

Higher MBA entrance requirements

How proposed changes could affect prospective students

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JOHANNESBURG- Prospective MBA students will have to ensure that they meet the proposed higher entrance requirements that have been proposed by the South Africa Business School's Association (Sabsa). The new requirements were proposed by Sabsa after the Council on Higher Education had considered grading the MBA at an honours level degree.

Business schools opposed this move and instead agreed to increase the entry requirements of an MBA. Prof Tommy du Plessis, president of Sabsa says that "after extensive consultation and discussion, all 18 members of SABSBA have unanimously accepted the proposal to set a standard for the MBA that brings it into line with international standards and positions South African MBA graduates on a par with top international MBA graduates."

The new requirements:

Prospective MBA applicants will have to ensure that they have a four year bachelor's degree, post-graduate diploma or an honours degree to be considered for an MBA qualification. This is alongside other entrance requirements that business schools may have in place.

Currently business schools have requirements that are similar with minor differences and accept individuals with a tertiary level degree. GIBS for example requires applicants to have a minimum of a degree or equivalent qualification, five year's work experience and they also have to write the Graduate Management Admissions Test (GMAT). The UCT business school requires entrants to have at least three year's work experience and be 25 years or older.

Ahmed Essop, CEO of CHE, states that the changes in the requirements would bring South African standards in line with international practice as in the USA and the UK and Europe an undergraduate degree is four-years long.

Business schools will also have to consider whether they offer a professional MBA or an academic MBA. The academic MBA will be heavily research focussed as opposed to the professional MBA which will be more focussed on theory and application. Essop emphasises that "the Council's proposals for master's degrees in general provides for different research requirements in the degree, which distinguishes between a general and a professional focus". However both the professional and academic would come out at NQF level at 9.

"John Powell of USB offered the opinion that academic rigour was of massive relevance in the workplace, as evidenced by the increasing dissatisfaction of senior employers at the inability of well-taught MBA graduates to turn knowledge acquired in the MBA into the sustainable decision making skills needed by Boards. The 'applied knowledge' acquired in many MBAs may provide a

specious contemporary competence on Day 1 of a business career but it is this which goes out of date rather than the thinking and cognitive skills developed by research and serious academic study.”

Colette Symanowitz, founder of MBA Connect, an online community for MBA students, states that the debate concerning placing the MBA at an honours degree is centred on the level of rigour that goes into the research component of an MBA degree. Symanowitz states that an average MBA student spends less time in the duration of their degree on research in comparison to other master’s degrees. However, Symanowitz adds that the comparison between an MBA and other master’s degree is unequal. An MBA is meant to be an application focussed degree. Symanowitz argues that question should not be about academic rigour alone; a lot of what is learnt becomes outdated soon afterwards, the application is what becomes crucial and this is what business schools focus on.

Students with an academic degree are at a disadvantage in the workplace because they “cannot hit the ground running” she says. This is a disadvantage for employers because it will take longer for employees to contribute to the organisation. Symanowitz anticipates that individuals who would select an academic MBA would do so perhaps so that they can obtain a PhD and lecture at a business school whilst an individual who selects a professional MBA would go straight into a management position.

Symanowitz also highlights that had the decision been put through to place the MBA qualification at an NQF level 8, this would have decreased the value of a South African MBA. It would have affected the employment prospects of MBA graduates in South Africa as well as internationally because they would be entering the market with a lesser qualification. It would have also affected the number of international students who attend South African universities, with a lower qualification-they would have less incentive to attend South Africa universities, she said.

The proposal was gazetted on December 14 and awaits a response from the minister, Blade Nzimande.