designing an MBA programme curriculum and modules and students' reflections on their experience.

#### **Case study A**

The respondent population at CSA consisted of 18 *males* (81.82%) and four *females* (18.18%), with one participant not indicating a gender. Six participants (27.27%) indicated they were *single*, two (9.09%) identified themselves as *in a relationship* and 14 more identified themselves as *married* (63.64%). One participant did not indicate anything. It was found that 13 participants (59.09%) fell within the *26-35 years* age group and nine (40.91%) indicated they were *above 36 years*. There was one abstention from responding to this question.

In terms of computer expertise, one participant (4.55%) responded as having *no experience*, with two (9.09%) indicating they were a *novice*. Fourteen (63.64%) identified themselves as *intermediate*, with five (22.73%) claiming to be *experts*. One participant did not answer this question.

When the participants were asked whether they had previously studied on an online course, five (22.73%) answered *yes* and 17 (77.27%) answered *no*. One participant did not provide an answer.

The findings show that the respondents generally had a favourable view of the kinds of support and management provision they received on the MBA programme at CSA. Table 5.5 shows the range of response choices available

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to the participants to best capture their level of agreement with a given statement, which it was hoped would gauge the degree/effectiveness of the kind of support and help they received on the MBA. These response choices ranged from *strongly disagree* and *disagree* to *agree* and *strongly agree*. Table 5.5 shows that of the 23 respondents who responded to each of the 13 distinct statements, at least 12 of them (representing over 50%) tended to *agree* with each of the statements.

The second most popular respondent choice was the *strongly agree* option. Of the 23 distinct response choices made to each of the 13 distinct statements, the *strongly agree* option received a high response tally of 11 for the statement that *I receive good quality e-learning material*, whilst the *I received a good quality of induction* option had the lowest response choice tally of just two. These two response choices of *agree* and *strongly agree* taken together represent a high tally of 22 out of a possible 23, indicating that the vast majority of survey participants had a positive outlook regarding the level of support expressed in their responses to each of the 13 distinct statements they were given.

The statement *I received technical help when I had IT issues* received the highest *agree* tally of 18 among all the other 13 distinct statements/comments presented to the survey participants. At the same time, the total tally that represented negative views of any of the 13 distinct statements/comments presented the *strongly disagree* and *disagree* options, which cumulatively tallied to only 27 for every single one of the 13 distinct choices. These findings demonstrate that the support system for students as perceived by the students themselves on the CSA MBA programme is significantly strong.

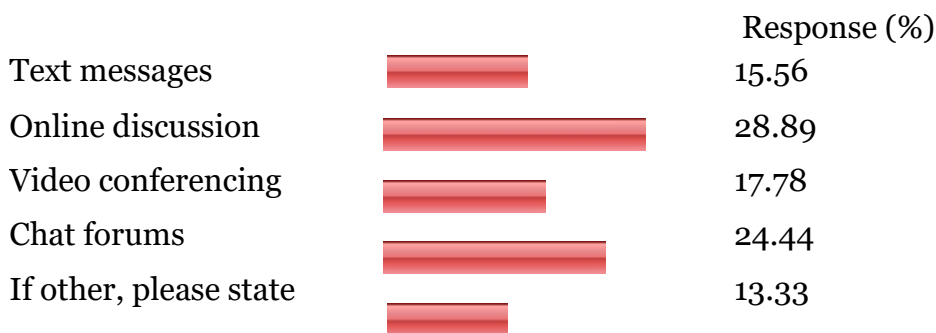


**Table 5.5: Survey participants' views on the support and management levels received on the MBA programme at CSA**

	<b>Strongly disagree</b>	<b>Disagree</b>	<b>Agree</b>	<b>Strongly agree</b>
I received good quality administrative support.	0	1	15	7
I received good quality teaching.	1	0	15	7
I received a good quality of induction.	2	5	13	3
I received good quality assignment support.	0	4	17	2
I found the module handbook helpful.	0	2	13	8
I had access to relevant textbooks.	0	1	12	10
I received a good quality of e-learning materials.	0	1	11	11
I found the email support from tutors helpful.	0	1	14	8
I received relevant website links e.g., additional learning resources and e-journals.	0	0	16	7
I received technical help when I had IT issues.	0	2	18	3
I found the assignment instructions helpful.	0	2	16	5
I found the assignment submission procedures clear.	0	1	16	6
I found the assignment feedback helpful.	0	4	12	7

Figure 5.6 outlines the results indicating students' insight into the communication methods used within the MBA programme to support learning and teaching. Students were presented with five response/answer options, with the liberty to choose as many options as applied to them on the MBA programme. This means that 23 students with the liberty to choose from up to five separate response options potentially had a maximum of 115 distinct responses. However, the figure shows that a total of 45 responses were recorded.

The figure shows that online discussion was the most commonly used communication means on the MBA programme among the 23 students surveyed, with 13 out of the 45 responses indicating that choice. The least popular choice was the *other* response option, which had only six participants choosing it as their means of communication on the MBA programme. The *other* response had a number of specific choice options, including e-mails, webinars, Blackboard and face-to-face, as shown in the figure. Between the most and least popular choices, the use of chat forums recorded 11 responses, video conferencing received eight responses, and seven participants indicated text messages as their main means of communications on the MBA, in that order. Figure 5.6 shows a detailed breakdown of the findings.



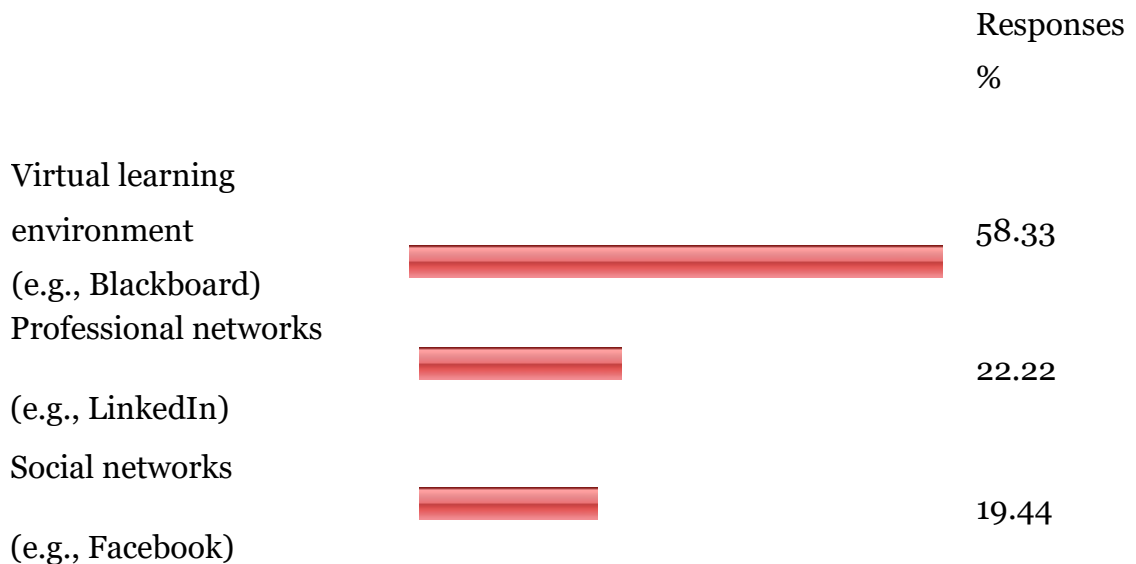
**Figure 5.6: Communication methods used within the MBA programme to support learning and teaching at CSA**

Participants were also surveyed on the systems used on the CSA MBA programme. This time, students were presented with three response/answer options, with the liberty to choose as many options as applied to their circumstances on the MBA programme. Each of the 23 students could choose from up to three distinct response options:

- ❖ Virtual learning environments (e.g., Blackboard)
- ❖ Professional networks (e.g., LinkedIn)
- ❖ Social networks (e.g., Facebook)

This arrangement presented the possibility of obtaining a maximum of 115 distinct responses. Figure 5.7 shows that a total of 36 distinct responses were recorded.

Figure 5.7 show that the VLE (e.g., Blackboard) was the most-used medium for communication on the CSA MBA programme, with 21 out of the 36 respondents identifying it as such. Professional networks and social networks were the second and third most-used means of communication on the CSA MBA programme, with 22.22% and 19.44% of the surveyed students, respectively, as also shown in Figure 5.7.



**Figure 5.7: Systems used on the MBA programme at CSA**

Table 5.6 shows the responses to statements regarding the impact of the MBA programme on participants' professional development. The survey participants were required to choose from the options *strongly disagree*, *disagree*, *agree* and *strongly agree*. A total of 22 out of the possible 23 participants responded to each statement. The findings indicate a generally positive outlook of the survey respondents on the impact that the CSA MBA programme had on their personal development. The majority of the responses showed respondents *agreeing* or *strongly agreeing* with every statement. Indeed, the *disagree* column for all six statements had a total tally of only five out of the 22 responses. From the *strongly disagree* column, it can be seen that no respondent *strongly disagreed* with any of the statements. The most common response tally recorded for that table was *agree* in response to the statement that the *MBA programme improved my ability to think critically*, with 14 responses out of 22.

**Table 5.6: Perceptions of the capacity of the MBA programme at CSA for professional development**

	<b>Strongly disagree</b>	<b>Disagree</b>	<b>Agree</b>	<b>Strongly agree</b>
The MBA programme enhanced my ability to understand different points of view.	0	0	9	13
The MBA programme improved my decision-making and problem-solving skills.	0	2	10	10
The MBA programme improved my ability to think critically.	0	0	14	8
The MBA programme enabled me to relate my own experience to the topic covered on the course.	0	2	13	7
The MBA programme helped me to become a better manager.	0	1	12	9

The MBA programme helped me to become a better leader.	0	0	11	11
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As with Table 5.6, Table 5.7 also shows the results for a number of statements to which the survey participants were asked to choose one response: *strongly disagree*, *disagree*, *agree* or *strongly agree*. These statements focused on how the MBA programme helped students to interact with their environment, including their peers, tutors, etc. By observing the table, it is evident that the *strongly disagree* column recorded no responses, whilst the *disagree* column only recorded eight responses for all six distinct statements taken together. To put these numbers into perspective, every distinct statement had a maximum of 22 responses, and every column for a response option, including the *strongly disagree* and *disagree* columns, can potentially record a maximum of 138 responses.

It can be seen, therefore, that Table 5.7 generally depicts an overwhelmingly positive outlook of the MBA programme, which is represented by the *agree* and *strongly agree* options, according to the responses of the students. The *agree* column had the largest response tally among the four response options (out of 138), with the *strongly agree* option following in second place (out of 138). The statement regarding the MBA improving the ability to facilitate sharing and discussing ideas with tutors was the statement with the largest response tally, this coming under the *agree* response option.

**Table 5.7: Survey participants' perceptions of the MBA programme at CSA in developing students' ability to interact with their environment**

Survey instruments	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Agree	Strongly agree
The MBA improved my team working skills.	0	0	10	12
The MBA improved my ability to share and discuss ideas with my peers.	0	0	10	12

The MBA improved my ability to share and discuss ideas with my tutors.	0	1	16	5
The MBA enabled me to take part in professional networking.	0	5	10	7
The MBA enabled me to develop my problem-solving skills through working with peers.	0	1	14	7
Working with my MBA peers helped me to develop new knowledge skills.	0	1	12	9

Table 5.8 shows participants' choices for learning preferences. However, unlike the other tables, the information in this table runs counter to the trend of highly positive views on each theme, as demonstrated by the high numbers in the response tally for the *agree* and *strongly agree* response options. In this table, the *disagree* option column records relatively high responses for statements referring to students' preference to learn in face-to-face situations, their preference to learn through communicating with others using technology, or the preference to learn independently using online resources.

**Table 5.8: Survey participants' learning preferences at CSA**

Survey instruments	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Agree	Strongly agree
I prefer to learn in face-to-face situations.	0	5	6	11
I prefer to learn through communicating with others using technology.	0	9	9	4
I prefer to learn by myself using online resources.	1	8	9	4

I prefer to learn by myself using traditional resources, such as books.	1	2	17	2
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### Case study B

At CSB, five *male* (62.50%) and three *female* (37.50%) respondents took part in this research. Two participants were *single* (25%), one person (12.50%) described him/herself as being *in a relationship*, and five participants were *married*. There were four respondents in each category for the age groups *26-35 years* and *above 36 years*. One respondent did not answer the question.

When the participants were surveyed on their level of computer expertise before they enrolled on the MBA programme, three respondents (37.50%) identified themselves as *experts* and five (62.50%) as being at an *intermediate* level. According to the survey findings, no participants identified themselves as a *novice* or with *no experience*. One participant did not answer the survey questions.

One participant (12.50%) had previously studied on an online course and seven had not had any previous studies online. One participant did not answer the question.

The participants generally agreed with the statements presented on the survey that sought to measure perceptions of the level of support and management they received on the MBA programme at CSB. Nine participants responded to this survey, which had 14 distinct items or statements about the level of support available for students on the CSB MBA programme. There were also four response choice options for these statements: *strongly disagree*, *disagree*, *agree* and *strongly agree*. It can be observed from Table 5.9 that 88.89% of the nine respondents tended to *agree* with the statements on *receiving good quality teaching* and *good quality administrative support*. These were the highest responses recorded in this section of the survey. The majority of the respondents tended to *agree* when it came to

statements on having *received good quality assignment support* and *finding assignment instructions helpful* (77.78% each).

On the other hand, there were significant indications of discontent regarding the statements, particularly with those on *having received a good quality of induction* and *receiving relevant website links*, which, respectively, recorded 33.33% and 44.44% of the respondents choosing the *disagree* option. Interestingly, the *strongly disagree* column recorded zero responses to each of the statements. It is, therefore, safe to say that, in general, respondents' perceptions were positive about the kind of support and management they received from the CSB MBA programme (from observing the response percentages in the *agree* and *strongly agree* columns).

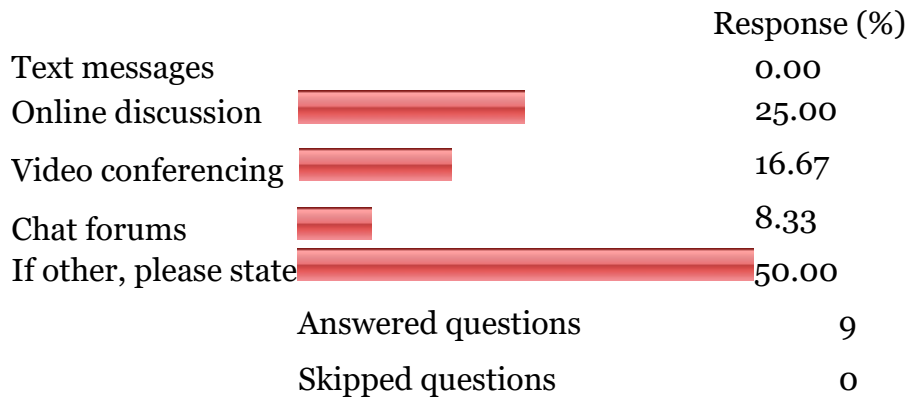
**Table 5.9: Participants' views on the support and management levels received on the MBA programme at CSB**

	<b>Strongly disagree (%)</b>	<b>Disagree (%)</b>	<b>Agree (%)</b>	<b>Strongly agree (%)</b>
I received good quality administrative support.	0	11.11	88.89	0
I received good quality teaching.	0	0	88.89	11.11
I received a good quality of induction.	0	33.33	55.56	11.11
I received good quality assignment support.	0	11.11	77.78	11.11
I found the module handbook helpful.	0	11.11	55.56	33.33
I had access to relevant textbooks.	0	0	44.44	55.56
I received a good quality of e-learning materials.	0	33.33	44.44	22.22
I found the email support from tutors helpful.	0	11.11	55.56	33.33



I received relevant website links e.g., additional learning resources and e-journals.	0	44.44	22.22	33.33
I received technical help when I had IT issues.	0	22.22	55.56	22.22
I found the assignment instructions helpful.	0	0	77.78	22.22
I found the assignment submission procedures clear.	0	22.22	33.33	44.44
I found the assignment feedback helpful.	0	22.22	55.56	22.22

Figure 5.8 outlines the next section of the survey, which examined participants' perspectives on communication methods used within the MBA programme to support learning and teaching. Participants were presented with five response options, with the liberty to choose as many options as applied: *text messages*, *online discussion*, *video conferencing*, *chat forums*, and *others*. There were zero responses for *text messages*, *online discussions* recorded three responses, *video conferencing* recorded two, and *chat forums* recorded one. Six responses were recorded for the *other* response option. With respect to the six responses recorded for *other*, three of them were specified as being *eBridge*, whilst *emails*, *face-to-face meetings*, *discussion groups* and *telephones* were also specified as the alternative means by which respondents communicated on the MBA programme, as depicted in more detail in the figure.



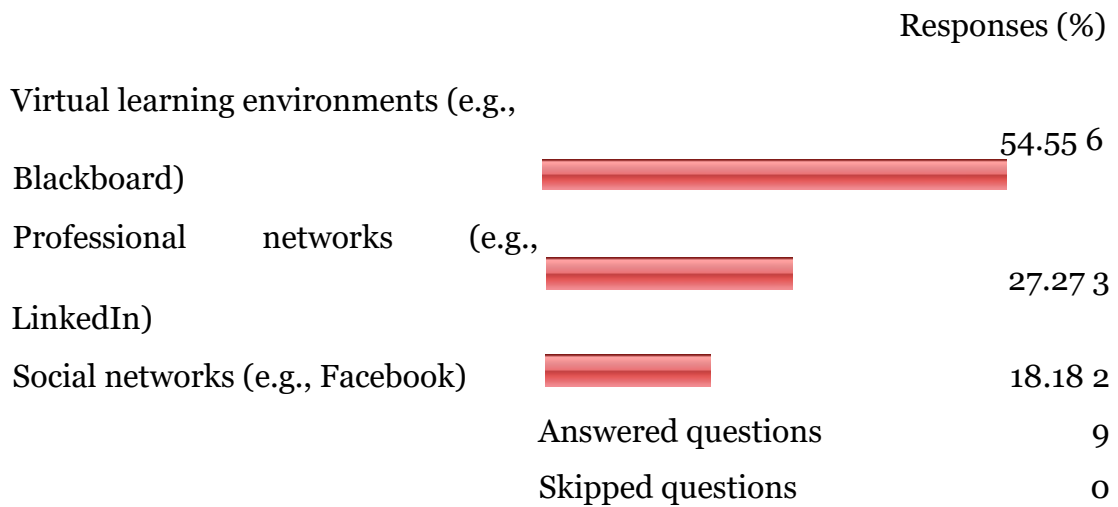
**Figure 5.8: Communication methods used within the MBA programme to support learning and teaching at CSB**

When the respondents were asked to specify which medium of communication they preferred, three identified video conferencing. One respondent each identified eBridge, email and online discussions as their preferred means of communication.

Focus on the survey then shifted to the systems that were used by CSB for its MBA programme. Participants were asked to choose from up to three responses from the following options:

- ❖ Virtual learning environments (e.g., Blackboard)
- ❖ Professional networks (e.g., LinkedIn)
- ❖ Social networks (e.g., Facebook)

This meant that each response option could, potentially, be chosen nine times, as there were nine respondents. VLEs were the most popular choice among the nine respondents, with 54.55% of them identifying it as a system used on the MBA programme. Three respondents (27.27%) chose professional networks, with two respondents identifying social networks, as depicted in Figure 5.9.



