

WHY DO MBA STUDENTS DELAY COMPLETING THEIR THESIS?

Dr. John Barnes¹

Abstract: *This academic paper investigates one problem universities offering MBA programs encounter with students who choose Plan B (thesis option) as they often delay completing their thesis. Its purpose is to identify the nature of the problem and its impacts on the several parties involved and propose an educational management solution. The delay in students completing their MBA theses has been found to cause difficulties for the students, their advisers and for the Graduate Schools of Business. Managerial approaches for each party to minimize if not mitigate the problem caused by late completion of the thesis are proposed, including a proposed eight-step solutions. A subsequent paper will investigate this problem more deeply from a research perspective.*

Keywords: *Delay in completing thesis, Plan B (thesis option), advising faculty members, educational management solution.*

1. Introduction

As a faculty member of the Tourism Management MBA Program at a well-known university in Bangkok, Thailand, it is noticeable to both this writer and colleagues that students who choose Plan B (thesis option) often delay completing their thesis. A discussion over lunch with friends at another large and prestigious government university in Bangkok recently indicated that they too face this same difficulty within both their General and Tourism MBA programs. So it seems appropriate to investigate this problem in greater detail.

This paper is of an academic rather than research paper. Its purpose is to identify the nature of the problem and the impacts of the several parties involved and to propose an educational management solution. A subsequent paper will investigate this problem more deeply from a research perspective.

The delay in students completing their MBA theses often causes difficulties for the students, their advisers, and for the Graduate Schools of Business. To better understand the scope and nature of student's late completion of the thesis, it will be useful if this writer firstly explains those difficulties and then explores the causes and implications of the delay and to finally suggest managerial approaches for each party to minimize if not mitigate the problem caused by late completion of the thesis.

The causes of delay are likely to be both External (Extrinsic) and Internal (Intrinsic) to the student, so let us review the various causes on those bases first.

2. Intrinsic and Extrinsic Causes of Delay of a Student Completing a Thesis

According to a brief survey of some of the literature on this issue, the most common causes of not completing the thesis or completing it late are: distractions from thesis research; difficult data-related processes; lack of understanding of the thesis writing process; students and supervisors' personal qualities (Ho, Wong and Wong, 2010); changing the direction of the studies; and financial difficulties (Anon, 2013).

The relevant literature further goes on to identify two other causes of delay: unfamiliarity with the thesis process; and difficulty in rescheduling activities to include the thesis process (Burton & Steane, 2004; and Morton & Worthley, 1995).

In terms of familiarizing the student with the thesis process, this is not currently included in the Research methods or other coursework of most MBA programs. For the most part, there is no formal introduction to the academic writing process until the student begins working with his/her thesis adviser other than reading the occasional journal article as part of assignment work for other classes. We might agree that one's first encounter with academic English is a daunting one, even for a native English language speaker, let alone a student whose first language is not English.

All TRM MBA students are provided with a copy of the Graduate Student's Handbook on the first day of attending their orientation at the university. They are also urged to read it thoroughly and ask questions to faculty members, where they do not understand it.

¹John Barnes, Ph.D. lectures at Assumption University, Graduate School of Business.

The Graduate Student Handbook includes a clear guide to the thesis process. Unfortunately, like users of new consumer goods, the manual is the last (rather than the first) item that is referred to when help is required.

In practice, thesis students are also told by their advisers to visit the library and read a couple of theses to become familiar with the structure and the academic language of the thesis. In this writer's experience, however, this is far too late in the thesis process for the student to be engaging with this preliminary part of the process.

Additionally, the literature suggests that another common cause with younger students is procrastination in either not getting started, or making unsatisfactory progress between meetings with their adviser, reading but not writing regularly and so getting overwhelmed is another common cause of delay (ibid; Haskins, 1988).

The literature also cites breakdown in the relationship between adviser and advisee. This may be due to either party being too busy to devote sufficient time and energy to the process (Morton & Worthley, 1995; and Markle, 1977). The writer's own experience indicates that this may also be happening where teaching brings in regular income on which to live but that income from thesis is often a tenuous affair.