**Figure 5.9: Systems used on the MBA programme at CSB**

The next survey theme presented a number of statements about the impact the MBA programme had on individuals in their personal development as leaders, managers, etc. The survey participants were asked to choose from the options *strongly disagree*, *disagree*, *agree* and *strongly agree*, to indicate the extent to which they agreed with the statements. A total of eight out of the nine participants responded to each of the statements. The findings indicate a generally positive perception of the survey respondents towards the impact of the CSB MBA programme on their personal development. The majority of the responses showed respondents *agreeing* or *strongly agreeing* with every statement. Only the statements that the *MBA programme improved my ability to think critically* and *the MBA programme helped me to become a better manager* recorded some responses in the *disagree* column, with each statement recording 12.50% of the responses. It is important to note that the *strongly disagree* column did not record any response for any statement. At the same time, the statement regarding the *MBA programme enabling me to relate experiences to topics covered on the course* had 75% of the respondents *strongly agreeing*. Table 5.10 presents the respondents' perceptions of the MBA programme's capacity for professional development.

**Table 5.10: Perceptions of the capacity of the MBA programme at CSB for professional development**

	<b>Strongly disagree (%)</b>	<b>Disagree (%)</b>	<b>Agree (%)</b>	<b>Strongly agree (%)</b>
The MBA programme enhanced my ability to understand different points of view.	0	0	50.00	50.00
The MBA programme improved my decision-making and problem-solving skills.	0	0	62.50	37.50
The MBA programme improved my ability to think critically.	0	12.50	37.50	50.00
The MBA programme enabled me to relate my own experience to the topic covered on the course.	0	0	25.00	75.00
The MBA programme helped me to become a better manager.	0	12.50	50.00	37.50
The MBA programme helped me to become a better leader.	0	0	62.50	37.50

The next statements focused on how the MBA programme helped students interact with their environment, including peers, tutors, etc. The respondents were asked to choose from the same pool of response options: *strongly disagree*, *disagree*, *agree* and *strongly agree*. Table 5.11 shows that the *strongly disagree* column recorded no responses, even though the *disagree* column recorded significant response percentages for five out of the six distinct statements. Only the *working with my MBA peers helped me to develop new knowledge skills* statement recorded a zero response percentage in this column. Again, the table generally depicts an overwhelmingly positive outlook of the MBA programme, and this conclusion can be drawn by observing the percentages recorded under the *agree* and *strongly agree* columns according to the responses of the students. The *agree* column had

the largest response percentage among all four response options, with the *strongly agree* option also showing a strong percentage. The statement regarding the *MBA enabling me to develop problem-solving skills through working with peers*, for instance, recorded 87.50% *agree* responses.

**Table 5.11: Perceptions of the MBA programme at CSB in developing students' ability to interact with their environment**

	<b>Strongly disagree (%)</b>	<b>Disagree (%)</b>	<b>Agree (%)</b>	<b>Strongly agree (%)</b>
The MBA improved my team-working skills.	0	12.50	75.00	12.50
The MBA improved my ability to share and discuss ideas with my peers.	0	12.50	62.50	25.00
The MBA improved my ability to share and discuss ideas with my tutors.	0	25.00	62.50	12.50
The MBA enabled me to take part in professional networking.	0	12.50	75.00	12.50
The MBA enabled me to develop my problem-solving skills through working with peers.	0	12.50	87.50	0
Working with my MBA peers helped me to develop new knowledge skills.	0	0	75.00	25.00

In comparison with the other findings, Table 5.12 displays relatively high negative perceptions: two 12.50% *strongly disagree* responses, and one 75.00%, 50.00%, and 37.50% *disagree* response, each quite unlike any of the results in the other tables and figures observed for the CSB MBA programme survey, and a testament to the negative perceptions found.

**Table 5.12: Survey participants' learning preferences at CSB**

	<b>Strongly disagree (%)</b>	<b>Disagree (%)</b>	<b>Agree (%)</b>	<b>Strongly agree (%)</b>
I prefer to learn in face-to-face situations.	12.50	0	37.50	50.00
I prefer to learn through communicating with others using technology.	0	37.50	62.50	0
I prefer to learn by myself using online resources.	12.50	50.00	25.00	12.50
I prefer to learn by myself using traditional resources such a book.	0	75.00	25.00	0

### Case study C

The respondents from CSC were two *males* (66.67%) and one *female* (33.33%). All the participants were *married*. In terms of age, one participant was in the *26-35 years* group and two were *above 36 years old*.

When the participants were surveyed on their level of computer expertise before they enrolled on the MBA, all the respondents (100.00%) identified themselves as *experts*. One participant (33.33%) had previously studied on an online course and one had not. One participant skipped the question.

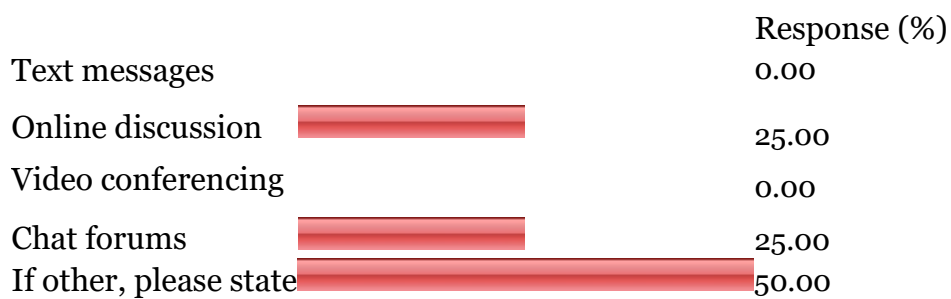
Table 5.13 shows the range of response choices available to the respondents that best captured the degree to which they concurred with a given statement, which it was hoped would gauge the level of effectiveness of the kind of support and help they received on the CSC MBA programme. These response choices were *strongly disagree*, *disagree*, *agree* and *strongly agree*. The

table shows most of the responses to all 13 statements are centred on the *agree* response option. All three respondents (100% of the participants for CSC) *agreed*, which meant that they *found the module handbook helpful; had access to relevant textbooks; found the email support from tutors helpful; found the assignment instructions helpful; and found the assignment feedback helpful*. Table 5.13 also shows that no respondent *strongly disagreed* with any of the statements. Observing the *strongly agree* column shows a generally positive opinion of respondents towards the CSC MBA programme.

**Table 5.13: Survey participants' views on the support and management levels received on the MBA programme at CSC**

Survey instruments	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Agree	Strongly agree
I received good quality administrative support.	0	1	2	0
I received good quality teaching.	0	1	1	1
I received a good quality of induction.	0	1	2	0
I received good quality assignment support.	0	1	2	0
I found the module handbook helpful.	0	0	3	0
I had access to relevant textbooks.	0	0	3	0
I received a good quality of e-learning materials.	0	0	2	1
I found the e-mail support from tutors helpful.	0	0	3	0
I received relevant website links e.g., additional learning resources and e-journals.	0	0	1	2
I received technical help when I had IT issues.	0	1	1	1

I found the assignment instructions helpful.	0	0	3	0
I found the assignment submission procedures clear.	0	0	2	1
I found the assignment feedback helpful.	0	0	3	0



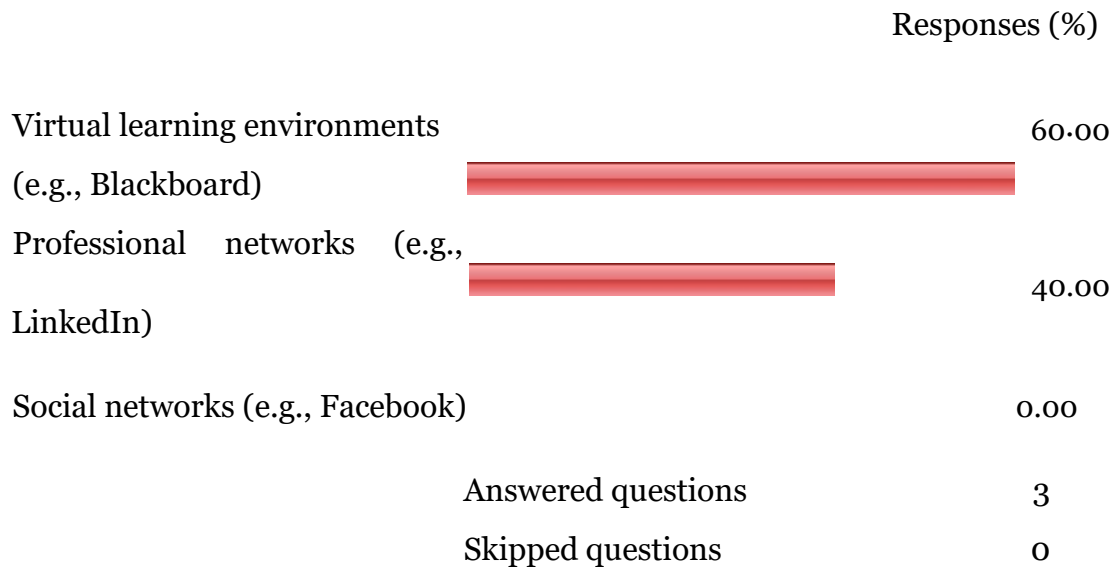
**Figure 5.10: Communication methods used within the MBA programme to support learning and teaching at CSC**

Figure 5.10 shows the various communication channels available for use for students on the CSC MBA programme to support learning and teaching. Students were presented with five response/answer options, with the liberty to choose as many options as they found applicable; this meant that each response option potentially had a maximum of three responses. The results show that none of the respondents used text messaging or video conferencing as a means of communication at CSC. *Online discussions* and *chat forums* had one response each. The *other* response option, which was defined by *email feedback on request* and *email Blackboard*, received two responses.

The next survey theme investigated the systems that were used on the CSC MBA programme. Participants had *virtual learning environments*, *professional networks*, and *social networks* as three response/answer options from which to choose, with the liberty to choose as many options as applied to their circumstances on the MBA programme. Whilst there was zero response recorded for *social networks*, three responses were recorded



for *virtual learning environments* and two for *professional networks*, as demonstrated in Figure 5.11.



**Figure 5.11: Systems used on the MBA programme at CSB**

Table 5.14 presents statements about how the MBA programme had an impact on the participants' personal development. Depending on how deeply they identified with the statement, the participants were asked if they *strongly disagreed*, *disagreed*, *agreed* or *strongly agreed*. The majority of the participant responses to these statements were recorded in the *strongly agree* column, depicting a generally positive view of the MBA programme for personal skills enhancement. There were zero responses that showed strong disagreement with any of the statements and the *disagree* column recorded a single response for each of the six statements made, with the exception of the statement on *relating personal experience with the topics covered*, with which none of the respondents disagreed.

**Table 5.14: Perceptions of the capacity of the MBA programme at CSC for professional development**

	<b>Strongly disagree</b>	<b>Disagree</b>	<b>Agree</b>	<b>Strongly agree</b>
The MBA programme enhanced my ability to understand different points of view.	0	1	1	1
The MBA programme improved my decision-making and problem-solving skills.	0	1	0	2
The MBA programme improved my ability to think critically.	0	1	0	2
The MBA programme enabled me to relate my own experience to the topic covered on the course.	0	0	2	1
The MBA programme helped me to become a better manager.	0	1	1	1
The MBA programme helped me to become a better leader.	0	1	0	2

Table 5.15 presents the results for statements which focused on gauging the degree to which the MBA programme was perceived to help students' interaction with their environment, including peers, tutors, etc. Again, Table 5.15 shows a generally positive response, with the vast majority of the responses recorded in the *agree* and *strongly agree* columns.

**Table 5.15: Perceptions of the MBA programme at CSC in developing students' ability to interact with their environment**

	<b>Strongly disagree</b>	<b>Disagree</b>	<b>Agree</b>	<b>Strongly agree</b>
The MBA improved my team-working skills.	0	1	1	1
The MBA improved my ability to share and discuss ideas with my peers.	0	1	1	1
The MBA improved my ability to share and discuss ideas with my tutors.	0	0	2	1
The MBA enabled me to take part in professional networking.	0	1	1	1
The MBA enabled me to develop my problem-solving skills through working with peers.	0	1	0	2
Working with my MBA peers helped me to develop new knowledge skills.	0	1	1	1

In Table 5.16, the *disagree* column recorded more responses than any of the others, signifying dissatisfaction with all the statements, with the exception of the statement regarding a preference for learning in face-to-face situations, to which two responses *strongly agreed* and a third *agreed*. This table is a vastly uncomplimentary perception of the respondents' use of online resources, communicating with others using technology and even learning by themselves using traditional resources such as books.

**Table 5.16: Survey participants' learning preferences at CSC**

	<b>Strongly disagree</b>	<b>Disagree</b>	<b>Agree</b>	<b>Strongly agree</b>
I prefer to learn in face-to-face situations.	0	0	1	2
I prefer to learn through communicating with others using technology.	0	3	0	0
I prefer to learn by myself using online resources.	1	2	0	0
I prefer to learn by myself using traditional resources such as books.	1	2	0	0

### 5.3.4 Summary

In summarising the findings in this section, it can be argued that there were a large number of similarities and only a few differences between survey participants' responses to the MBA programmes at the three case study institutions. Respondents generally had a favourable view of the kinds of support and management provision they received on the MBA programme at CSA. In general, respondents' perceptions were positive with regard to the kind of support and management they received from the CSB MBA programme. The support and help received on the CSC MBA programme was also generally positive. Online discussion was a major preference as a means of communication on the MBA programme at CSA. At CSB, online discussions recorded a large degree of preference as a means of communication on the MBA programme. CSC also had online discussion as a widely preferred communication means among survey respondents. According to the respondents at CSA, the VLE (i.e., Blackboard) was the most-used medium for communication on the MBA programme. The VLE

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was also the most popular choice among respondents at CSB as a medium of communication on the MBA programme. The same was true for CSC.

The findings further indicate a generally positive outlook among survey respondents regarding the impact of the CSA MBA programme on their personal development. Similarly, the findings indicate a generally positive perception of the survey respondents towards the impact of the CSB MBA programme on their personal development. There was also a generally positive view of the MBA programme for personal skills enhancement at CSC.

Furthermore, for CSA, CSB and CSC, a greater number of respondents would prefer to learn in face-to-face situations. CSB and CSC are similar in the sense that the majority of the respondents would prefer not to learn by themselves using online resources. Respondents at both case study institutions would also prefer not to learn by themselves using traditional resources such as books. In contrast, the survey results from CSC indicate that the majority of the respondents would prefer to learn by themselves using online resources. On the other hand, the majority of respondents at CSA indicated that they would prefer to learn by themselves using traditional resources, given that CSA was found to market a principally online MBA programme. CSA and CSC were found to be similar in terms of the particular type of VLE used on their MBA programmes, namely, the Blackboard learning environment, whereas CSB was found to use eBridge as a VLE system for its MBA programme.

#### **5.4 MBA PEDAGOGY**

This section highlights the third main finding regarding existing pedagogies for learning and teaching part time and full time MBA programmes and the extent of alignment between these pedagogies and theoretical frameworks.

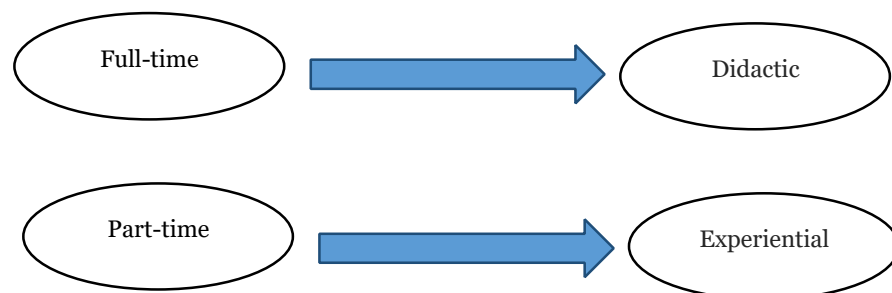
With respect to MBA pedagogy across all MBA programmes in each of the three case study universities, the findings indicate that the type of pedagogy was largely dependent upon the choice of the module leaders or lecturers.

This section also sheds light on the different forms/approaches to pedagogy on the MBA programmes in the case studies.

### 5.4.1 Pedagogical Forms

Some respondents at the case study institutions perceived using technological methods as the real meaning of pedagogy. Moreover, the findings from the case study institutions show that blended learning MBAs have paid more attention to technological learning and teaching approaches, with little regard for the real concept of pedagogy, i.e., the pedagogical theories in MBA programmes that are of utmost significant for effective learning deployment. As discussed earlier in this chapter, the case study institutions had different models of delivery, i.e., online learning, distance teaching and face-to-face learning. However, they have a common mode of delivery, i.e., full-time and part-time. This section considers the main differences between two part-time and full-time MBA programmes.

The CSA, CSB and CSC respondents considered a more didactic approach with their full-time students, i.e., traditional learning and teaching, and a more experiential technique, i.e., learning by doing, with part-time students (Figure 5.12). These were unexpected findings, which could have an impact on students' output.



**Figure 5.12: Pedagogy forms for full-time and part-time MBAs**

Most of the academics agreed that, due to the non-availability of professional managers among the full-time students, the MBA students engage with the

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real world of practice. The mechanism of the pedagogy on part-time courses of providing theoretical and practical instruction on the MBA programme was based on the idea that students would be able to exchange experiences and knowledge with other senior managers and be able to apply this knowledge practically in their workplace. The respondents further mentioned that the Executive MBA provided an opportunity for management and professional development, because most of the MBA students on the part-time course were professional managers, as mentioned by interviewee F:

*The Executive MBA provides an opportunity for management development. The reason that students who come to classrooms and take theory, they are working in management. So they share experience and apply it in their workplace. In addition, there is a module about the professional development of MBA students; whereas full-time MBA students cannot engage with the real world of practice.*

Furthermore, interviewee A mentioned that

*the MBA pedagogy is one of experiential learning, particularly with a part-time mode. What it is not about is about a practising theory but it's being able to go away, use it in your current work.*

#### **5.4.2 Different Learning and Teaching Approaches**

This section discusses the different learning and teaching techniques used by academics to deliver MBA programmes, as noted in this research. This section also highlights the similarities and differences in the teaching and learning techniques between the three cases.

##### **Case study A**

The findings from CSA show that, due to changes in the internal environment of the university and the use of traditional and online learning and teaching techniques, the policy and practices of the university academics' frameworks were changing as well, with a major shift in blended learning and teaching. The findings further show that the main teaching and learning support tool was the VLE e.g., Blackboard. Although CSA offered full-time, part-time and

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online learning, they all used the same techniques in teaching and learning, i.e., case studies, workshops, seminars and Blackboard. Blackboard was also used as the most important communication tool between lecturers and students. The findings also suggest that the course leaders were the main beneficiaries and users of the Blackboard system.

The findings show that a mix of tools and techniques were used at CSA for the delivery of its MBA programme. However, the respondents mentioned that the use of slides was the most common method used for lectures. Further, instructional sessions were a mix of lectures and tutorials, typically lasting for about three hours. Media tools, such as YouTube or any others that were deemed relevant, can be used to demonstrate important cases under study. The findings from CSA show that Blackboard was used as the main platform for lecturer-student interaction and communications regarding its MBA programme delivery. The respondents also mentioned that Blackboard played a collaborative function in organising group videos for as many as six students. Therefore, it could build a community of learning by facilitating student-lecturer engagement and interaction, as well as through emails and webinars. The findings also demonstrate that CSA used Blackboard to send emails to students for both face-to-face and online MBA programme models. It was also found that face-to-face meetings were encouraged and face-to-face sessions were held once a year, for one week. The respondents also described some other means of lecturer-student interaction/communication at CSA, such as tutorials and meetings with dissertation or project supervisors and a seven hour-a-week window for appointments to meet tutors face-to-face for online programmes.

Furthermore, webinars are a tool for presenting seminars, lectures and presentations over the internet. They form a learning community and are more enjoyable for academics than any other tool of communication, because lectures gather all the students together and they feel part of that community. Interviewee B mentioned that with the



*Webinar method, we can talk to all the students at the same time, virtual.*

The researcher concludes that CSA used webinars for online MBA students as a tool to enhance teaching and learning, whereby students could ask questions, receive answers and gain feedback at the same time (synchronous). Table 5.17 presents the main learning and teaching techniques for the MBA programme at CSA.

**Table 5.17: Learning and teaching techniques at CSA**

CSA	
Learning and teaching approaches	
Online learning	✓
Face-to-face	✓
Residential	✓
Lectures	✓
Workshops	✓
International trips	✓
Business trips	✓
Attending seminars	
Networking events	
VLE (Blackboard)	✓
Webinars	✓
Case studies	✓

### **Case study B**

The findings show that full-time, part-time and distance teaching have similar teaching and learning approaches and they have the same input in terms of objectives and learning outcomes. Further, the most common tool for teaching and learning at CSB was face-to-face contact, including seminars, workshops and business trips. Furthermore, students, particularly

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at off-site locations, appreciated face-to-face communication and wanted to see lecturers live. The findings from CSB point to a mix of teaching and learning techniques being used for the delivery of its MBA programme. The most-used techniques were lectures, case studies, the module handbook and email interaction. It was also found that face-to-face teaching was an important technique for all three models of MBA. Even though CSB offered distance teaching, it still had an important element of face-to-face contact as a main technique for teaching and learning.

The findings from CSB indicate that face-to-face interaction and the use of emails were the main means of interaction between lecturers and students. The respondents further mentioned that these two sources, face-to-face and email contact, were used for full-time, part-time and overseas MBA student-lecturer interaction and communication. It was also found that both full-time and part-time programmes offered students the opportunity to further develop themselves and their knowledge through exchange programmes with partner business schools abroad.

However, all the interviewees at CSB demonstrated that different students had different learning and teaching requirements, so the MBA academics tried to vary their approaches to teaching e.g., lectures, case studies and a VLE. One interesting finding at CSB was that interviewee A confirmed the above findings, as she was following a systematic approach and undertaking critical reflection in her approach to teaching and learning.

Table 5.18 presents the main learning and teaching techniques for the MBA programme at CSB.

**Table 5.18: Learning and teaching techniques at CSB**

<b>CSB</b>	
<b>Learning and teaching approaches</b>	
Online learning	
Face-to-face	✓
Residential	✓
Lectures	✓
Workshops	✓
International trips	✓
Business trips	✓
Attending seminars	✓
Networking events	
Virtual learning system	✓
Case studies	✓

### **Case study C**

All the interviewees mentioned that both the full-time and part-time models at CSC used similar teaching and learning techniques and facilities, including online testing, online packages, face-to-face meetings and a VLE (Blackboard). The full-time MBA students at CSC were working on different projects in class, e.g., group work and case studies. At CSC, it was found that there was widespread use of Blackboard, with its discussion board and blogging features. The respondents also mentioned that CSC used the

Blackboard system for its MBA programme as a platform for setting up groups, so that individual groups could be emailed to share information or quickly send feedback, for announcements, uploading and displaying course material, arranging reminders of lecturers' schedules, and for administering assignments. The findings from CSC suggest that face-to-face meetings were the main tools for lecturer-student interaction and communication at CSC.

The findings further suggest that the use of presentations using slides and lecture seminars was also common for MBA programme delivery at CSC. The findings and respondents' views show that CSC was following a lecturer-centred approach, because students had not done prior reading and, therefore, could not engage in and contribute to the MBA programme delivery, forcing the lecturer to lead the process. Table 5.19 presents the main learning and teaching techniques for the MBA programme at CSC.

**Table 5.19: Learning and teaching techniques at CSC**

CSC	
Learning and teaching approaches	
Online learning	
Face-to-face	✓
Residential	✓
Lectures	✓
Workshops	✓
International trips	✓

Business trips	✓
Attending seminars	✓
Networking events	✓
Virtual learning system (Blackboard)	✓
Case studies	✓

### 5.4.3 Academics' Disciplines

During the interviews, all the academic participants were asked about their experience of the underlying pedagogy used on the MBA programme. The term 'underlying pedagogy' is hidden behind the individual academics' disciplines. Academics' disciplines are discussed in section 5.3.1 and the PIA demonstrates the different disciplines of the academics who participated in the three case studies.

Two participants at CSA had different disciplines. The findings from CSA show that even though interviewee B, as explained in the previous section, outlined the differences in pedagogy for the full-time and part-time MBA students, she avoided answering questions related to underlying pedagogy, although she fully understood the meaning of the question. She asked the researcher to move to the next question. On the other hand, for interviewee M, who referred to industrial experience founded on a sound theoretical basis with an interactive content, a clear connection could not be drawn between the two pedagogies, since it was not clear whether the process was student- or tutor-centred. However, he asserted that his pedagogical approach was based on complexity theory and that the concept of this theory concerns how MBA students can manage their business more effectively. Further, he was inclined

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to blend theory with practical approaches in his way of delivering the programme:

*Well, basically it's to try and deliver a mixture of sound theoretical background tempered with people who have had industrial experience.*

In addition, he linked the quality of the MBA with its ability to help students apply what is learnt in class to the workplace, by emphasising that the MBA was good for managers if they could connect theory with practice. In other words, engaging with the practice of management and applying theories in the workplace may create a new and different experience, and this was done through case-based learning.

The findings from CSB are somewhat compatible with those from CSA. Interviewee A asserted that the pedagogical approach was up to the individual lecturers. She confirmed that her discipline influenced her approach to teaching and learning by following a systematic pedagogy, i.e., systems theory:

*Underlying pedagogy is one of critical reflection of experiential learning and heavily driven by system thinking, which is all about learning, reflection and implementation and reflection and this repeats which makes MBA very interesting.*

The above extract shows that the pedagogical approach is up to the individual lecturers' disciplines.

The findings also show that not only could disciplines affect the pedagogical approach, but the academic's interest could also have an influence. However, although his background is purely accountancy, interviewee J adopted Kolb's learning cycle (see Appendix E) as a main pedagogical approach in his module because he is interested in the educational model and

*the learning cycle, because it enabled me to develop that model. Yeah. This talks about concept mapping. I do these for my students, in which I map out an area. It shows how ideas link together.*

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Similarly, the findings from interviewee S show that his disciplines, interests and professional experience have had a major impact on his pedagogical approach. His background is organisational behaviour, his interest is in management education, while his professional experience is as a practising manager in industry and in electronic engineering design. However, because he has experience on both the practical and theoretical sides, he has tried to follow a similar strategy in his approach to teaching and learning on the module.

Furthermore, interviewee S is Programme Leader on the MBA programme at CSC. She asserted that her discipline had influenced her way of thinking in adopting different teaching and learning techniques in the programme and the researcher noticed that, during the interview, she was willing to learn about CourseRA (Course Remote Active), which is more for distance learning. Further, she mentioned that, based on her role, she intended to apply a different kind of social networking on the MBA programme, i.e., Yammer:

*I should be looking at Yammer. It's a different type of social network that's out there. It is different from Facebook.*

#### **5.4.4 Summary**

In summarising this section, it was found that MBA academic staff had considered traditional learning and teaching techniques, i.e., a didactic approach with full-time students and, with part-time students, more experiential learning, i.e., learning by doing due to most of the Executive MBA students being professional managers.

Furthermore, the findings from CSA, CSB and CSC show that face-to-face communication is an important element in all the different MBA models. At CSA, online students attend a residential session in their first year and with a partner institution in their second year to participate in a two-day business simulation exercise. The residential session offers students the chance to meet academic staff and peers with whom they have been working remotely.

The findings from the three case studies also show that case-based learning is one of the main methods used to teach within the MBA programmes. This was in agreement with module leaders' responses in the interviews, which revealed that case studies, alongside group work and presentations (see Table 5.20), were presented as some of the techniques used in the delivery of MBA programme modules. The useful aspect of case-based learning lies in its ability to enable learners to analyse cases and explore solutions through discussion, reflection and decision making, as they integrate prior experiences with what has been recently learned. The qualitative research findings reveal the use of some technology at all three universities to varying degrees, even those that claimed not to have online, blended or distance models for their MBA programme. The findings further show that there were a significant number of module leaders and lecturers who were wary of migrating their modules to an online mode.

**Table 5.20: Learning and teaching techniques at the three case study universities**

Learning and teaching techniques	Case study universities		
	CSA	CSB	CSC
Online learning	✓		
Face-to-face	✓	✓	✓
Residential	✓	✓	✓
Lectures	✓	✓	✓
Workshops	✓	✓	✓
International trips	✓	✓	✓
Business trips	✓	✓	✓



Attending seminars		✓	✓
Networking events			✓
Virtual learning system (Blackboard, eBridge)	✓	✓	✓
Case studies	✓	✓	✓
Distance teaching		✓	

Based upon the discussion in this section, Table 5.20 above shows the findings regarding the 12 most recurring and common methods adopted by each individual case study institution for MBA students to experience their learning. The findings indicate that these methods were based upon the choice of how each module leader wanted to deliver her or his module in each of the three case study institutions. Evidence for this was based upon the interviewees' own experience of teaching or based upon a colleague's experience, as documented from the interviews.

Furthermore, each academic had her or his own signature pedagogy. One important finding was that the different disciplines of the individual academics appeared to be playing a major role in their module delivery. These appeared to have a greater influence than a tacit underpinning pedagogy in the whole MBA programme.

Although the three case studies offered different learning models, i.e., online learning, distance teaching and face-to-face learning, they commonly used the same learning and teaching approaches, whether online or traditional approaches. CSA, CSB and CSC had two types of independent learning and teaching approaches: 1) a face-to-face approach, and 2) online learning approaches (VLE).

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However, at this stage, the researcher would like to evaluate the concept of blended learning on an MBA programme. The research findings show that the concept of blended learning is hidden behind different learning and teaching models and approaches. This idea is further discussed in the next section.

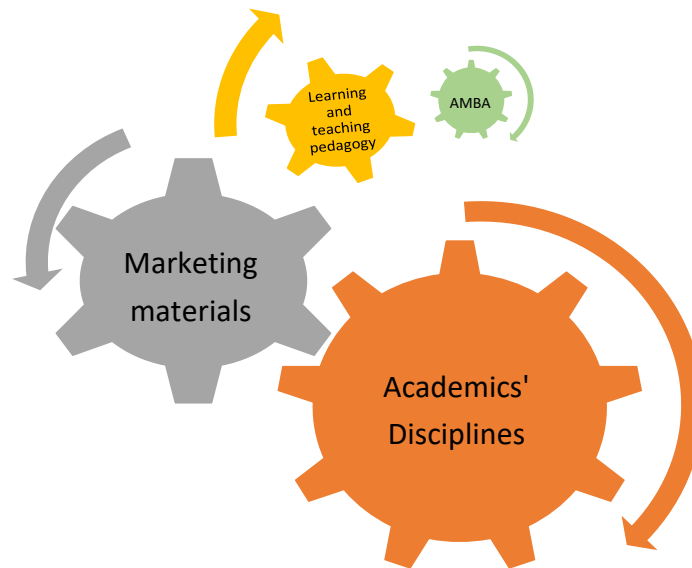
## **5.5 IMPROVING AND MARKETING MBAs**

This section on the marketing of MBAs refers to findings which indicate how official information pertaining to the delivery of the MBA programmes for all three case studies was portrayed to the outside world or to prospective students. One of the main ways by which each of the three case study institutions marketed their MBA programmes was through their business school's web page and it was found that there was diversity in how each case study portrayed its MBA programmes. This section presents the findings regarding the marketing of MBA programmes by answering the following question: How do the universities selected market their MBAs? This section also evaluates the language used in the design, delivery, and marketing of an MBA programme.

### **5.5.1 Language Used on MBA Programmes**

The findings show that the language used on MBA programmes in the case study institutions was driven by marketing and business school disciplines, rather than pedagogy. This has implications for the student experience, as it may indicate that a thoughtful pedagogy is either absent from or underplayed in the world of MBAs. Figure 5.13 below summarises interesting findings, i.e., attention is paid to marketing material and the business and management disciplines rather than pedagogical practices. Moreover, AMBA documents show that the Association does not highlight the importance of pedagogy, which is likely to have a major influence on the design, development and delivery of MBA programmes in institutions generally. The findings further

show that the language used in MBA programmes is based upon marketing, e.g., in online and offline documents, and business school disciplines (academics). Furthermore, the accreditation documents provided by AMBA relate to academic disciplines, with minimal reference to pedagogies.



**Figure 5.13: Language used in MBAs**

Source: Compiled by the researcher

### 5.5.2 Marketing vs. Reality

The findings show that the MBA programme at CSA is marketed as purely online learning. However, it was found that the students attended two kinds of residential sessions at CSA: one in their first year and the other with their partner institution in the second year. The residential sessions offer students the chance to meet academic staff and peers with whom they have been working remotely. Further, the findings show that the university used different technology to enhance learning and teaching techniques, as shown in section 5.2.3. In addition, the findings show that academics at CSA used different pedagogical techniques: they delivered the theoretical side using a VLE (Blackboard), and the practical side using traditional approaches, such as case studies and workshops. Although CSA markets an online learning

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experience, in practice, the course delivery mixes both online and face-to-face learning. In reality, CSA uses a blended learning model because it uses a VLE (Blackboard) and MBA students have a face-to-face element of a minimum of 120 hours. The findings from CSB demonstrate that a mixture of technology was used to enhance learning and teaching. Even though the MBA programme markets itself as offering distance teaching, i.e., CSB academics fly to overseas MBA students in different locations to lecture face-to-face, the face-to-face element is also important for this kind of learning and teaching model. Furthermore, CSB used different learning and teaching approaches, as shown in section 5.4.2, e.g., workshops, seminars and business trips. In practice, CSB used a blended learning model because the main teaching and learning techniques were face-to-face and it used a VLE (eBridge) for the three different models. The findings show that the MBA programme at CSC was marketed as face-to-face learning. However, different technology was used to enhance learning and teaching approaches, e.g., a VLE (Blackboard) and YouTube. CSC also used Blackboard to support teaching and learning with electronic communication and access to materials and information. In practice, CSC used a blended learning model due to the mix of technology used to enhance learning and teaching approaches, in addition to traditional approaches, e.g., face-to-face contact.

### **5.5.3 Summary**

In summarising this section, the findings demonstrate that the three case studies followed blended learning as the main model for delivering their MBA programmes. Even though the CSA programme is marketed as “fully online” on its website, it is actually a blended learning programme, because, in line with AMBA recommendations, an online MBA programme must contain 120 hours of face-to-face coursework. The CSB programme is packaged almost exclusively as face-to-face learning but, in practice, technology was also used in certain aspects. At CSC, the programme was packaged as an integrated programme, emphasising teaching practice across the disciplines. In practice, however, the module delivery is that of blended learning, indicating

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technological assistance mixed with face-to-face learning. However, the face-to-face element of 120 hours is important in any online/distance learning and teaching programme. Thus, the combination of online and face-to-face contact shows that all three universities used a mix of face-to-face learning and online learning to some degree i.e., blended learning. Therefore, against the background of the above detailed results, the next chapter presents a comparison of the findings in relation to the literature reviewed with a view to discussing the theoretical and practical implications of the results.

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## **CHAPTER SIX DISCUSSION**

### **6.1 INTRODUCTION**

The aim of this research was to evaluate the effectiveness of blended learning as a means of delivering management development in MBA programmes. The findings of this research have major implications for various aspects of the framework that guided the conduct of this research. This chapter discusses the findings in comparison with the formulated research questions; the empirical evidences and finally with the literature reviewed earlier to establish whether they corroborate or contradict one another in any way. During this process, various propositions are made which will ease the way to designing a new or modified MBA framework for different teaching and learning techniques.

This research explored four main themes (see chapter five). In this chapter, section 6.2 discusses the first finding which was related to investigating the dynamics of blended learning in MBA course delivery for management development and the extent of effectiveness of this approach in UK Universities; section 6.3 discusses the second finding which was related to identifying and evaluating existing theoretical frameworks for learning and teaching in MBA programmes and to compare and contrast these with existing MBA frameworks within three UK Universities; section 6.4 discusses the third finding which was related to critically investigating and evaluating existing pedagogies for learning and teaching part time and full time MBA programmes and the extent of alignment between these pedagogies and theoretical frameworks; and section 6.5 discusses findings related to the possibility for developing a theoretical framework that can be used by practitioners and managers of MBA programmes in UK Universities to improve and market their approaches to blended learning. Finally, Section

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6.6 assembles the different propositions in order to suggest a new framework for blended learning in MBA programmes.

## **6.2 BLENDED LEARNING AS A MEANS OF DELIVERING MBA PROGRAMME**

Among other things, this research seeks to provide answers on how effective “blended learning” learning is a means of delivering management development in MBA programmes. Findings from the research reveal that while face to face learning results in a lack of flexibility, there is still a preference for face to face learning methods. Findings from the research also demonstrate that face-to-face communication is becoming a crucial part of MBA programmes because people tend to value and appreciate human contact. Some of the different methods for face to face teachings and learning include group work, case studies, as well as seminars. On the other hand, the lack of flexibility as well as other shortcoming of the face to face learning methods makes blended learning a highly effective means of delivering management development training in MBA Programmes. It provides the students with 24 hours access to materials, and it also makes it possible to conduct online tests, quizzes, and multiple choice exams that can cover over two-third of the syllabus of courses taken. The role of blended learning as a means of delivering MBA programmes was discovered to be a major finding with three subthemes: academic framework (the impact of individual university regulations), the influence of AMBA, and individual course design and delivery. In this section, the researcher compares each sub-theme with the literature reviewed.

### **6.2.1 Academic Framework**

Seven dimensions were found as the main context, players and themes for blended learning MBAs: environment, market, university, course, module, academics, and students. The different relationships between them were also

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highlighted. The following is a comparison between these dimensions with the existing literature.

The environment dimension was discussed in the literature review from two perspectives: first, the general environment in a distance learning programme, which can exist in direct or indirect ways, from the type of society to the state of the economy (Cookson, 2000; Dron et al., 2000); and second, the systemic environment for the different learning and teaching systems (Cox, 1997; Cookson, 2000; Du Mont, 2002).

The findings of this research demonstrate that the environment dimension has implications from two perspectives: first, the external environment, e.g., AMBA, which provides credibility to business schools for their programmes on an international scale; and second, the internal environment, such as the market, university, course, module, academics and students. However, the empirical evidence (see section 5.2.1) demonstrates that the external environment dimension, i.e., AMBA, has a substantial impact on MBA programme strategy, design and delivery. This is discussed in the following section in more detail. The findings of this research support previous researchers' views, such as Banathy (1992), Cox (1997) and Cookson (2000), who described the environment as the greatest component in the different learning systems and as having a major influence on the performance of the system as a whole. Similarly, the findings regarding the environment dimension also support Cookson's (2000) idea, as he highlighted that the environment is likely to be the most important determinant of the success or failure of a learning system. The findings regarding marketing, which is reflected in the first dimension in the internal environment, highlight the way in which business schools market their MBA programmes, e.g., through websites and brochures. However, the empirical evidence highlights that AMBA also has a substantial impact upon the marketing of MBA programme delivery, e.g., an online MBA programme must contain 120 hours of face-to-face communication. Therefore, the findings of this research are consistent



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with AMBA reports (2013, 2015) and are discussed in section 6.5 in more detail.