This writer's experience with TRM MBA students points to some external causes: serious personal illness and death in the family or near family. Yet other reasons might be (if already employed) relocation of the work place or change of employment status. If the advisee is from a foreign country then the advisee may face pressure from spouse or parents to return home to reunite with the family. Yet other factors include romantic relationships, financial constraints (Ho, Wong and Wong, 2010) or bureaucratic difficulties within the university (Stewart, 2004).

3. Parties Impacted by the Delay in Completing a Thesis

Three immediate parties are impacted by the student delaying in completion of their thesis: student advisees; advising faculty members; and the graduate school of business.

- Student Advisees:

Up to the point where the student decides whether to choose Plan A (non thesis option),

the student's study plan is detailed and scheduled. However, at the end of trimester 2 students must decide whether to continue under Plan A or Plan B so that they can preregister for their third trimester. If a student selects Plan A then he/she continues with a clearly-defined study schedule. However, if a student chooses Plan B (thesis option) his/her study schedule is more flexible and new to the students who may be unable or unwilling to apply themselves to finishing their thesis in the expected trimesters four and five.

Students entering the TRM MBA program may either be working full or part-time or they may commence working during the first two trimesters or begin employment in their third trimester, when they think they have sufficient time to undertake both paid work and their thesis. It appears that at that point, the challenge of managing both work and a thesis overwhelms some of them.

It is believed by this writer that the principal reason students undertake employment whilst studying is pecuniary. Unless a student is on a scholarship or has parents supporting him/her, he/she lives a frugal life during his/her first two trimesters. However, students see an escape as they enter their third trimester, by engaging in paid employment. This comment applies to both Thai and foreign students.

In this writer's experience, a secondary reason to undertake paid employment at this stage of their studies is to gain some practical working experience, so that when students graduate, they have some proven working experience behind them.

Students from China often undertake paid work as tutors of Chinese language to Thai students or to business people wishing to become fluent in Chinese for their business purposes. Alternatively Chinese students earn good money as translators to Thai businesses engaged in import or export with Chinese companies.

Students from Iran are under added financial pressure because sanctions on their country by the international community have devalued their currency by around fifty percent and remittances from home are very strictly controlled by the Iranian government. Many Iranian students who would not otherwise work whilst studying are forced to do so by this dire financial situation.

Students from the former Soviet Union or

Eastern Bloc countries and Africa have been shown to engage in a variety of work, such as modeling, real estate sales, and export of Thai or neighboring products to their homeland.

Meanwhile Thai students may undertake a more active role in a family business after completing their core subjects as they, their parents or siblings believe that additional time is available for them to do so.

It should be noted that foreign students studying in Thailand on student visas are forbidden to undertake paid employment by Thai Law and if caught by immigration officials will be fined and deported.

- Advising Faculty Members

Faculty members within the Graduate School of Business are not permitted to have more than five student advisees at any given time. This very sensible rule is intended to ensure that each faculty member will have sufficient time to assist and meet with each student advisee to ensure their steady progress through the thesis process (Schlosser and Gelso, 2001).

When students delay the thesis process, they prevent their advisers from taking on other students awaiting an adviser, which effectively limits the adviser's income stream. So there is a tendency for some advisers to flout the five advisee rule and take on more than the permitted five advisees. In fact this is treating the symptom not the cause of the problem. So like blood-letting, the situation gets worse rather than better. Advisers can rationalize their actions by saying to themselves, that the cause of their interrupted income stream, lies with the student advisees and not with themselves and so why should they suffer financially, through no fault of their own. So they may surreptitiously take on additional student advisees, which makes managing the problem that much more difficult for the program and university administration.

This skirting of the rules, has subsequent serious consequences to the thesis process and teaches neither the student advisee nor the teacher-advisor, how to solve the problem.