The second dimension of the internal environment is the university provision and the instructors' tools, e.g., the VLE. The empirical findings of this research support Du Mont (2002), who discussed a potential scenario in which distance education programmes could depend heavily on human resources in their various environments, such as the appropriate technical infrastructure to support course delivery. However, the findings demonstrate that each university has its own rules and regulations. For example, each case study institution offered a new mode of delivery based on their advancements in communication technologies. Regarding the third dimension of internal environment, i.e., courses (see section 5.2.3), the empirical evidence demonstrates that the specific technologies considered for delivering each independent course further affect the quality of an MBA programme. For example, Allen and Seaman (2009, 2013) argued that courses could be designed in such a way that they could be searched for based on their mode of delivery.

The next dimension is the module, e.g., learning outcomes. The empirical evidence shows that the modules in MBA programmes are a combination of different subjects (see section 5.3.2). The findings support Williams et al. (2006) and Liu, X. et al. (2007), who highlighted the importance of online module strategy, and discussed the relationship between teamwork and student learning and student learning outcomes. Regarding the academic dimension, the findings of this research (section 5.3.1) demonstrate that individual academics appear to play a major role in terms of their input to an MBA programme. This empirical evidence is further discussed and compared with the literature reviewed (section 6.3).

The final dimension in the MBA framework is students, who were asked about their experiences of and reflections upon the MBA programmes at the case study institutions (section 5.3.3). The results regarding the students' views on the level of the support and management received on the MBA

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programmes at the three case study institutions were generally positive. This supports the literature in that, in order to ensure a successful blended learning experience for students, there must be university support for course redesign that may involve deciding which course objectives can be best achieved through online learning activities (Garrison and Kanuka, 2003; Dziuban et al., 2006; Harris et al., 2009; Vogel, 2010). Figure 5.8 showed that a VLE was the most-used medium for communication on the CSA, CSB and CSC MBA programmes. This result strongly supports researchers (Marriott et al., 2004; Love and Fry, 2006; Potter and Johnston, 2006; Wells et al., 2008; Arbaugh et al., 2009) who also reported that a VLE is considered a main communications tool in MBA programmes, and focused on the advantages of such a system in uploading courses, sending announcements, setting up groups and administering assignments.

Furthermore, the survey respondents indicated the impact of the case study institutions' MBA programme on their personal development and skills enhancement, e.g., managerial skills. AMBA reports (2013, 2015) emphasised that accredited programmes must also be designed to build on the experience and diversity their student body brings as a result of their work as professionals in the field, as well as approaching contemporary management with an international dimension, e.g., by developing interpersonal skills. The empirical evidence from the survey respondents shows a significant number of statements referring to students' preference for learning in face-to-face situations. Researchers such as Kristjansson (2006), the ABS Task Force (2014) and CarringtonCrisp et al. (2014) also highlighted that face-to-face contact is important as a means of course delivery for MBA programmes in business schools in building relationships, career networking, and enhancing social and emotional intelligence.

### **6.2.2 The Influence of AMBA**

AMBA accreditation requirements were found to be challenging by the case study institutions. The accreditation requirements were also found to have a

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major influence on the case study institutions' MBA programmes (see section 5.2.3). The following is a comparison of the AMBA accreditation challenges with the existing literature.

The AMBA dimension was discussed in the literature review in chapter two (section 2.6). There has been significant discussion in the literature on AMBA's reputation and its importance for MBA programmes in helping to improve and ensure the quality of MBA programmes around the world (British Council, 2005; AMBA, 2013, 2015). Chapter two also highlighted that the students on an accredited MBA programme must have a minimum of three years' management or leadership experience. AMBA further expects student admissions to follow a certain level of standards, i.e., certain academic credentials and relevant work experience, as it is felt that this requirement helps to maintain the quality of the MBA as a post-experience qualification (British Council, 2005; AMBA, 2013, 2015). Chapter two also reviewed the available literature on AMBA, indicating that there should be enough students on a course, which AMBA refers to as a 'critical mass'. This reflects how the accreditation body emphasises the value of peer group exposure during an MBA (AMBA, 2013, 2015). It was also found in the literature that AMBA has expectations regarding the offerings of accredited programmes, as institutes must offer a more flexible mode of delivery and provide substantial evidence that the programme design and delivery allow all the criteria to be met. For example, online learning and distance teaching and learning programmes must also offer some element of face-to-face contact (MBA British Council, 2005).

The empirical evidence (see section 5.2.2) indicates that MBA students are required to have at least three years' work experience in order to be granted admission to an MBA programme, which strongly supports the literature as discussed above. Further, the case study institutions wish to enrol as many students as possible to conform to AMBA requirements. However, the

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empirical evidence shows that the three case study institutions are still limited in their ability to attract more students to join the programme due to students' lack of work experience. The empirical evidence supports reports by the British Council (2005) and AMBA (2013, 2015) highlighting the importance and advantages of students having three years' work experience before they start an MBA programme. In contrast, to the researcher's knowledge, no previous research has paid attention to the challenges of this requirement for the students and the institutions, particularly for those students who are willing to study for a professional qualification, e.g., an MBA, but do not have the required experience. Therefore, the findings of this research make an exciting contribution by arguing that experience is important for MBA students to enable them to exchange and construct new knowledge with other peers. On the other hand, this requirement also limits the case study institutions' ability to attract more students due to applicants' lack of work experience.

Furthermore, the findings of this research (see section 5.2.2) also highlight another AMBA requirement that is challenging for the case study institutions, in that any online and distance learning and teaching should offer a minimum of 120 hours of face-to-face contact, which is strongly recommended as part of AMBA accreditation. However, although the findings of this research support AMBA reports (2013, 2015) that have highlighted a minimum face-to-face requirement in any online and distance learning and teaching programme, no strong reference was found in the literature to discussing challenges which business schools face in this regard in order to meet AMBA accreditation requirements. Therefore, the most interesting and novel insight provided by this research is regarding the flexibility offered. For example, interviewee B at CSA highlighted that AMBA considers webinars as face-to-face contact and that these are part of the online MBA programme at CSA. However, AMBA's requirements for face-to-face contact hours are still challenging, especially for working professionals, due to their busy working hours. On the other hand, no previous reference was found in the literature to suggesting a solution to replace face-to-face

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elements and keep AMBA accreditation. Although webinars can overcome the face-to-face contact requirement, it might not be possible for MBA students to attend classes due to busy working days in their organisations, as most of the MBA students are managers and organisational professionals.

Although the findings of this research demonstrate that prior experience is becoming a challenge and a barrier to MBA admission, prior knowledge or experience is essential for MBA students for various reasons mentioned in the findings chapter and in the literature. Therefore, paying proper attention to this challenge in terms of the previous experience of MBA students could significantly reduce the chances of business schools losing accreditation, as well as helping them to attract more students.

### **6.2.3 Individual Course Design**

Individual course design was identified as a sub-theme of blended learning in MBA structure (see section 5.2.3). The MBA programme and module leaders' and students' perceptions of individual course design and delivery in MBA programmes were demonstrated in the following six sub-themes:

- ❖ Provision of prior training.
- ❖ The use of virtual learning environments.
- ❖ The use of web 2.0 technologies.
- ❖ Lecturer-student interaction.
- ❖ Course delivery challenges.
- ❖ Evaluation and development of an MBA programme.

The following is a comparison of each of these sub-themes with the literature.

*Provision of prior training:* the training dimension was discussed in the literature review in chapter two. The findings of this research strongly support Finlayson et al. (2006) and Ofsted (2008), who highlighted the importance of training for MBA academic staff in distance and online learning and teaching on their MBA programmes. Similarly, the findings regarding the lack of training as an issue for lecturers also support Brownell

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and Tanner's (2012) account, as they highlighted the importance of training for lecturers for the effective delivery of a module. The findings also support Ooms et al. (2008), who reported that the reluctance of academic staff to use technology in their modules to support face-to-face learning and teaching was due to their lack of training. Similarly, the HEFCE (2005), Beadle and Santy (2008), Hannon (2008) and Harris et al. (2009) suggested that both technological and pedagogic training are important for academic staff in order to facilitate effective student learning. The finding also supports Finlayson et al.

(2006:53), who highlighted the importance of tutor training as follows:

The importance of tutors knowing about the use of e-learning appropriate to their own subjects was underlined. Where tutors were not aware of how to use information and learning technology within their subject they made only limited or inappropriate use of e-learning.

Finlayson et al. (2006) emphasised that it is not enough for teachers to know how to put materials onto a virtual learning environment; they also need to know how to design the materials and the accompanying student tasks to support the learners in developing both their understanding and their autonomy.

The findings of this research strongly support the literature on the issue of the lack of training and, therefore, more needs to be done to encourage academic staff to become involved in educational development programmes. However, staff engagement could also be challenging. For example, it could be suspected that lack of time and different pressures, such as teaching, research, administration, etc., might prevent staff from actively engaging in training and development activities. Hence, the researcher concludes that although all higher education institutions provide staff development, the case study institutions could further improve their MBA programmes by providing effective training for their staff, e.g., technology training.

*Virtual learning environments (VLE):* the VLE was also discussed in the literature review in chapter two. The MBA academic staff and students who

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took part in this research emphasised the importance of a VLE as a supporting tool for learning and teaching and respondents' perceptions were positive about the use of a VLE, i.e., Blackboard and eBridge in these cases, in a blended learning MBA programme. The empirical evidence gained through this research strongly supports the literature, which demonstrated that a VLE helps learners to operate outside the constraints of university and directs learners to meeting their goals, with the learners and their environment interacting reciprocally (Wagner, 1994; Leidner and Jarvenpaa, 1995; Benbunan-Fich and Hiltz, 2003). The empirical evidence in this study is also consistent with the findings of a survey review of a UK university-foreign institution MBA programme partnership (Wilde's model, 2000; Bentley et al., 2012), which reported that Blackboard was employed in an e-learning environment as an instructional tool that also played an initial and important role in the learning and teaching methods as a means of communication and interaction.

Furthermore, the literature review in chapter two also highlighted some of the useful functionalities of a VLE, such as the Blackboard system with its discussion board and email. Overall, the blended learning literature (Marriott et al., 2004; Love and Fry, 2006; Potter and Johnston, 2006; Wells et al., 2008; Arbaugh et al., 2009) favours a VLE as a main communications support tool in MBA programmes and focuses on the advantages of such a system for uploading courses, sending announcements, setting up groups and administering assignments. Two types of VLE were found to be used as communication systems in the MBA programmes at the case study institutions: Blackboard and eBridge. Bentley et al. (2012) also reported the usefulness of Blackboard in a blended learning MBA programme, as discussed above.

Although a large stream of research has focused on VLE systems for communications and teaching and learning techniques, little attention has been paid to the limitations of VLE software functionalities (Blackboard and eBridge in this study), such as hardware and pedagogical issues in online

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learning programmes (Rovai and Jordan, 2004; Delialioglu and Yildirim, 2007; Hameed et al., 2008). Therefore, the findings of this research contribute to the existing literature on the use of VLE systems and their inherent limitations, particularly in MBA business and management education, within the three case study institutions in the UK.

*The use of web 2.0 technologies:* the literature review chapter highlighted different types of technologies being used in an online learning environment. However, the findings of this research highlight that none of the case study institutions used web 2.0 technologies as a tool to support teaching and learning methods (see Table 5.4). Further, this research found that Skype was used individually between students and faculty members at the dissertation stage. The empirical evidence shows that the use of web 2.0 technologies was not an official part of the teaching and learning in MBA programmes but could be used individually among the students themselves.

The findings regarding the reluctance of the use of web 2.0 technologies at the three case study institutions also support Stodel et al. (2006), who reported that the lack of physical appearance, informal social interaction and non-verbal cues that are typical of traditional face-to-face communication make web 2.0 technologies difficult to use as part of learning and teaching methods. However, the empirical evidence partly supports Dziuban et al. (2006) and Ladyshevsky and Soontiens (2013), who described the new generation of students as technology-savvy users. They further highlighted different types of web 2.0 technologies, such as Skype, chat forums and video conferencing. Although the findings regarding the reluctance of the use of web 2.0 technologies at the three case institutions contradict Okello-Obura and Ssekitto (2015) from a conceptual point of view, they corroborate them a great deal in terms of the importance of the utilisation of web 2.0 technologies in teaching and learning. Therefore, paying proper attention to the use of web 2.0 technologies in MBA programmes, particularly with well-established ICT, will help universities to enhance learning and teaching and



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facilitate students learning effectively by ensuring access to an internet service 24 hours a day, seven days a week.

*Lecturer-student interaction:* the literature review in chapter two discussed lecturer-student and student-student interactions and highlighted their different aspects, such as their role in helping students to construct their own knowledge through student-student or student-tutor interactions. Further, Arbaugh and Benbunan-Fish (2006) highlighted that group collaboration represents a form of interaction that also helps in shaping knowledge construction, such as learners considering different aspects with their peers, e.g., timing, situations, circumstances, areas of interest and even communication tools. It was also discussed that the students had positive attitudes towards the blended learning model with regard to their access to materials or communication methods. Further, Jones and Chen's (2008) concerns about student-student interaction during online meetings were also discussed, in addition to the traditional teaching method of presenting material. Similarly, Tallent-Runnels et al. (2006) reported that learner-learner interaction plays an important role in learning environments and provides motivation by students working together in small groups.

The findings of this research support the above researchers and previous research in this area (Benbunan-Fich and Hiltz, 2003; Fjermstad, 2004; Arbaugh and Benbunan-Fich, 2006; Tallent-Runnels et al., 2006; Allan, 2007; ABS Task Force, 2014). Further, no difference was found between the literature on this topic and the empirical evidence. The findings also strongly support the categories of online interaction: learner-instructor interaction, learner-learner interaction, and learner-content interaction (Moore, 1989). Therefore, the findings of this research corroborate previous research and the importance of different types of interaction in blended learning MBA programmes. Hence, the researcher concludes that, for effective, blended learning in an MBA programme, it is vital to consider and implement different types of interactions in the learning and teaching process.

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*Course delivery challenges:* course delivery challenges were discussed in the literature review (see section 2.6). The findings of this research highlight important and common course delivery challenges on MBA programmes from both academics' and students' perspectives at the three case study institutions in the UK. The findings corroborate the literature, which described how managing an online system requires time (Vaughan, 2007; Poon, 2013). The findings regarding internet crashes and technical problems also strongly support Hara and Kling (1999), Hara (2000), King (2002), Welker and Beradino (2006) and Smyth et al. (2012), who highlighted the negative impact of poor internet connection on distance learning and online learning in terms of course delivery. The findings also support Baldwin-Evans (2006), who reported technical faults as a major point of concern in online, distance and blended learning course delivery. Similarly, Stodel et al. (2006), Smyth et al. (2012), Ealy (2013) and Poon (2013) highlighted that, due to a lack of interaction, online students feel isolated, less motivated and less encouraged. Therefore, the findings of this research strongly support the existing literature on interaction.

Thus, the researcher argues that networking with peers is an important element of an MBA programme. Hence, the researcher concludes that the case study institutions could further develop their MBA programmes by paying more attention to challenges such as tracking learner preferences, improving the delivery of content, and adopting cost-effective and appropriate strategies and technologies that could improve the learner experience (White et al., 2010).

*Evaluation and programme improvement:* the evaluation and development dimensions were discussed in the literature review in chapter two. Chapter two also highlighted the role of the QAA, as the QAA website (2014) maintains that the Agency is carrying out assessments to ensure quality and is also enabling sustainability in the improvement of learning and the management of programmes in higher education. Chapter two further highlighted the role of AMBA, which is to ensure the quality of MBA

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programmes. AMBA accreditation is also highly relevant to this study, and the researcher demonstrates that the respondents were more familiar with AMBA than with the QAA because of its relevance to MBA education.

The empirical evidence of this research further highlights the importance of evaluation as the main tool for assessing the success rate of an MBA programme. The findings of this research strongly support Khan (2001), Martinez-Argüelles et al. (2010), Bentley et al. (2012) and AMBA reports (2013, 2015), which highlighted the importance of evaluation in learning and teaching strategies for different aspects of both face-to-face and online learning. Further, the findings of this research corroborate the conceptual point of view of Martinez-Argüelles et al. (2010), as they highlighted that learner feedback should be at the centre of the learning and teaching process. On the other hand, the findings of this research also support Cookson (2000), Wilde et al. (2000) and Khan (2001), who reported that evaluation and feedback are important dimensions of the distance learning and e-learning model. Moore (2006) further highlighted that five elements are required to evaluate the effectiveness of online education programmes: learning effectiveness, cost effectiveness and institutional commitment, access, faculty (employee) satisfaction and learner (customer) satisfaction.

The findings of this research also highlight specific parameters for evaluating the MBA programmes at the three case study institutions: questionnaires (module evaluation) that are distributed following the completion of each module, feedback from alumni (programme evaluation), and meetings held once a term with the course director and academic committee. However, the parameters mentioned are all standard UK university QA practices (QAA, 2015) and it was found that all the parameters play a significant role in improving learning and teaching strategy, i.e., course delivery and teaching and learning approaches.

Similarly, the findings regarding the evaluation of pedagogical dimensions, i.e., programme goals and programme design delivery, also support Khan (2001), who highlighted the importance of evaluation in course content, the

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setting of course goals, course design, strategies and learning materials. The findings also support Saunders (2003:9), who stated the importance of the “purposeful gathering, analysis and discussion of evidence from relevant sources about the quality, effectiveness, and impact of provision, development or policy”. Similarly, Singh (2003) highlighted that evaluation is important for both teachers and students from different aspects, such as the evaluation of learning materials, learning processes and user friendliness. Although a large stream of research has focused on e-learning, only a limited number of studies have focused on its effectiveness (Jara and Meller, 2010). Further, the literature did not reveal what elements could help UK universities to improve quality, particularly in their MBA programmes. Therefore, all the evaluation (feedback) parameters should be considered in assessing blended learning MBA programmes. Therefore, the researcher concludes that, with respect to the parameters mentioned above, either the case study institutions have nothing new or different or the respondents are not familiar with or knowledgeable regarding all the parameters.

The findings in this section of the research highlight the importance of evaluation and programme improvement feedback in improving different aspects of MBA programmes. The findings of this research strongly support Arbaugh (2000), the HEFCE (2005), Beadle and Santy (2008), Hannon (2008) and Harris et al. (2009), who found that better training for academic staff should be considered in order to facilitate effective student learning.

The findings partly support Bentley et al. (2012), as they highlighted aspects of partnerships with foreign universities by testing the limiting factors of online and distance MBA delivery. Bentley et al. (2012) reported that the Turnitin support system was still used for electronic submission and to check plagiarism. Therefore, the findings of this research strongly support the existing literature and further argue that considering a proper online electronic submission system in a blended learning MBA programme is necessary to help course work submission. The researcher also argues that development elements should be considered in depth, as, for example,

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linking theory with practice could help the development or management of an MBA programme in UK universities. In this regard, the case study institutions could learn from and take advantage of each other's blended learning MBA programmes, as well as the module leaders, as the case study institutions expressed an interest in blended learning.

### **6.3 THE EXISTING THEORETICAL FRAMEWORKS FOR LEARNING AND TEACHING MBA**

This research seeks to answer the question regarding the existing theoretical framework for learning and teaching that is relevant to the MBA programmes in UK universities. A key finding from the research points to the Academic Conceptual Framework (ACF) as a dominant and existing framework for learning and teaching in the MBA programme. Findings from the research also show that the ACF provides space within the curriculum and makes it possible to see what the needs of the students are as well as providing avenues for receiving feedback from the students. The ACF can be seen in the light of two sub-themes that include: the underlying conceptual framework of the individual academic, and the professional identity frameworks from the perspectives of the academics. In this section, the researcher compares each sub-theme with the existing literature.

#### **6.3.1 Underlying Academic Pedagogy**

MBA pedagogy was discussed in the literature review (chapter two and section 2.7). The findings of this research demonstrate that two main factors are linked with MBA pedagogy: pedagogical forms, including the understanding of pedagogy in full-time and part-time courses, and teaching and learning approaches. The findings of this research corroborate Cogill (2008), who argued that there is no particular defined pedagogy and that it is very difficult to define one. Similarly, the findings support Mayes and Fowler (2006) and Attwell and Hughes (2010), who described how different technologies are required to enhance learning and teaching and usually tend to be more constructivist and learner-centred. The findings also strongly

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support Vogel (2010), who maintained that most researchers had focused on technological aspects compared to the pedagogical aspect in online, distance, and blended learning models. Further, the findings of this research also support Attwell and Hughes (2010), who outlined that despite increased research in technological improvement for enhancing learning and teaching, little attention has been paid to pedagogies in terms of technology use in teaching and learning in MBA programmes. Similarly, most of the research has focused on a particular kind of technology, e.g., VLEs in teaching and learning.

Coffield (2008:14) described how,

In all the plans to put learners first, to invest in learning, to widen participation, to set targets, to develop skills, to open up access, to raise standards, and to develop a national framework of qualifications, there is no mention of a theory (or theories) of learning to drive the whole project. It is as though there existed in the UK such widespread understanding of, and agreement about, the processes of learning and teaching that comment was thought superfluous.

The empirical evidence also supports Attwell and Hughes (2010), who commented that no attention had been given to the pedagogical development of academics but that, on the other hand, the use of professional development technology had been given much consideration.

The empirical evidence further demonstrates that most of the respondent academics relied upon their disciplines, level of interest and experience in order to use a convenient pedagogical approach for their teaching purposes. The empirical evidence partly supports Luke and Freebody (1999) and Deem (2006), who reported a very strong link between an academic's identity and teaching approaches which are discipline based; however, they did not mention the academic's interest or experience.

Similarly, the empirical evidence revealed that five factors contribute to academics' underlying pedagogy on the MBA programmes in the case study institutions: roles, disciplines, professional experience, interest, and training and interest in learning and teaching. These factors partly support Clarke et

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al. (2013:13), who described other factors of professional identity that are based on “gendered patterns of identity within academia, age and length of service of professional identity in higher education”. However, this research did not find most of the factors mentioned by Clarke et al. (2013). This might be due to the fact that this research was conducted in the context of the MBA programmes in three case study institutions in the UK.

Therefore, this research provides novel insights by exploring academics’ perspectives on the MBA programmes at three case study institutions in the UK, demonstrating that individual academics play a major role in their input into an MBA programme and that they had a narrow view of the pedagogical approaches and strategies embedded in a blended learning MBA programme.

### **6.3.2 Professional Identity Frameworks**

The findings chapter (chapter five) discussed the importance of the professional identity of academic staff by exploring the responsibilities of the participant academics and their views regarding blended learning. The findings in this section show that the identity/role/discipline responsibilities of the participant academics formulated the professional academic frameworks in the three case study institutions. It was found that all the academics at the three case study institutions were from different disciplines and such a variety of disciplines had influenced the academic design, delivery and assessment of the modules. This section further compares the findings with the existing literature.

Chapter two reviewed a wide selection of literature on MBA academic staff disciplines and their learning and teaching strategies on MBA programmes. For example, the majority of faculty members teaching on an MBA programme should hold a doctorate degree with high-quality research in all areas of activity. Further, MBA academic staff are expected to have a high level of academic leadership and management support for the programme, and the academics who teach on an MBA programme tend to be experienced in their academic and professional expertise and experience. The empirical

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evidence in this research (see section 5.3.1) revealed a similar idea of academic staff disciplines and professional experience to those stated in chapter two, as mentioned by Arbaugh (2010b), Varela et al. (2013) and AMBA (2013, 2015). The empirical evidence from this research shows that all the academics at the three case study institutions came from different disciplines, e.g., strategic management, marketing, accounting, finance and engineering. Furthermore, the findings of this research highlight that the professional experience of academics played a fundamentally important role in the MBA programmes.

Therefore, the findings of this research are consistent with Paterson et al. (2002), Deem (2006), Clarke et al. (2013) and Kovalcikiene and Buknyte-Marmiene (2015) from a conceptual point of view. However, the researchers (Paterson et al., 2002; Deem, 2006; Clarke et al., 2013; Kovalcikiene and Buknyte-Marmiene, 2015) further reported that academics' identity and disciplines were related to the teaching process.

Similarly, researchers such as Rhoades (2007) have highlighted that the definition of the professional identity of academics in higher education is very complicated; this refers to the lack of sufficient case study research to help understand the factors that have an impact on academics' identity in higher education. Although all the above-mentioned researchers and the existing literature have documented issues regarding academics' identity in higher education, e.g., academics' disciplines and professional experience, this research has filled a gap by exploring how the different disciplines of individual academics appear to play a major role in their module delivery, and that these appeared to have a greater influence than a tacit underpinning pedagogy on the whole MBA programme at UK universities.

#### **6.4 MBA PEDAGOGY**

Another research question which this research sought to answer focused on the existing pedagogies for learning and teaching part time and full time MBA programmes in UK Universities and how these pedagogies align with



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existing theoretical frameworks. Findings from the research show that MBA academic staff had considered traditional learning and teaching techniques to be more experiential in nature. The traditional learning and teaching technique was found to be a didactic approach with full-time students and, with part-time students, while experiential learning largely refers to learning by doing. Another vital pedagogy for learning and teaching, according to findings from this research, is face to face communication. Findings from the research reveal the fact that face-to-face communication is a crucial element in all the various MBA models. Findings from this study also revealed that online students always attend a residential session in their first year and with a partner institution in their second year, participate in a two-day business simulation exercise. These findings are further assessed in relation to two sub-themes that include: pedagogical forms and different learning and teaching approaches. In this section, the researcher compares each sub-theme with the existing literature.

#### **6.4.1 Pedagogical Forms**

In chapter five, the researcher highlighted the different forms of pedagogy in the full- and part-time programmes at the case study institutions. It was also found that similar teaching and learning approaches were used in both the full- and part-time modes. The empirical evidence (see section 5.4.1) is consistent with those who have particularly highlighted using an experimental approach in an MBA programme. For example, Greenberg et al. (2011:240) reported that “We also used an experimental approach when expanding the geographic footprint of the Fast Track MBA programme into San Francisco”. Against expectations, no correspondence between the findings of this research and the literature on MBA pedagogy was found. However, the findings of this research show that a more didactic approach was used with the full-time students, i.e., traditional learning and teaching, and with part-time students a more experiential technique, i.e., learning by doing (Figure 5.12) was in practice at the case study institutions. Similarly, the findings of this research strongly support Greenberg et al. (2011), who

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discussed how blended learning presents opportunities for MBA students with respect to personal development in a way that suits their individual learning and time frames. Therefore, the researcher concludes that an understanding of the different pedagogy forms on full- and part-time courses could help academics to evaluate the effectiveness of blended learning and in the further management development of an MBA programme.

#### **6.4.2 Learning and Teaching Approaches**

In chapter five, different learning and teaching techniques were found in the pedagogical approaches of the three case study institutions (see section 5.4.2) and are further summarised in Table 5.20. This links with Arbaugh (2014) and GMAC (2015), who explained the various learning and teaching techniques used in MBA programmes, e.g., case study and lecture methods.

The MBA literature also shed light on the main learning and teaching methods used in MBA programmes, such as case-based learning. Case-based learning helps equip students with theoretical, e.g., grape theory, and practical knowledge, e.g., learning by doing (Arbaugh, 2010b), and has the ability to present real-world problems, help students in developing solutions, and allows personalised learning as a result of developing intrinsic and extrinsic motivation (Benbunan-Fich and Hiltz, 1999). On the other hand, MBA literature has criticised the case study approach by arguing that using case study as a learning and teaching approach will not provide students with any opportunity to improve soft skills e.g., leadership and negotiation (Ammerman et al., 2012; GMAC, 2015).

The empirical evidence of this research (see section 5.4.2) supports to a great extent the existing literature and the above-discussed case-based learning is one of the main methods used to teach the MBA programmes at the three case study institutions in the UK. Further, the findings of this research also presented a positive correlation between case studies, alongside group work, presentations and lecture approaches (Millis et al., 2009; Varela et al., 2013). However, the empirical evidence highlights some benefits to using case-based

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learning as a teaching and learning technique in MBA programmes, as it enables learners to analyse cases and explore solutions through discussion, reflection and decision making, as the students integrate prior experiences with what has been newly learned. This finding supports the benefits of case-based learning in an MBA programme, as highlighted in the above discussion.

Furthermore, the findings of this research emphasise that face-to-face communication is an essential element at all case study institutions, as well as being important in online learning and distance teaching MBA programmes. This empirical evidence corroborates Osakinle et al. (2010), who highlighted that the lecture format is still used in many top-quality MBA programmes. Further, the findings of this research show that online students attend a residential session in their first year and with a partner institution in their second year. This kind of technique, i.e., a residential session, gives students an opportunity to meet academic staff and peers with whom they have been working remotely.

The empirical evidence emphasises that there were a significant number of module leaders and lecturers who were wary of migrating their modules to an online mode. The findings support Brownell and Tanner (2012), who reported that the lack of faculty training in using different learning and teaching approaches was the main cause of ineffective lectures.

Furthermore, the empirical findings indicate that the use of learning and teaching methods was based upon how each module leader wanted to deliver her/his module in each of the case study institutions. However, individual academics appeared to play a major role in their module delivery. Hence, each academic has her/his own signature pedagogy.

Therefore, this research supports, on the one hand, the argument that using different learning and teaching techniques is important in MBA programmes. On the other, the research provides novel insights by exploring the way in which the three case study institutions offered different learning models and commonly used the same learning and teaching approaches, whether online

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or traditional approaches, e.g., face-to-face, and a VLE. The research findings thus show that the concept of blended learning is hidden behind different learning and teaching models and approaches.

## **6.5 IMPROVING AND MARKETING MBAs**

Another question this research sought answer relates to the theoretical frameworks that can be used by practitioners and managers of MBA programmes in UK Universities in developing and marketing their approaches to blended learning. Findings from the research show that although the CSA programme is marketed as a programme that is carried out online fully, in reality, it is a blended learning programme as a result of the fact that the AMBA recommendations stipulates that an online MBA programme must contain 120 hours of face-to-face coursework. In particular, the CSB programme is marketed almost exclusively as a distance teaching but, in practice, it is a blended learning programme because technology is also engaged in certain aspects. The CSC programme, however, is marketed as an integrated programme, with emphasis on teaching practices across the disciplines. However, the development of a theoretical framework that can be used by practitioners and managers of MBA programmes in UK Universities to improve and market their approaches to blended learning can be assessed under two sub-themes that include: the language used in the design, delivery and marketing of MBA programmes, and models of delivery. In this section, the researcher compares each subtheme with the existing literature.

### **6.5.1 Language Used in MBA Programmes**

In chapter five, the researcher presented significant findings (see Figure 5.13) which showed that, in terms of the language used in MBA programmes, huge consideration was given to the marketing materials and the business and management disciplines rather than pedagogical practices. However, in this research, the researcher found that the language used in the MBA programmes on the websites, in the marketing documents (online and offline), as well as the language of the business school disciplines

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(academics), was based upon marketing principles. The empirical evidence from the three case study institutions indicates that the language of pedagogy was rarely used when describing the learning and teaching experience offered within the MBA programmes. However, no strong reference was found in the literature regarding the language used in MBA programmes in the context of UK universities. This finding (see section 5.5.1) partially corroborates the ideas of Van Auken and Chrysler (2005), who mentioned that the most effective language used in MBA programme is business language.

Furthermore, as discussed previously, AMBA accreditation has a major influence on an MBA. However, AMBA documents (2013, 2015) do not highlight the importance of pedagogy, which is likely to have a major influence on the design, development and delivery of an MBA programme. Despite increased research on management and leadership development through MBA programmes (Baruch, 2009; Chen and Yang, 2010; Varela et al., 2013; Kaplan, A. 2014), little attention has been paid to the language used in the design, delivery and marketing of these courses in the context of MBA programmes in UK education institutions. Therefore, this research makes a novel contribution to the literature by exploring the use of language in business and management education within the three case study institutions in the UK. Consequently, the researcher concludes that AMBA should consider highlighting the importance of a coherent underpinning pedagogy as part of its accreditation process. Further, this research has potential implications for MBA programmes, as it was found that more attention has been paid to marketing business and management disciplines than to their pedagogical practices. Furthermore, the researcher argues that underplaying the importance of pedagogy limits the student learning experience.

### **6.5.2 Models of Delivery**

Models of MBA programme delivery were reviewed in the literature, section 2.6 highlighting various MBA programme delivery models. The empirical evidence further suggests that, even though the three case study institutions market themselves as online learning, distance teaching, and face-to-face

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learning, they are actually following a blended learning programme in practice. Similarly, the empirical evidence suggests that all the case study institutions delivered their MBA programmes by means of a mixed-methods approach, by utilising, for example, face-to-face contact, online and technology-assisted methods (see Table 5.20). The findings of this research support Bhote (2013) and Poon (2013), who viewed blended learning as a mixture of face-to-face and online approaches.

In practice, however, the various models at all the case study institutions were found to be consistent with all the definitions of blended learning found in the literature: a mixture of face-to-face and online learning to varying degrees (Reay, 2001; Sands, 2002; Young, 2002; Rooney, 2003; Ward and LaBranche, 2003; Graham, 2004; Sharpe et al., 2006; Allan, 2007; Caravias, 2015). Therefore, the findings of this research support researchers (Bonk and Graham, 2006; Garrison and Vaughan, 2007; Picciano and Dziuban, 2007; Arbaugh, 2010b) who shared the same views on how blended learning, as a course delivery means, was increasingly gaining recognition in general and amongst educationists in particular (Garrison and Kanuka, 2004; Allen et al., 2007; Picciano, 2007).

The empirical evidence in this study further demonstrates that, across all three case study institutions, there was considerable hesitation in shifting part of their face-to-face modules to an online delivery system. This was due to a lack of enthusiasm for moving modules online, and a lack of confidence and experience in handling the requisite technology for such a transition. This reluctance was the basis for Beadle and Santy (2008) and Harris et al. (2009) calling for recognition of the need to train instructors to make them experts in technology use in order to facilitate effective student learning. Further, the continuation of a positive attitude, readiness and maintaining the technological skills of the course facilitators are equally important factors that affect how successfully they use, develop, and update the technology-based tools and resources in operation.

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A significant amount of literature reviewed in chapter two discussed the meaning of blended learning and the almost infinite variety of definitions. However, Sharpe et al. (2006) argued that there was a lack of understanding of the meaning of blended learning among higher education staff members and students. Therefore, staff members preferred to use their own understanding in order to continue using traditional methods (face-to-face learning and teaching) and employing different kinds of technology for effective blended learning. The researcher further argued that achieving an effective programme by using the term ‘blended learning’ in the delivery and marketing of an MBA programme would enable academic staff and students to understand the nature of blended learning, e.g., the learning and teaching approaches. The findings of this research strongly support the literature on the lack of understanding of the concept of blended learning among academic staff and students. As discussed in the literature review (see section 2.6), the researcher adapted Allen and Seaman’s (2009, 2013) definition of blended learning for this research: *blended learning is a course that blends online and face-to-face delivery*. The empirical evidence suggests that the participants (MBA academic staff and students) did not want to see a reduction in face-to-face interaction. Further, the MBA students believed that blended learning meant a reduced amount of time spent in face-to-face interaction.

*Traditional face-to-face learning* was discussed in the literature review (see section 2.6). Chapter two also described face-to-face learning from different perspectives. First, face-to-face learning and teaching is important as a means of course delivery for MBA programmes in business schools, e.g., in building relationships, career networking, and enhancing social and emotional intelligence (Kristjansson, 2006; Dunn et al., 2011; ABS Task Force, 2014; Carrington-Crisp et al., 2014). Second, flipped instruction supports MBA students who need more time and for them to receive help from the instructor (*Economist*, 2011; Hamdan et al., 2013; Nwosisi et al., 2015). This allows more time for MBA academic staff to help MBA students

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to work cooperatively with their peers in solving problems and in group work (Nwosisi et al., 2015).

The findings of this research support Ealy (2013), who discussed the challenges of traditional face-to-face methods in MBA programmes, such as the lack of flexibility in scheduling, students lacking the ability to adjust the pace of learning to suit their learning styles or for viewing lectures, and the inability to reduce commuting time and expenses. Similarly, AMBA reports (2013, 2015) also recommended 120 hours as a minimum amount of face-to-face interaction in any online/distance learning or teaching. Therefore, the findings of this research support the literature which mentioned that face-to-face learning and teaching was strongly recommended for an MBA programme. However, the minimum set for face-to-face learning and teaching in an MBA programme is also proving challenging for MBA students due to the lack of flexibility. On the other hand, this research also provides interesting insight from CSA, which was delivering online learning in an MBA. However, CSA also considered webinars as a face-to-face interaction tool, which was helpful in overcoming the challenge surrounding levels of face-to-face contact.

*Web-facilitated learning* was also discussed in the literature review (see section 2.6), such as the impact of a CMS on students' encouragement. The lecturer also plays an important role through the system by staying up-to-date in delivering a course, and such a system has various functionalities e.g., making announcements, emailing, and sending and uploading materials (Martins and Kellermans, 2004; Love and Fry, 2006; Wells et al., 2008; Van Doorn and Van Doorn, 2013). The empirical evidence in this research partly supports Arbaugh et al. (2009), who highlighted that students viewed the CMS as a content repository instead of a mechanism for learning and teaching engagement. However, the empirical evidence in this research suggests that the use of Blackboard was found to be useful for the students. Although the case study institutions market their MBA programmes as online learning, distance teaching, and face-to-face learning, all of them were found



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to be engaged in a web-facilitated delivery model. Therefore, the finding supports previous research and further makes its own claim that a web-based delivery module is helpful in the blended learning and teaching in MBA programmes.

*Online learning:* chapter three reviewed an extensive amount of literature regarding online learning and highlighted its different features. For example, the four categorisations made by Allen and Seaman (2009, 2013) and White et al. (2010) - traditional (face-to-face) learning, web-facilitated learning, blended/hybrid learning, and online learning - were discussed in chapter three in the literature review. The last category of blended learning, that of online learning, found agreement in the case study institutions, although in combination with some face-to-face learning content. For example, CSA marketed and promoted a purely online delivery model but this consisted of at least 30% face-to-face meetings.

Therefore, the empirical evidence supports Allen and Seaman's (2009, 2013) categorisation of the methods of MBA programme delivery. However, the respondents were not sure of the exact percentage of online and face-to-face content in each case study institution. The most interesting finding was the use of blended learning by the case study institutions in light of their need to retain their AMBA accreditation. Therefore, the online learning category was in line with the MBA requirements set by the AMBA.

## **6.6 REVISED FRAMEWORK FOR A BLENDED LEARNING MBA PROGRAMME**

This section assembles the different propositions made in the previous sections of this chapter to propose a revised framework for the MBA programmes at the three case study institutions. The empirical evidence, the discussion of the findings and the propositions were taken into consideration to add new dimensions to the learning and teaching frameworks discussed in the literature review. This section also answers the research questions, which will be further summarised in the conclusion chapter.