Let us assume for the basis of this discussion that when the student, who has delayed progress of his/her thesis, later wishes to continue it, the adviser has to pick-up where he/she left off and re-engage with the student and his/her thesis topic. By that time, the adviser will have researched thesis topics with

other advisees and may have lost his/her own motivation to continue with the recalcitrant student. If the advisor drops the student it may take some time for the advisee to find another suitable and willing supervisor. If the adviser continues on with his former advisee he/she will have to dredge up the student's earlier work and re-engage with the literature and the student's work which carries a substantial burden of effort with it.

Students who delay completing their thesis often do so up to the limit of the fifth and final year in which they are permitted to complete their thesis. The writer was recently assigned such a student who paid three and a half years of maintenance fees and yet failed to graduate because he succeeded only in defending a thesis proposal within the five year limit. The major reason why this student ultimately failed was that the student had two full time jobs, as well as trying to complete the TRM MBA degree thesis.

Advisers who have a number of tardy thesis students in their care, in the meantime might have taken on additional advisees. They may be too busy either with other thesis students or with teaching additional classes to follow up students who have delayed completion of their thesis. As Schlosser and Gelso (2001) have suggested, the Program Director could follow up with these students and either encouraged them to complete their thesis or change to Plan A (non thesis option) to finish and graduate within the five year limit. In the author's view, this approach can be quite successful.

When advisees do not receive what they perceive as adequate support from their advisers they will either "fade away" or resort to using "ghost writers" to maintain adequate progress. Neither of these situations is good in the ethical and moral sense for the student, the advisor or the Graduate school of business (Markle, 1977).

- The Graduate School of Business

Part of the Quality Assurance Program under both OHEC and ONESQA monitors and tracks the progress of students in both Plan A and Plan B and requires that the Graduate School monitor and explain the time taken for graduates to complete their studies.

Students who take longer than the prescribed 2 ½ years to complete their TRM MBA, effectively penalize the Graduate School of Business, by attracting a lower

ranking in the Quality scoring process.

As can be seen from the above discussion the factors identified in the limited sources identified in the abbreviated literature survey closely align with those in this writer's experience. However the call to action must begin at the origin of the problem which begins in the stage prior to a student commencing their thesis.

4. The Solution to the Problem - Start at the Beginning - The Current Pre-Thesis Process

As mentioned above, the clearly defined structure of the TRM MBA up to the end of the students second trimester, means that students just need to follow their study plan. With the commencement of the students' third trimester, the situation changes and students enter that trimester with their final core courses and one non-taught course listed as Thesis.

During a student's third trimester, thesis students must write a Thesis Prospectus which is in fact a mini-thesis proposal. While students, currently undertake writing this Prospectus largely alone, it should be done in consultation with the program director with whom they typically informally meet perhaps 3-4 times during their third trimester.

By the end of their third trimester, students should have completed their Thesis Prospectus and been assigned an adviser from among those available. Students are allowed to choose an adviser from those available, who have less than five advisees and who are teaching and researching in the area of the advisee's thesis topic.

From their fourth trimester on, the thesis process currently depends upon the arrangement made between the adviser and advisee, as to how often they will meet and what progress is expected at each meeting. This part of the process is currently verbal and with students' new-found freedom, this is where the thesis process is likely to stumble.

Understanding by both faculty and students, that students work more effectively to a sufficiently structured plan (as is common in the pre-thesis stage of their studies), than to an insufficiently detailed plan, is key to overcoming many of the difficulties experienced in students delaying completion of their thesis (Burton and Steane, 2004; Philips and Pugh, 2005).

5. The Proposed Eight Step Solution

Step 1: Discuss with students the differences between Plan A and Plan B towards the end of their second trimester and before they make Plan A or Plan B decision.

Step 2: Add some rigor and detail to the Plan B option by enhancing the current loose schedule of completing the Thesis Proposal within Trimester Four and the complete thesis and journal or conference paper by the end of Trimester Six. The author suggests that the thesis and accompanying journal paper or conference proceeding be dissected into six thesis chapters and one paper all to be completed within two trimesters according to the advertised 2 ½ year schedule for our TRM MBA Program.