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The literature review highlighted different types of learning and teaching frameworks and further discussed different dimensions for integrating and managing learning and teaching. The empirical evidence shows that the MBA frameworks at the case study institutions consisted of seven main themes: environment, market, university, course, module, academics, and students, as the main context of and players in an MBA (see Figure 5.1). To design a new framework, theory or model, Dubin (1978) and Whetten (1989) recommended that researchers focus on the following questions: What? Theory created by different factors; How and Why? The relationship between factors was established; and what? Generalisability, focus or boundaries were set.

Figure 6.1b represents the proposed new framework for blended learning within an MBA programme for the case study institutions. The figure illustrates several interrelated factors/dimensions and their interrelationship, which creates a meaningful learning and teaching environment in an MBA programme. For example, in terms of the influences on an MBA programme, AMBA is the essential factor that has an impact on all the other factors and, second, MBA course design is affected by AMBA and this has an influence on the other two factors. Similarly, an academic conceptual framework has an impact on MBA pedagogy but is supported by the influence of AMBA and MBA course design. Finally, as the last factor, MBA pedagogy is affected by all the main factors, from the influence of the MBA programme to the academic conceptual framework.

AMBA has a major influence on an MBA programme, its regulation and individual course design and delivery. The empirical evidence highlights that AMBA also has a substantial impact on the marketing of MBA programme delivery, e.g., an online MBA programme must contain 120 hours of face-to-face communication. Furthermore, AMBA has influence on the university by limiting its flexibility to attract more students, as MBA students are required to have at least three years' work experience. Moreover, individual academics appeared to play a major role in their module delivery. Therefore, this has

influenced a tacit underpinning pedagogy for an MBA programme. Although AMBA has major influence on MBA design, delivery, and development, the Association does not highlight the importance of pedagogy, and the language of pedagogy is rarely used in describing the learning and teaching experience.

The above discussion is further illustrated in Table 6.1, which shows the dimension of each factor. The first column in the table presents the responsibilities AMBA, the university, academics and students have in a blended learning MBA programme. However, at an institutional level, if a university is applying blended learning in an MBA programme to encourage and help students, academics' roles, such as academics' contributions, should be considered in any institutional development or decisions.

**Table 6.1: Dimensions and factors of a blended learning MBA programme**

<b>Responsibilities (AMBA, university, academics and students)</b>	<b>Dimensions/Factors</b>	<b>Description</b>
AMBA accreditation	Influence on the MBA: AMBA	Demonstrates that AMBA's requirements are challenging for the MBA programmes in the case study institutions.
University	Individual university regulation	Explores the policy framework regulations by which business schools operate their MBA programmes, e.g., the individual university is important in providing the tools (VLE) and structure for MBA instructors and students.
University	Marketing	Explores the language used in marketing MBA programmes and the differences between marketing, educational and academic language, and demonstrates the impact of AMBA on the marketing of an MBA.
AMBA and university	Model of delivery	Explores the AMBA requirement of face-to-face contact time in any online/distance learning and teaching.
University and academics	Course design: academics' training	Illustrates the importance of training for MBA academic staff for distance and online learning and teaching for their MBA programme.

University and academics	Technology use	Highlights the different communications methods, e.g., Skype, discussion board. Demonstrates technology-enhanced learning and teaching, e.g., YouTube, PowerPoint and email.
Academics and students	Interaction	Illustrates the importance of interaction in MBA programmes from two different aspects: student-student and student-teacher.
University and academics	Teaching and learning methods	Explores the different types of teaching and learning approaches, e.g., technology can be used to deliver the theoretical part, whereas case study and group work can be used for more practical elements.
University QA and QE	Evaluation and development: feedback	Explores the importance of different parameters for the quality improvement and evaluation in an MBA programme, e.g., module and programme evaluation. These QA and QE systems and practices are well known in the UK. Clarifies the significance of student, lecturer and university feedback for MBA programmes.
University and academics	Development of programme and staff	The quality of the evaluation of learning and teaching will help the university to develop its MBA programme and staff.
Academics	Academic conceptual framework	Critically identifies how the academic conceptual framework influences programme design and delivery.
University and academics	Pedagogy: lack of understanding	Illustrates the concept of pedagogy that underpins the blended learning in an MBA programme. Recognises the importance of technology and pedagogy aspects in blended learning in an MBA programme rather than just focusing on technology.
Lecturers	Roles of students and lecturers	Identifies the role of academics as facilitators by using different learning and teaching strategies to support and encourage MBA students. Illustrates how the academic's role will have an impact on the student's role in blended learning in MBA programmes.

Based on the frameworks proposed by Cookson (2000), Wilde et al. (2000) and Khan (2001), the missing dimensions, and the research findings, this research explored missing dimension and attempted to integrate those new or explored missing dimensions to develop a theoretical framework for

blended learning MBA programme which could be used to evaluate the blended learning MBA programme. The new framework is based on the experiences of the academic staff and students who participated at the three case study institutions in the UK as well as findings from literature.

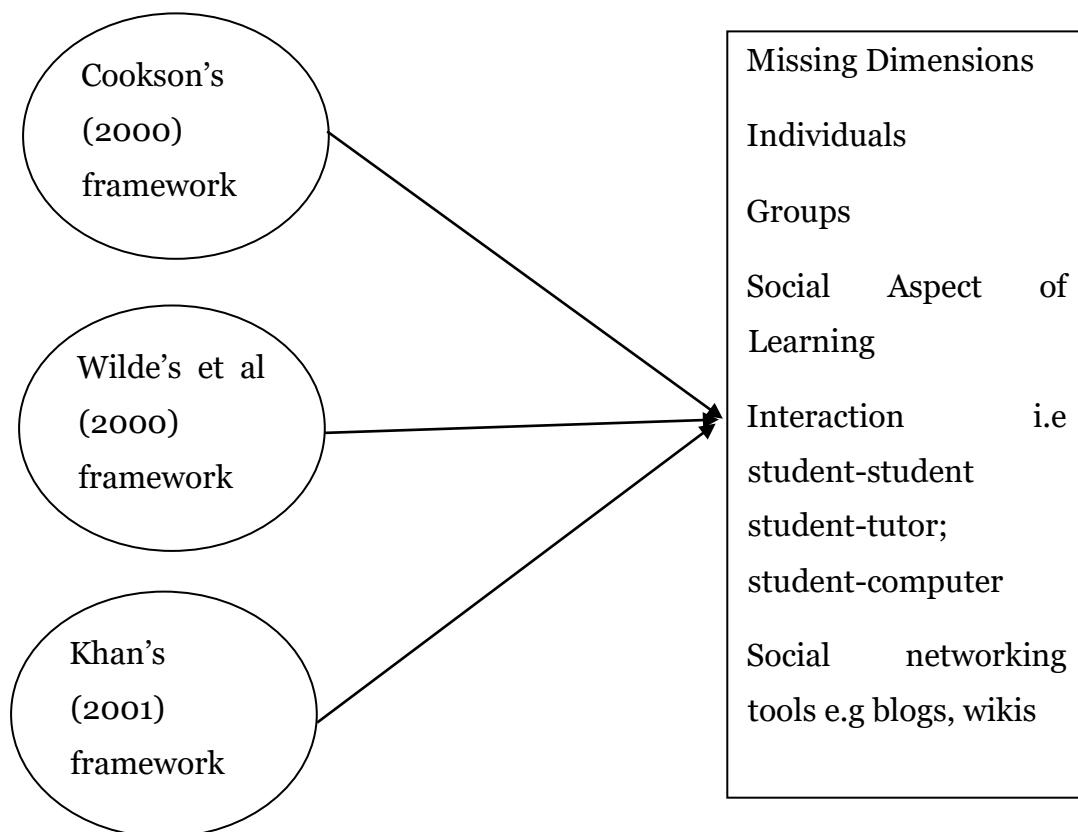
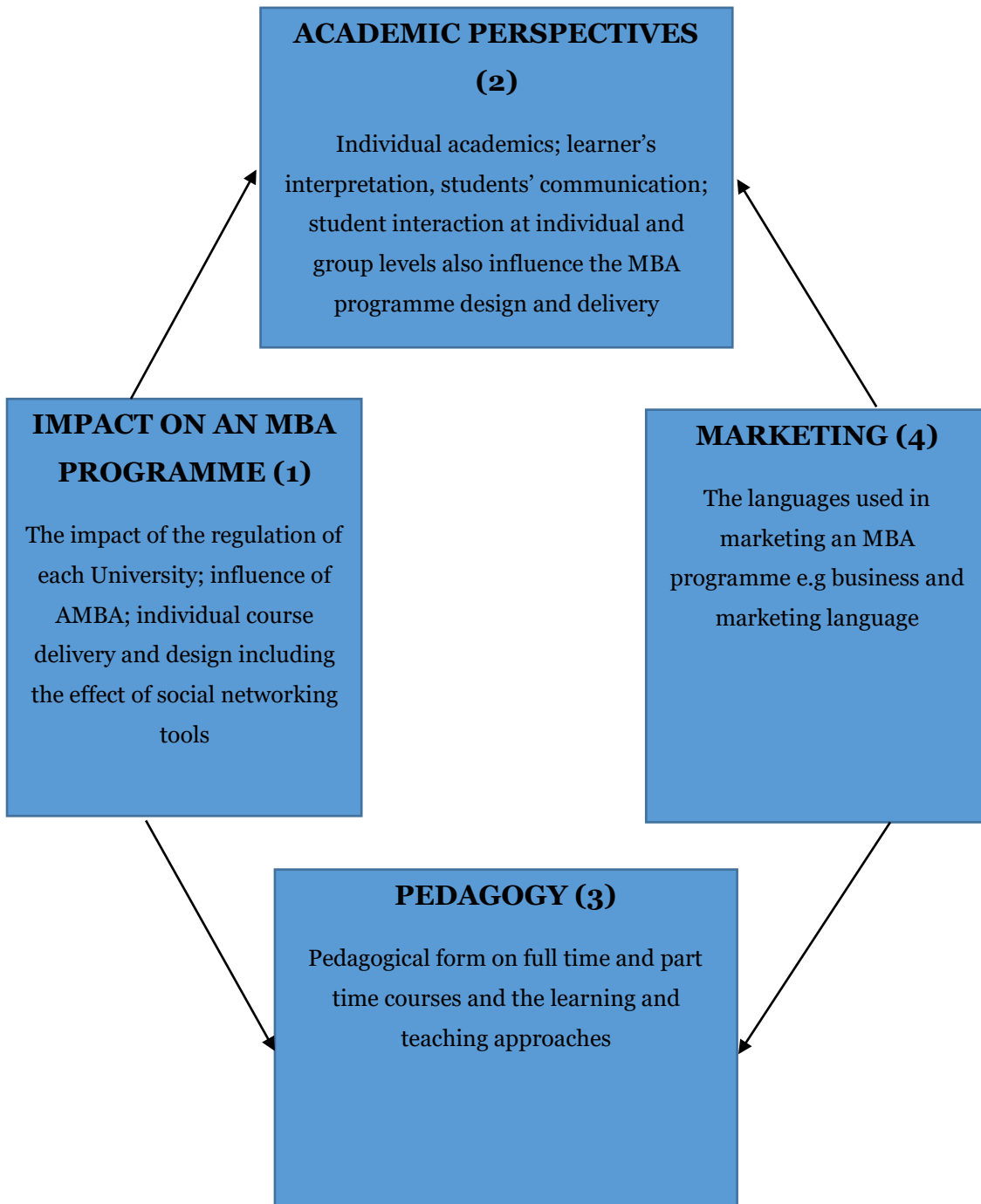


Figure 6.1a: Theoretical Framework and Missing Dimensions

Against the background of the above missing dimensions in figure 6.1a, the following diagram in figure 6.1b outlines the adapted and updated model for blended learning MBA programme.

**Figure 6.1b: Final version of a revised framework for a blended learning MBA programme**



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There are four dimensions to the proposed developed blended learning MBA programme framework: individual university regulation, AMBA, individual course delivery and design; and the way individual course design and delivery has an impact on an MBA programme; individual academics (the academic perspective including learner's interpretation, students' communication; student interaction at individual and group levels) play a major role in their MBA programme. The type of pedagogy was largely dependent upon the preference of the module leaders and an understanding of the different forms of pedagogy required for full-time and part-time courses. The language of pedagogy was rarely used when describing the learning and teaching experience, the language coming instead from the marketing and business school disciplines. Figure 6.1a and 6.1b above show that the four major dimensions need to be integrated into the three theoretical frameworks and their missing parts to be effective for blended learning in the MBA programmes at the case study institutions in the UK.

Three frameworks proposed by Cookson (2000), Wilde et al. (2000) and Kahn (2001) were used as the theoretical framework for this research. The three frameworks share a common stance, i.e., an emphasis on the significance of both tutors and students in learning and teaching systems. Although there are common features in the three frameworks, for example the importance of the reliability of the medium, ethical considerations and access issues, several significant dimensions were missing from these frameworks, such as pedagogy, which requires conversant understanding of and attention to individual needs, social presence, students' communication, and interaction. However, there are different categories of interaction: learner-teacher, student-student and student-computer interaction (Moore, 1989).

To engender effective blended learning in an MBA programme, it is imperative to pay attention to and implement different types of interactions in the learning and teaching process. Moreover, the student-tutor relationship is also an important dimension in an MBA programme. Thus, universities must provide guidance to their academic staff to help them contact the

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students at their different levels (Bentley et al., 2012). According to constructivist theory, it is important for both teachers and students in MBA programmes to know that the teacher teaches skills and knowledge to the students, in the main, while the students grab new knowledge from the teacher and try to build new skills and knowledge using their existing knowledge (Rogers et al., 2009). Furthermore, in the literature, little attention has been paid to the aspects of pedagogy; much more research has focused on the technology used in teaching and learning, such as the VLE (Attwell and Hughes, 2010). Therefore, paying proper attention to pedagogy would help to enhance the learning and teaching effectively in MBA programmes in UK universities.

To summarise, three theoretical frameworks, i.e., Cookson (2000), Wilde et al. (2000) and Khan (2001), the missing dimensions (see section 3.7) and the research participants, i.e., MBA academic staff and students (see chapter five) were assessed in terms of blended learning MBA design and delivery. The researcher highlighted that the four major dimensions shown in Figure 6.1a are missing from the three theoretical frameworks selected. These have consequences for the education system and its environment, particularly for MBA programmes in UK universities. Also missing was the academic conceptual framework and its role in a blended learning MBA programme. Although Khan discussed the pedagogical dimension particularly, i.e., content, course goal, course design and learning materials, little attention was paid in the three frameworks and their dimensions to how UK universities could evaluate or analysis these factors of their MBA programmes, and, finally, the marketing dimension, in terms of the language used in MBA programmes.

However, consideration of Figure 6.1b and the way in which these dimensions are integrated with the three frameworks and their missing dimensions would render a meaningful design and delivery for the blended learning and teaching on the MBAs in the UK institutions. At this point, it is worth pointing out that, as a new contribution to the existing knowledge, the



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theoretical frameworks on which this research was based were originally taken from educational literature, but this is the first time they have been applied in a business management programme, i.e., an MBA programme. Furthermore, this contribution is intended to help business and management schools in UK universities from two sides: exploring theoretical frameworks from a business and management perspective, rather than from a 100% education discipline perspective; and in overlapping business, management and education research. The findings of this research also indicate that the case study institutions should not design any blended learning strategy without consulting the students. For example, students need more face-to-face contact and want to be flexible in the way they approach learning. Therefore, a more learner centred approach could be more helpful in enhancing student satisfaction. Similarly, an approach which moves away from a purely didactic process to an action learning style was also mentioned as desirable by the respondents, placing students at the centre of the learning environment and the lecturer as a facilitator. However, when MBA academic staff and students do not understand their new roles in the learning environment, they resist any change that may cause a reduction in meeting face-to-face.

Thus, academics' and students' preparation is important to help them understand their new roles. Thus, this research provides novel insight into where MBA learning fits in this picture. The researcher further argues that MBA programme pedagogy should be designed at the learner level. Furthermore, existing accounts overlook the impact of an academic's discipline(s) on an MBA and these have been left unexplored. Thus, this research provides interesting and novel insights into how academics' disciplines, in addition to their identity, influences MBA programme delivery, design and assessment (see Table 6.1 and Figures 6.1b).

The new framework is based on the perceptions of the participants, i.e., MBA academics and students across three case study institutions which have different models of delivery: online learning, distance teaching and face-to-

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face learning. However, they all follow blended learning and teaching modes. According to Whetten (1989:492), “it is unfair to expect that theorists should be sensitive to all possible boundary constraints”. Thus, the researcher proposes that this framework should be evaluated in other institutions, countries and subject areas before claiming its transferability or generalisability. Against the above theoretical and practical implications, the next section presents the conclusion sections of this study, while presenting a new framework for MBA programmes as derived from this study.

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## **CHAPTER SEVEN CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS**

### **7.1 INTRODUCTION**

This thesis explored the concept of blended learning in MBA programmes for management development at three case study institutions in the UK. This chapter first begins with the theoretical/research contributions of the findings in section 7.2. The next section, (7.3) highlights the practical contributions to MBA programmes and practice in the UK and offers recommendations. Section 7.4 summarises the contribution made to research methodology. This is followed by section 7.5, which presents the research limitations and future research directions. The final section (7.6) provides an overall summary of the thesis.

### **7.2 THEORETICAL CONTRIBUTIONS OF THIS RESEARCH**

#### **7.2.1 Theoretical Contribution from findings on Research Question One**

The first research question in this study was, **“How effective is “blended learning” as a means of delivering management development in MBA programmes?**

Although this study has discovered the works of Khan, 2001; Wilde et al., 2000; and Cookson, 2000 as appropriate and relevant frameworks for understanding learning and teaching dimensions within the MBA framework, some dimensions were found to be missing in these three frameworks, such as student interaction at the individual and group levels, social and cross-cultural issues, and social networking tools, e.g., web 2.0 technologies (see Figure 3.7). In particular, there had been many previous tensions and debates around the blended learning concept. For example, there is a high propensity for lack of appropriate support services for students as well as difficulties in

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finding the right balance in terms of the level of student control over their involvement in the teaching-learning process (Aspden and Helm, 2004; Hofmann, 2014); faculty scepticism and misunderstandings about what blended learning includes have occurred and might limit the effectiveness and development of blended learning (Hebert-Maccaro, 2012; Ooms et al., 2008). According to Parker (2016), other challenges of blended learning include the engagement of students in discussion-based learning online, the difficulty in encouraging critical thinking among the participants online, as well as the maintenance of the presence of the teacher online. Unlike other critics of blended learning, Parker (2016) focuses on the challenges experienced or encountered in one of the aspects of blended learning, which is online learning. However, Parker (2016) fails to iterate the challenges encountered in blended learning from a holistic perspective.

Other current tensions and debates relate to the effect of blended learning on students. For example, it has also been debated that pervasive online access can also be invasive to students' personal lives, and students who are not able to strike the right balance can feel overwhelmed and exhausted (Smyth et al., 2012); and students enrolled on blended courses can sometimes have unrealistic expectations, such as the notion that reduced face-to-face class time directly translates into less work (Vaughan, 2007). Thus, the resolutions of these tensions and debates were found capable of informing the development and improvement of MBA pedagogy that can help to limit negative consequences of the implementation of blended learning frameworks in for example, the three case study Universities of this study. Therefore, by measuring the extent of the effectiveness of blended learning within the three case study Universities, using a wide range of empirical data, this study generated findings that helped in the development of a new framework. Incidentally, this study selected and justified three relevant and useful models, but which were found to contain specific missing dimensions, some of which represent opportunities for resolving the numerous tensions and debates on the effectiveness and suitability of blended learning within MBA programmes.

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This research therefore contributes to the existing knowledge by exploring the three frameworks proposed by Cookson (2000), Wilde et al. (2000) and Khan (2001). This exploration and the findings will be helpful for the business and management schools at the three case study institutions in the UK from two perspectives. First, three theoretical frameworks were explored from the business and management discipline perspective, rather than purely from the education discipline perspective. Second, the research also provides overlaps between business, management and education research. Hence, the findings can also be useful for these disciplines. Section 7.3 discusses in detail the practical contribution of the proposed improvements to the theoretical aspects of blended learning in MBA.

The researcher concludes that the four key dimensions explored should be integrated into the three frameworks proposed by Cookson (2000), Wilde et al. (2000) and Khan (2001) to design a new framework for blended learning, which can be used to evaluate the blended learning MBA programmes at the case study institutions in the UK. Therefore, the researcher is contributing knowledge to the blended learning MBA literature, although the previous researchers (Cookson, 2000; Wilde et al., 2000; Khan, 2001) evaluated and discussed different models of distance/e-learning and teaching individually. This research contributes to the knowledge by exploring online and e-learning models and their missing dimensions, rather than discussing each one alone (see Figure 6.1). Therefore, a theoretical framework for blended learning in MBA programmes has been developed which illustrates several factors and the relationship between these factors, which could lead to the creation of a meaningful learning and teaching environment in the MBA programmes at the three case study institutions in the UK.

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### **7.2.2 Theoretical Contribution from findings on Research Question Two**

The second research question was, **“What existing theoretical framework for learning and teaching are relevant to the MBA programmes in UK universities selected in this research?”**

There have been debates on the most appropriate learning and teaching framework in academic delivery. For example, research has shown that behaviourism, cognitivism and constructivism can greatly influence education and provide guidance for instructional practice (Baruque and Melo, 2004), while objectivism and constructivism in particular have been found to be the two ends of a continuum that have important implications for MBAs in their distance learning format (Phan and Hoover, 2014). In particular, many scholars have argued that each of these theoretical stances has its own relevance and application and should not be adopted arbitrarily. However, in the context of an MBA programme design and delivery, the relevance of constructivist methods in mainstream MBAs has been brought to the fore by many researchers, including prominent studies by Arbaugh and Duray (2002), Arbaugh and Hwang (2005), Moon et al. (2005), Strang (2006), Rovai et al. (2007), Chia and Holt (2008) and Tsai et al. (2008).

These scholars reported that many of the top business schools in the world were adopting and using some highly typical constructivist methods for programme design and delivery. Similarly, this study found the constructivist learning method of immense application and similarity to the interpretive stance of this research and found out that it is capable of furthering the development of a new model of MBA programme delivery that incorporates many aspects of constructivism such as students' communication; student interaction at individual and group levels; and other social and cultural issues within and outside a University learning environment that impacts on students' learning.

Against this background, the researcher's contribution to theoretical knowledge is that this research provided novel insights by exploring how the three case study institutions offered different learning models: online

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learning, distance teaching and face-to-face learning. Further, they commonly used the same learning and teaching approaches, whether online or traditional, such as a VLE and face-to-face. The research findings show that the concept of blended learning is hidden behind different learning and teaching models and approaches in the MBA programmes at the three case study institutions. Furthermore, this research contributes to understanding of the concept of blended learning in MBA programmes by identifying that, in most cases, the case study institutions used marketing language to market their MBA programmes as an alternative to outlining the format of the programme delivery. However, the programme delivery was different from the way in which it was marketed.

The research participants highlighted that different forms of pedagogy were practised with full-time and part-time courses. Full-time MBAs were based upon didactic pedagogy, while part-time courses offered a more experiential pedagogy (see Figure 5.12). Furthermore, although the full-time and part-time MBA students have the same input in terms of objectives and learning outcomes, the full- and part-time courses used the same teaching and learning techniques, e.g., case studies and workshops. The researcher concludes that an understanding of the different pedagogy forms on full-time and part-time courses could help academics to evaluate the effectiveness of blended learning and in the further management development of MBA programmes.

In chapter five (see section 5.4.2), the researcher highlighted that the case study institutions used a variety of teaching and learning approaches as pedagogical approaches (see Table 5.20). The findings of this research show that the particular role of MBA students in Allan's diagram (2007) indicates that there should be more inquiry-based approaches and an action learning style. Therefore, this research concludes that the centre of Allan's diagram will be MBA programme pedagogy level and focus should be on the learner with an inquiry-based approach.

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This kind of teaching approach, e.g., case-based learning, supports MBA students in learning both theory and practical knowledge. This finding builds on and strongly supports Arbaugh (2010b), who illustrates the importance of case-based learning for MBA students, i.e., learning by doing. Therefore, the empirical evidence of this research highlights that further development elements should be considered, as, for example, linking theory with practice could assist the development or management of an MBA programme in UK universities. Therefore, the researcher contributes to the knowledge by arguing that the case study institutions should introduce more collaborative group work aimed at problem-solving in the learning process, with action learning offering opportunities for students' participation in collaborative and cooperative learning.

The concept of blended learning was found embedded in the different learning and teaching models and approaches at the case study institutions. It was also found that the case study institutions used technology for enhancing learning and teaching at different levels, e.g., videotapes, recorded lectures and webinars (see Tables 5.2 and 5.35). Similarly, various sections in the literature review also shed light on techniques which can be utilised to evaluate different learning and teaching techniques, such as module and programme evaluation and a meeting held once a term with the course director and the academic committee. However, the mentioned parameters are all standard UK university QA practices (Universities UK, 2008; QAA, 2015). Therefore, it was found that all the parameters play a significant role in improving the learning and teaching strategy, i.e., course delivery, teaching and learning approaches. However, there was no specific evaluation parameter for MBA programmes and, therefore, the researcher argues that either the case study institutions have nothing new or different or the respondents were not familiar with the existing parameters.



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### **7.2.3 Theoretical Contribution from findings on Research Question Three**

In this study, research question three was, **“What are the existing pedagogies for learning and teaching part time and full time MBA programmes in UK Universities and how do these pedagogies align with existing theoretical frameworks?”**

There have been numerous tensions and debates on the pedagogical forms for learning and teaching within the MBA programme, one of which is the actual definition of “pedagogy” as a concept. For example, Cogill (2008), argues that pedagogy is an ambiguous concept and is difficult to define. This lack of a widely acceptable definition led to further tensions on what constitutes appropriate approach for pedagogy. For example, Mehdinezhad (2011) argues that pedagogy can be teacher-centred or learner-centred, but Mascolo (2009) argued that pedagogy can be a mixture of teacher-centred and learner-centred approaches. In other words, Mehdinezhad (2011) fails to acknowledge the possibility of pedagogy that combines a teacher-focused and a learner-focused system or pattern, but only see them as mutually exclusive. However, Mascolo (2009) negates the mutual exclusivity of the asserted by Mehdinezhad (2011) in favour of a mutually encompassing position or stand as it relates to the teacher-centred and learner-centred approaches. The focus on what methods are found appropriate for pedagogy, particularly within the MBA context has further been expanded with authors like Hebert-Maccaro indicating that MBA programmes employed a variety of pedagogic methods, such as the case-based method, lecture-based instruction, experiential learning and a team-based focus approach (HebertMaccaro, 2012).

However, HebertMaccaro’s (2012) position was further criticized since different students were found to have different learning approaches, and there is a very strong link between students’ academics’ identity and their teaching approaches (Luke and Freebody, 1999; Deem, 2006; Rhoades, 2007; Marcelo, 2009; Clarke et al., 2013; Komba, 2013). All the same, many contemporary scholarships on MBA pedagogy have found the use of case-based learning in MBAs (Lee et al., 2009) in some of the most popular and

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influential business schools in the world (Caruana and Ploner, 2012), while the language employed in MBAs as well as other business terminologies have been found to be the most-used languages in MBA programmes (Van Auken and Chrysler, 2005). It was against this background that findings from this study attempted to propose improvements and development based on these tensions and debates in the development of a new MBA pedagogy as shown in the new framework of figure 6.1.

In particular, the empirical evidence highlights that there are five factors which contribute to academics' underlying pedagogy on the MBA programmes at the case study institutions: roles, disciplines, professional experience, interest, and training and interest in learning and teaching (see Figure 5.5). The empirical evidence also highlights that there is a strong link between academics' identities and teaching approaches that are discipline-based. The findings of this research (see section 5.3.1) show similar ideas regarding academic staff disciplines and professional experience to those stated in chapter two, mentioned by AMBA (2013, 2015) and Varela et al. (2013). However, such a variety of disciplines has influenced the academics' design, delivery and assessment of the modules. Moreover, the empirical evidence in this research highlights that the professional experience of academics plays a fundamentally important role in an MBA programme. This finding is also supported by Paterson et al. (2002), Deem (2006), Clarke et al. (2013) and Kovalcikiene and Buknyte-Marmiene (2015), who illustrated that academics' identity and disciplines are related to their teaching processes. Thus, this research contributes to the knowledge by exploring the influence that academics' disciplines and identities have had on MBA programme design, delivery and assessment and provides improvements in the proposed MBA blended learning framework as shown in figure 6.1.

It was also found that the academic staff in the case study institutions rarely used pedagogic language and that the major focus was on the language of marketing. Therefore, the researcher argues that, in order to enhance the effectiveness of blended learning, the case study institutions should use

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appropriate language to market their programmes by integrating pedagogic language as well. Further, AMBA requirements were of prime importance, particularly in terms of face-to-face contact, but not for online learning, such that a primarily online module is required to have some face-to-face aspect (thereby making it a blended experience) but a face-to-face module is not required to have any online aspect. Adopting online learning for modules was largely based upon the individual module leaders' decisions, leading to a situation in which some modules on an MBA programme can be blended and some may be purely face-to-face.

#### **7.2.4 Theoretical Contribution from findings on Research Question Four**

##### **What theoretical framework can be used by practitioners and managers of MBA programmes in UK Universities to develop and market their approaches to blended learning?**

This research selected three theoretical frameworks and found that some dimensions were missing. Further, it was mentioned that those dimensions were important for exploring and evaluating the effectiveness of blended learning in the MBA programmes at the three case study institutions. Sections 5.2, 5.3, 5.4 and 5.5 summarised the four major findings in the case study institutions. This research has shown that blended learning is an important and essential model of delivery for the MBA programmes at the case study institutions. According to Thompson (2016), the meeting of the diverse needs and requirements of students has often been a challenge for teachers, given that teachers tend to have limited time, within which they serve students who are gifted, average, or struggling, all with diverse patterns of learning. Hence, a combination of online learning with face to face learning has been a welcome solution. However, Thompson (2016) further iterates six models of blended learning which include the face to face driver model, the rotation model, the flex model, the online lab school model, self-blended model, and the online driver model.

However, the investigation of an MBA learning and teaching framework also highlighted some challenges which should be considered beforehand. For

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example, MBA pedagogy requires more attention from the institutions and academics in order to enhance the learning and teaching in MBA programmes and to be more constructivist and learner-centred. Consequently, the researcher suggests that AMBA should consider highlighting the importance of a coherent underpinning pedagogy as part of its accreditation process.

Furthermore, the empirical evidence shows that individual course design also has an influence on an MBA programme, e.g., in academic training, interaction, learning and teaching techniques, and the evaluation and development of an MBA programme. The empirical evidence also highlights the importance of academics' training from two perspectives: technological and pedagogical. Different forms of technologies are required in order to enhance students' ability to understand and construct new knowledge.

### **7.3 CONTRIBUTION TO PRACTICE AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

This section highlights the practical contributions and recommendations to the management of MBA programmes. Furthermore, this section also provides answers to the final research question: *How can the UK universities improve or develop their approaches to blended learning and teaching in their MBA programmes?*

The outcome of this research is a revised theoretical framework for blended learning MBA programmes, which has implications for the case study institutions in terms of needing to pay attention to interaction dimensions, i.e., student-student interaction, student-teacher interaction, and student-computer interaction. Further, pedagogy should be considered in MBA learning and teaching in the pedagogical aspects of both pedagogical theory and the technology used in the teaching and learning approaches. It is further argued that the programme teams need to explore and understand their own approaches to pedagogy and their own conceptual background, as this has implications for learning and teaching on an MBA course. This will further help in developing the underlying pedagogies within individual modules or

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agreeing upon a common pedagogy. However, the most important characteristic of the theoretical framework developed is that it guides practitioners in understanding the factors involved and the relationships between them, which will help in creating a meaningful and effective learning and teaching environment in an MBA programme.

Furthermore, practitioners should consider and treat seriously the language of learning and teaching in MBAs, which would affect the learning outcomes and assessment of MBA students, as well as business and finance, and strengthen their ability to put their learning into practice in the future. There is also a need for a clearly defined meaning of MBA pedagogy for education institutions in the UK. Furthermore, UK universities should also actively provide staff training for the members of an MBA programme team, such that there is general agreement on and a definition of the programme's underlying pedagogy. This could be achieved by engaging fellow lecturers and module leaders in discussing how, and to what extent, their own particular preference for a certain pedagogy is influenced by their background, since it was found that different module leaders had their own teaching techniques. This would help narrow a range of diverse techniques in teaching into what can be accepted as the general pedagogical construct for an entire MBA programme.

Although the empirical evidence highlights that the academics in almost all the case study institutions have a conceptual framework (see Figure 5.5), most of the MBA programme and module leaders were found to rely on their roles, experience, disciplines, interest, and training and an interest in learning and teaching to design and deliver a programme and module and evaluate the students. The empirical evidence also shows that there are no formal or specific parameters of the academic conceptual frameworks followed by the case study institutions. The empirical evidence further shows that the underlying conceptual framework of individual academics appears to play a major role in their input into an MBA programme, and that these seem to have a greater influence than the explicit or tacit underpinning pedagogy of the whole MBA programme. In this regard, it was noticed from the existing

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literature that blended learning MBA researchers have not yet explored such factors in the context of UK education institutions. Therefore, paying attention to such issues was important in this research to evaluate the effectiveness of the design and delivery of a blended learning MBA programme.

#### **7.4 CONTRIBUTION TO RESEARCH METHODOLOGY**

A multiple case study research method was adopted for this research. However, a major limitation of the case study in this research was the number of case studies in one country, which reflected the time limitation. Being limited by time meant that the three case studies had to be carried out almost concurrently. Similarly, both the e-survey and the semi-structured interviews had to be carried out within a short space of time of each other, since most of the students and module leaders had very busy schedules. These two situations created the potential challenge of an overload of information or data to manage at the same time.

Another challenge encountered over the course of data gathering was the issue of access. Gaining access to respondents from the case study institutions to conduct this research was not entirely straightforward. Each education institution required certain conditions to be met on the researcher's part before data gathering could commence, which included an official e-mail from the research supervisor to help introduce the researcher to the education institutions. At the same time, setting the parameters for establishing and confirming participants' confidentiality and, therefore, gaining their confidence in participating freely in the research was also quite an experience for the researcher as an international student. Lastly, the researcher's choice of eSurv as the survey tool for this study was occasioned by the constraint of having to pay for the use of other survey conducting websites or platforms, which also came with a limit on the number of questions that could be included. eSurv allowed unlimited questions and was available free of charge.

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Moreover, this research focused on one programme that offers the delivery of different learning and teaching models, i.e., the MBA programme, and ignored others. The research investigated three learning and teaching frameworks, those proposed by Cookson (2000), Wilde et al. (2000) and Khan (2001), and their missing dimensions. The chosen research methodology enabled the researcher to identify four major findings, which were integrated into the theoretical framework of this research as dimensions that had previously been missing. In terms of the contribution to research methodology, the researcher in this study used standard research methods, particularly in the process of data gathering, presentation and analysis. Therefore, this research did not break any new ground in terms of adding anything to the established methodology. However, the conduct of this research confirmed and reaffirmed the researcher's confidence in the application of a standard methodology to this research. In the light of these challenges, it is recommended that future research on the subject matter of this research should be conducted with adequate provision for the time taken to get students and module leaders to answer the surveys and interview questions that were designed. Also, the survey method should be diversified. This research utilized only e-surveys. It is recommended that future research on the subject matter should incorporate diverse methods of administering surveys, such as a combination of electronic and offline survey methods.

## **7.5 LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH DIRECTIONS**

There are several limitations of this research which provide a scope for future researchers to explore or test. One of the limitations is the fact that this research only focused on three UK universities. Therefore, in the future, the number of cases could be increased and include institutions from different countries. This will provide more holistic and broader insights into the effectiveness of blended learning in MBA programmes for management development. Another limitation includes the fact that this research focused solely on MBA programmes. In the opinion of Horn (2014), blended learning

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can be referred to as the combination of teacher instructions and online technology that aids student-focused learning. In light of this, future researchers could focus on more diverse disciplines for professional development when considering blended learning and teaching. An example can be seen in a research conducted by Riad et al. (2013), with the aim of examining the effect of blended learning approach on the attitude of student nurses and their academic achievement in Medical Surgical Nursing courses.

This research also found that AMBA has had a negative impact on potential MBA students from two perspectives. First, MBA students require at least three years' work experience for admission to an MBA programme. Second, face-to-face interaction is recommended for any online/distance learning and teaching. However, a major challenge for MBA students is the lack of flexibility on the programme. Similarly, AMBA itself claims that this requirement helps in ensuring the quality and standards of the MBA programme and its stakeholders, i.e., students and institutions. Future research could focus on these two factors to investigate the severity of the impact of AMBA requirements and possible solutions.

Another limitation can be seen in the lack of experience and skills regarding e-learning and technology, which was also found to be a major challenge for lecturers who were interested in applying blended learning in their modules. Therefore, professional training should be considered for both academic staff and students. Future researchers could investigate how training could improve the delivery of different modules in the blended learning and teaching in MBA programmes.

The minimal attention being paid to the educational language that was used in the design, development and delivery of MBA programmes is another limitation with this study. Future researchers could explore how student learning outcomes could be improved through developing appropriate use of language on their MBA programmes. This research also found that the language used in the MBA programmes in the case study institutions was driven by marketing and business school disciplines. Future researchers could investigate why this is the case and how academic language could be



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integrated with pedagogic language, as well as the impact this could have on students.

This research found that a VLE was appreciated in the three case study institutions and respondents expressed their interest in greater interaction. Future researchers could focus on how interaction can be increased in blended learning, particularly in online learning, and what would be the impact on the management development in an MBA programme.

This research found that, due to a lack of understanding of the meaning of blended learning in MBA programmes among higher education staff members and students, they preferred to use their own understanding in order to continue using traditional methods (such as face-to-face learning and teaching). Future researchers could investigate how a better understanding of blended learning could be developed in MBA programmes and what impact this would have on management development. The revised framework has not yet been tested in terms of its effectiveness. Therefore, future researchers could test this framework for the management development of an MBA programme and blended learning.

The researcher is an international student who had never undertaken any distance or online learning before attending Hull University. The researcher's lack of experience stood as a limitation but the researcher herself considered it a challenge, as working with experts in the field, such as the research supervisors, and their guidance ultimately mitigated this limitation. The researcher had not studied an MBA prior to this research, which means the researcher came into this research with a fresh perspective and no prior assumptions. To carry out this research successfully, the researcher was challenged to learn about certain aspects of management development. The researcher also had to achieve a working knowledge of the MBA programme, as well as gaining an inside brief of AMBA and learn about higher education in the UK, all within a relatively short space of time before and during the research period. Such foundational knowledge was important, even in knowing which literature to review in line with the research objectives.