Step 3 - Plan B Third Trimester: Complete a Thesis Prospectus or mini proposal to include chapters 1, 2, 3 and the Reference List. An adviser is sought and assigned to the student.

Step 4 - Plan B Fourth Trimester: Complete Chapters 1 & 2, and the Reference List during this trimester so that the Thesis Proposal can be defended in the subsequent trimester. Achievement of this goal will require regular weekly meetings between the adviser and advisee to identify and discuss detail in sufficient depth.

Step 5 - Plan B Fifth Trimester: Complete Chapter 3 and the Reference List of the proposal. The Proposal is defended and any changes required by the committee are completed.

Step 6 - Plan B Sixth Trimester: Complete the Fieldwork, Chapters 4 & 5, and the Reference List. Undertake the Final Defense.

Step 7: Any changes to the Thesis requested by the committee are completed and the Thesis is signed off by the adviser and advisee.

Step 8: The adviser and advisee seek and decide on a suitable and approved peer reviewed journal or conference, recognized by Thai Citations Index (TCI), at which to publish. A quality journal or conference paper is completed by the student advisee under the guidance of his/her adviser. The journal or conference paper must be published before the student can apply to graduate. Letters of Acceptance by Journals or Conference organizers of student papers are no longer

sufficient evidence for graduation to be approved by OHEC and ONESQA.

6. Cement the Plan with a Written Agreement between Adviser and Advisee

Experience to-date at the Graduate School of Business shows that a gentleman's (verbal) agreement does not often work between an Adviser and an Advisee. Browsing the internet, one can find that many universities in the U.S., UK, and Australia have a protocol or Adviser/Advisee written agreement for Master's level students undertaking the Thesis option at their Universities, because verbal agreements have been found not to work.

This writer suggests that such an agreement be drafted and signed by both the adviser and advisee when entering into their respective inter-dependent thesis roles to set the necessary tone and commitment by both parties. The Advisor/Advisee Thesis Agreement should become the frontispiece of the Advisers and Advisees thesis file for that student and be examined each time that they meet to ensure that they are both honoring their agreement.

7. What Are Other Universities Doing to Manage this Problem?

A review of the Web elicits the following useful information:

1. Many universities provide Academic Writing Centres for their thesis students where they receive additional counseling and tutoring in the academic writing process, which is foreign to most non-native English speaking students.

2. Many universities provide thesis process workshops where students are counseled in the process of managing their reading writing and research time.

3. Many universities have an established formal written agreement between thesis advisers and advisees to add a measure of gravity and structure to the adviser and advisees relationship, in which the expectations, responsibilities and scheduling of both parties are clearly defined.

The Message is clear - if we do not manage the problem the problem will manage us!

References:

Burton S., and Steane, P., 2004, eds., *Surviving Your Thesis*, Routledge, London

Haskins, M,S, (1988), *Procrastination, Thesis Writing and Jungian Personality Type* Unpublished Master' Thesis, University of British Columbia,

Markle, G. H. (1977) *Student and Supervisor Interactions; A Model of the Thesis Completion Process*. Dissertation Abstracts International, 38(6-A), 3214-3215

Morton, K, R., and Worthley, J,S., (1995), Psychology Graduate Program Retention, Completion and Employment Outcomes, *Journal of Instructional Psychology*, 22, (4), 349-353.

Philips, E., and Pugh, D, S. 2005, *How to Get a PhD - 4th Edition: A Handbook for Students and Their Supervisors*, McGraw-Hill, London. .

Schlosser, L.,Z., Gelso, C, J.(2001), Measuring the Working Alliance In Adviser- Advisee Relationships in Graduate School, *Journal of Counseling Psychology* 48(2), 157-167.

Stewart, Helen, 2004, *Factors Affecting Successful Student Completion in A Career Oriented Program*, Master's Thesis Athabasca University