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## 7.6 RECOMMENDATIONS FOR PRACTICE

This research suggests that practitioners should have a clear understanding and knowledge of the methods and practice of learning and teaching in their MBA programmes, as different understandings have the potential to affect the learning outcomes and assessment of MBA students. Furthermore, the pedagogy on an MBA programme should be explicitly learner-centred in its design. According to secondary findings from Education Reform (2014), the term learner-centered refers to a wide variety of educational programmes, learning experiences, instructional approaches, as well as academic-support strategies that are aimed at addressing the diverse learning needs, interests, aspirations, or cultural backgrounds of individual students and groups of students. In the opinion Weimer (2012), some of the characteristics of the learner centered approach includes the engagement of student in the task of learning, the inclusion of explicit skill instruction, the encouragement of students to reflect on what they are learning and how they are learning it, the motivation of students by giving them control over the learning process, as well as the encouragement of collaboration. However, the findings of Weimer (2012) focuses on the characteristics that are reflective of the benefits of a learner centered approach, without due consideration of the characteristic challenges. Most importantly, in practice, as encouraged within the constructivist school of thought, learners or students should be allowed to explore, manipulate, and ask complex questions to obtain new information, with the lecturers as facilitators.

This argument is based upon the fact that most pedagogy design integrates a learner-centred approach but undermines learners during its execution. Finally, students' expectations of what the programme is, and what they actually experience it to be, should be better aligned. If there is any variance or change in course outline and actual teaching, this will cause confusion and will be detrimental to achieving the intended learning outcomes of a particular subject. This research further highlights the limitations of MBA structure, including AMBA accreditation, on MBA programmes, and suggests

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that practitioners consider the need to offer a more differentiated (by structure and delivery) range of MBA programmes. In terms of language, it is suggested that the case study institutions use a common language, which could then be used in both the promotional literature and the classroom. This would help provide an integrated approach and also contribute towards managing student expectations.

The final recommendation relates to the way in which the underlying conceptual maps of individual academics may result in overshadowing the agreed explicit or tacit pedagogy of a particular programme. It is suggested that programme teams explore their approaches to pedagogy and their own conceptual backgrounds and the implications these have for learning and teaching on an MBA. These discussions may then form the basis of further developing the underlying pedagogies, to both validate and highlight different pedagogies within individual modules or to agree upon a common pedagogy.

## **7.7 THESIS SUMMARY**

This thesis explored the concept of blended learning in the MBA programmes at three case study institutions in the UK. This section provides an overall summary of the whole thesis. This research followed an inductive, exploratory and interpretive approach to evaluating the effectiveness of blended learning as a means of delivering management development in MBA programmes. A multiple case study research method was adopted to explore, describe, compare and contrast the findings from the three case study institutions. Three frameworks, proposed by Cookson (2000), Wilde et al. (2000) and Khan (2001), were adopted as the theoretical anchor for this research. The theoretical frameworks integrate different learning and teaching techniques from various perspectives, such as distance, online and e-learning. Therefore, it was found to be useful for this research to evaluate the effectiveness of the different modes employed in blended learning at the three case study institutions in the UK. This further presented an opportunity to develop a theoretical framework which could be used to evaluate blended learning MBA

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programmes. Consequently, due to the inductive, exploratory and qualitative approach, the findings are only applicable to the participant case study institutions. However, the findings could also be generalised to other institutions, home or abroad, which show similar characteristics, module types, similar curriculums, resources and trends towards blended learning. Finally, data were collected using semi-structured interviews and questionnaires. The collected data were further supported by documents, and within-case and cross-case analysis was carried out to identify similarities and differences across the cases. Based upon the cross-case analysis, a revised framework was developed to evaluate the effectiveness of blended learning in the MBA programmes at the three case study institutions in the UK.

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**APPENDICES**

**APPENDIX [A]**

**FINAL INTERVIEW GUIDE**

**Interview questions**

**GENERAL QUESTIONS**

<u>MAIN QUESTIONS</u>	<u>ADDITIONAL QUESTIONS</u>
How long have you been working on the MBA programme?	
Tell me about your role in the MBA programme?	Responsibility Accessibility
Tell me about the MBA programme in your university?	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Do you have distance learning, elearning, or blended learning on your MBA programme?</li> <li>• Is there any difference between online learning and distance learning? If so, what is it?</li> </ul>	<p>Please explain?</p> <p>If the university uses one form of learning:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Why did you select the particular type of learning in [_____ university] e.g., distance learning?</li> <li>• What are the features of it? And what are the challenges on the other?</li> </ul>
<p>Which of the following systems are used on your MBA programme?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Virtual learning environment e.g., Blackboard.</li> <li>• Professional networks e.g., LinkedIn.</li> <li>• Social networks e.g., Facebook.</li> </ul>	<p>Why? What are the advantages in your selection?</p>
Did you take any training courses about distance learning facilities before practising on the MBA programme?	If yes, what is the benefit from that training?



How do MBA lecturers perceive distance learning?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• How do the lecturers understand distance learning?</li> <li>• What is the difference between the student uptake for face-to-face learning and distance learning?</li> <li>• What are the advantages of distance learning for students and lecturers?</li> <li>• What challenges do lecturers on a distance learning MBA encounter?</li> </ul>
Can you tell me how many students are enrolled on the MBA programme?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Why do you think MBA students choose distance learning as the way of learning?</li> <li>• What is the percentage of students who withdraw or drop out from the distance learning programme?</li> <li>• And what are the common reasons given for dropouts/withdrawals?</li> </ul>
Is it possible to say whether or not there are differences in the career outcomes after graduation from the distance learning course and traditional course?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Will future pay remain the same?</li> <li>• Is it possible to say whether or not they are paid the same?</li> </ul>

**PEDAGOGICAL STANCE**

<b><u>MAIN QUESTIONS</u></b>	<b><u>ADDITIONAL QUESTIONS</u></b>
Does the MBA programme help students to become better managers?	Do you think the MBA provides students with appropriate opportunities for management development? (How successful are these opportunities?)
Does the MBA programme help students to become better leaders?	Do you think the MBA provides students with opportunities for leadership development? (How successful are these opportunities?)
What is the underlying pedagogy used on the MBA programme?	What kinds of teaching and learning techniques are used on the MBA programme?
What kind of books have influenced you?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Why?</li> <li>• What do you want to achieve?</li> <li>• What kind of teaching technique do you not use? Why?</li> </ul>
How do lecturers communicate with the students?	How often are lecturers available to communicate with MBA students e.g., synchronous/asynchronous?

<p>Please tell me how you interact with students who are on the distance learning MBA programme at [_____ University]?</p>	<p>If the answer is (x), why do you prefer (x) rather than other?</p> <p>From your experience, what do you think about faceto-face as a means of interacting with MBA students?</p>
<p>Would you please share the most important communication methods that are used within the MBA programme to support teaching e.g., text messages, online discussion, video conferencing, Skype?</p>	<p>Which one of the previous communication methods do you prefer to support the teaching process e.g., text messages, online discussion, video conferencing, Skype?</p>
<p>There is a school of thought that believes that MBA teaching is focused on providing managers with advice about short-term profit rather than human benefit. What is your response to this idea?</p>	
<p>How is the MBA designed to facilitate tutor/student relationships?</p>	<p>Are the tutors on the MBA selected because they have a positive relationship with students? Do you as a teacher feel your relationship with the students affects their performance?</p>
	<p>Is there any monitoring by managers to evaluate the teacher-student relationships?</p>
<p>How could you evaluate the elearning MBA programme?</p>	<p>To what extent does the quality of evaluation of learning help the university to develop the MBA programme?</p> <p>Are there any factors/parameters to evaluate the MBA programme at [_____ University]?</p>
<p>What kind of development may be required to improve the MBA programme?</p>	<p>How could present and future uptake be increased using technology?</p>
<p>What advice would you give to future students who are interested in pursuing the distance learning MBA programme at [_____ University]?</p>	
<p>What advice would you give to future tutors who are interested in teaching on the MBA programme at [_____ University]?</p>	

**APPENDIX [B]**

**DATA COLLECTION SCHEDULE**

**Data collection schedule  
(semi-structured interviews)**

<b>CSA</b>	<b>Date</b>	<b>Interview length</b>
Interviewee B	16 October 2013	45 min
Interviewee M	16 October 2013	45 min
<b>CSB</b>		
Interviewee D	29 June 2013	50 min
Interviewee H	27 September 2013	30 min
Interviewee T	11 November 2013	45 min
Interviewee K	15 November 2013	35 min
Interviewee J	18 November 2013	50 min
Interviewee A	27 November 2013	50 min
<b>CSC</b>		
Interviewee S	11 July 2013	74 min
Interviewee F	24 July 2013	58 min
Interviewee R	24 July 2013	54 min

## APPENDIX [C]

### CONSENT FORMS

#### CONSENT FORM FOR MBA PROGRAMME AND MODULE LEADERS

DATE:

Dear

My name is.....and I am a doctoral research student at the University of Hull. This letter is an invitation to ask you to take part in a study I am conducting at Hull University Business School. I would like to supply you with further information about my project and you will be informed as to what your role is if you agree to participate in my research.

The aim of the project is *to evaluate the effectiveness of different models of learning and teaching as a means of delivering management development in MBA programmes*. The project focuses on the experience of students and staff in e-learning programmes. (This may involve e-learning, blended learning, distance learning, and/or distance teaching.) I would like to involve your institution as one of several institutions to be included in my project.

The purpose of my research is to:

*Evaluate the effectiveness of different models of learning and teaching as a means of delivering management development in MBA programmes.*

My research objectives are:

1. To identify and evaluate existing theoretical frameworks for learning and teaching in MBAs.
2. To critically examine three case studies of MBA programmes using the theoretical frameworks.
3. To develop (or adapt) a theoretical framework for MBA learning and teaching in the UK, and
4. To make recommendations to practitioners and managers of MBA programmes to enable them to develop their practice.

In this study, I would be grateful if you would provide me with access to information and experiences from your MBA programme(s). This may involve documents, e.g.,

programme and module handbooks, and also access to staff and students. Ideally, I would like to be able to interview academic staff involved in the management and delivery of the MBA. Each interview is likely to take approximately one hour and will take place in a mutually agreed place.

With your permission, a digital recorder will be used in order to help to collect information. Later, I will email the participants a copy to allow them to confirm the precision of the interview and to add or clarify any points. All information that is provided in this study will be treated as strictly confidential. I would also like permission to send a survey to your MBA students.

The research has been approved by the Ethics Committee at Hull University Business School and I would ask participants for their informed consent. Clearly, individuals may choose not to take part or to withdraw from participating in the study at any time.

The name of individuals and your institution's name will be hidden in any report or paper, including my thesis. However, with your permission, anonymous quotations may be used in the finished document. The whole of the data collected will be kept for approximately one year in a locked office at the University of Hull. Only my supervisor and I will have access. I guarantee that there is no potential risk to individuals who participate in this study.

I anticipate that the findings of my research will be of benefit to your institution, the wider MBA community, as well as to the broader research community. I will provide you with a copy of my thesis on its completion.

I look forward to hearing from you.

Yours sincerely,

Jamilah Alokluik, PhD  
Student.

## CONSENT FORM FOR MBA STUDENTS

DATE:

Dear Student,

My name is ..... and I am a doctoral research student at the University of Hull. This letter is an invitation to ask you to take part in a study I am conducting as part of my PhD. I would like to supply you with further information about my project and you will be informed as to what your role is if you agree to participate in my research.

The aim of the project is *to evaluate the effectiveness of different models of learning and teaching as a means of delivering management development in MBA programmes*. The project focuses on the experience of students and staff in e-learning programmes (this may involve e-learning, blended learning, distance learning, and/or distance teaching). I would like to include your perspectives in this study. I already have approval from your institution to go ahead.

I would like to ask you to complete my questionnaire online at <http://eSurv.org?u=MBAProgrammesUniA>

**It will take you about 10 minutes to complete and it would be helpful if you could complete within one week of receipt of this letter.**

The research has been approved by the Ethics Committee at Hull University Business School. By completing the questionnaire, you will be giving me your consent.

Your name will be hidden in any report and papers, including my thesis. However, with your acceptance, anonymous quotations may be used in the finished document. The whole of the data collected will be kept for approximately one year in a locked office at the University of Hull. Only my supervisor and I will have access. I guarantee that there is no potential risk to individuals who participate in this study.

Should you have any concerns about the conduct of this research project, please contact the researcher: Jamilah Abdulhadi Alokluq, Hull University Business School. Email address: [J.A.Alokluq@2010.hull.ac.uk](mailto:J.A.Alokluq@2010.hull.ac.uk). Alternatively, you may contact my supervisor, Dr Katy Graley ([K.Graley@hull.ac.uk](mailto:K.Graley@hull.ac.uk)).

Thank you for your consideration. Your help is greatly appreciated.

Your sincerely,

Jamilah Alokluq, PhD  
Student.

**APPENDIX [D]**

**FINAL QUESTIONNAIRE FOR MBA STUDENTS**

**EXAMPLE OF STUDENTS' QUESTIONNAIRE**

*This questionnaire is designed to measure your perception and satisfaction towards the blended learning MBA programme.*

**Section 1. Your perception about your MBA programme**

	Support and management	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Agree	Strongly agree
1	I received good quality administrative support.	1	2	3	4
2	I received good quality teaching.	1	2	3	4
3	I received a good quality of induction.	1	2	3	4
4	I received good quality assignment support.	1	2	3	4
5	I found the module handbook helpful.	1	2	3	4
6	I had access to relevant textbooks.	1	2	3	4
7	I found the email support from administrative staff helpful.	1	2	3	4
8	I found the email support from tutors helpful.	1	2	3	4
9	I received good quality elearning material.	1	2	3	4
10	Which of the following communication methods are used within the MBA programme to support learning and teaching? A) Text messages. B) Online discussion. C) Video conferencing D) Chat forums. E) If other, please state.				



11	Which one of the previous communication methods do you prefer? And why?				
12	Which of the following systems were used on your MBA programme? A) Virtual learning environment e.g., Blackboard.				
	B) Professional networks e.g., LinkedIn. C) Social networks e.g., Facebook.				
13	I received relevant website links e.g., to additional learning resources, e-journals, etc.	1	2	3	4
14	I received technical help when I had IT issues.	1	2	3	4
15	I found the assignment instructions helpful.	1	2	3	4
16	I found the assignment submission procedures clear.	1	2	3	4
17	I found the assignment feedback helpful.	1	2	3	4

	Individual learning	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Agree	Strongly agree
18	The MBA programme enhanced my ability to understand different points of view.	1	2	3	4
19	The MBA programme improved my decisionmaking and problem-solving skills.	1	2	3	4
20	The MBA programme improved my ability to think logically	1	2	3	4

21	The MBA programme improved my ability to think critically.				
22	The MBA enabled me to relate my own experiences to the topics covered on the course.	1	2	3	4
23	The MBA helped me to become a better manager.	1	2	3	4
24	The MBA helped me to become a better leader.	1	2	3	4

	Working in teams	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Agree	Strongly agree
25	The MBA improved my team- working skills.	1	2	3	4
26	The MBA improved my ability to share and discuss ideas with my peers.	1	2	3	4
27	The MBA improved my ability to share and discuss ideas with my tutors.	1	2	3	4
28	The MBA enabled me to take part in professional networking.	1	2	3	4
29	I developed problemsolving skills through working with peers.	1	2	3	4
30	Working with my peers helped me to develop new knowledge and skills.	1	2	3	4

	Learning preferences	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Agree	Strongly agree
31	I prefer to learn in a face-toface situation.	1	2	3	4
32	I prefer to learn through communicating with others using technology.	1	2	3	4
33	I prefer to learn by myself using online resources.	1	2	3	4

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34	I prefer to learn by myself using traditional resources such a book.	1	2	3	4
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**Section 2. General information**

1. What is your gender?
  - Male
  - Female
  
2. What is your marital status?
  - Single
  - In a relationship
  - Married
  - I do not want to respond to this question
  
3. What is your age?
  - 18 or under
  - 19- 25
  - 26-35
  - Above 36
  - I do not want to respond to this question.
  
4. Please estimate your level of computer expertise
  - No experience
  - Novice
  - Intermediate
  - Expert
  
5. Have you previously studied on an online course?
  - Yes
  - No

If yes, was it a positive experience? Please outline why?

6. Please use this box to record any further comments you may have about studying for an MBA by distance learning.

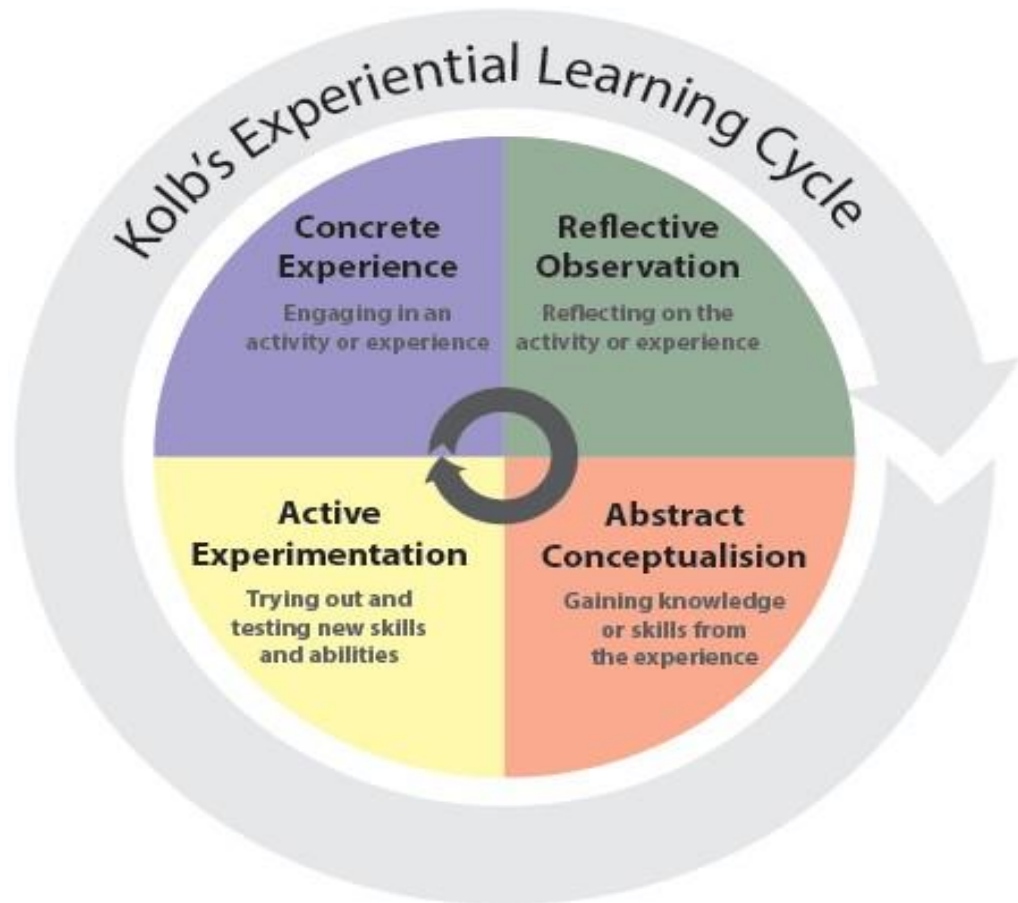
Thank you for your time.

PhD student

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**APPENDIX [E]**

**KOLB'S MODEL**



Source: Kolb (1984:229)