

Prospects and Challenges in the Deliverance of Executive Masters Degree Programmes

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Abstract: *In the recent decade Executive Masters degree programmes have become very popular deliverance in the Tanzanian higher learning institutions. Such shift of paradigm may have occurred due to public budgetary cuts, employment and socio economic conditions that do not favour full time courses attendance and recent higher learning marketing processes. Using The Open University of Tanzania as a case study, this article will focus on two programmes, namely; Executive Masters in Business Administration (EMBA) and Masters in Community Economic Development (MCED) to analyze its deliverance prospects and challenges. Data collection tools included questionnaire, interviews and documentary analysis. We are arguing that the Executive Master's Degree programmes can be made more effective by being more practical, learner-centered and adoption of blended learning approach. These changes in the provision of Executive Masters degree programmes may expand the impact of the higher learning institutions in the communities and labor markets*

Keywords: Executive Programme, Prospects, Challenges, Blended learning

INTRODUCTION

There is a great paradigm shift in the Tanzanian higher learning institutions in the recent years. Such paradigm shift may have occurred due to public budgetary cuts, employment and socio economic conditions that do not favour full time courses attendance and recent higher learning marketing processes. For instance, the financing of public higher education in Tanzania has adopted the cost sharing policy. Ideally, there is sharing of responsibility between different stakeholders and beneficiaries of higher education products (Ishengoma, 2008).

On the other hand, executive education is changing. As we move into the 21st century, numerous forces are causing a transformation in not only its delivery but also its purpose. The employment and socio economic conditions have acted as pushing factors that has lead into choice of Open and Distance Learning, evening classes and executive education as alternative to full time provision of studies. There are also some cases were students were not able to join residential and full time programmes due to family commitments, employment and working conditions.

A previous study by Conger and Xin (2000) pointed out that executive education is more directly geared to learning needs, learning content, pedagogy, instructors,

participant mixes, and organizational integrating mechanisms. The authors also feel that the mentioned outcomes can be considered in terms of the transformation of executive education in the 21st century. This article therefore intends to explore further on the provision of executive education in the Tanzanian higher learning institutions.

Background of the Problem

While the number of Executive Masters programmes being delivered by higher institutions in Tanzania is increasing rapidly, our knowledge of what makes these courses effective learning experiences for students is still limited. This study, therefore, was conducted to examine the prospect and challenges experienced by executive masters students at The Open University of Tanzania. The provision of Executive Master Programmes is The Open University of Tanzania education approach designed specifically for working business professionals to complete their course with minimal work interruption. The study further analyses the effects of technological, pedagogical, and student characteristics on student learning in Masters in Economic Development (MCED) and Executive Masters in Business Administration (EMBA) programmes at the Open University of Tanzania.

Masters in Community Development (MCED)

Masters in Community Economic Development (MCED) is among many programmes offered through executive module at The Open University of Tanzania. The programme started in 2008. Community Economic Development concept is a participatory process by which communities initiate and generate their own solutions to economic problems leading to positive concrete changes in communities through the creation of employment, stabilization of local economies, reducing poverty, contributing to the health of the natural environment, building local resources and capacities and increasing community control (OUT, 2008). The MCED promotes a holistic approach to practical issues and recognizes the complex, long term nature of individual and collective empowerment processes. MCED is an eighteen months course divided into three modules. Three courses are accomplished in each module lasting for two weeks.

There is a two months break between modules. In total students undertake 9 courses in total (6 core courses and 3 electives). Students are assessed in each course by a combination of course work, term paper and a project/dissertation. The course work component is made up of student's group presentation (50%), while the term paper carries 50%. Students are required to choose a community based organization to work with in order to practically create an impact in the respective community as part of dissertation requirements. The programme is offered in five regional centers, namely, Arusha, Dodoma, Dar es Salaam, Mbeya and Mwanza. Since 2013, the programme has been extended to one centre outside the country, namely, Kibungo, Rwanda (OUT, 2013).

Executive Masters in Business Administration (EMBA)

The Executive masters in Business administration (EMBA) programmes is designed to develop managerial competence in a wide variety of business situations appropriate to diverse national and international backgrounds. The main educational aim of the

programme is to prepare and equip graduates with general training in cross-organizational functions of business and specialized training in career-oriented management professions such as Marketing, Leadership and Governance, Transport and Logistics, Human Resources Management and Finance (OUT, 2006). The programme is offered in three modules with a two months break between modules. Three courses are taught in each module and each course is covered in five days. Course work and dissertations are expected to be accomplished in eighteen months. EMBA is offered in five centers, namely: Dar es Salaam, Arusha, Mbeya, Mwanza and Zanzibar in the country and Kibungo centre in Rwanda. The first two modules are conducted in the students' respective regional centers, while the third module (specialization) is done in Kinondoni Regional Centre, Dar es Salaam. The programme consists of 6 core courses and three electives. Students are assessed in each course by a combination of course work, final examination and dissertation. The course work component comprises of timed test (30%) and final examination carries (70%) (OUT, 2013).

THEORETICAL BASIS FOR EXECUTIVE MASTERS PROGRAMMES

The executive Masters Degree programmes are unique due to their business-academic partnership (Carrel and Schoenbachler, 2001). The partnership between Executive Masters Degree programmes and supporting organizations and communities is critical as most graduates are expected to show impacts in the duties with immediate effect. However, the existing literature points out that in some cases the organizations pay the tuition fees and other costs, while other executive students pay these costs through private sponsorship.

Executive Education Concepts

Executive education is commonly referred to academic programmes at graduate-level business schools worldwide for executives, business leaders and functional managers. Executive education is reported as being distinctive from most content focused education (Lockhart, 2013). Usually, these programmes are generally non-credit and non-degree-granting, but sometimes lead to provision of certificates. Recently, the universities and other higher learning institutions have adopted this mode of education whereby senior Managers and Executives are revisiting the campuses for executive education. Some of the goals of these executive learning programmes are to provide government and corporate executives with realistic training. The public and private organizations worldwide believe that they can help broaden the mental horizons of their employees by sponsoring such executive educational programmes.

The Executive Education Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework for describing the key features of provision of Executive Masters programmes was drawn from the theoretical perspectives of the reflective practitioner (Schön, 1983); the reflective executive (Roglio, 2006; Roglio, Light, & Coelho, 2006); and reflective executive development (Gosling & Mintzberg, 2003). The development of the reflective executive concept was linked with the study and description of the reflective thinking process, investigated by Argyris and Schön (1974). Schön (1983) developed the idea of reflective practice and presented the

reflective practitioner concept. *Reflective practice* is essential to the development of professional artistry—the ability to make sense of uncertain, unique, or conflicted situations of professional practice—and is based on the concepts of knowing-in-action, reflection-in-action, and reflection-on-action.

Knowing-in-action is a spontaneous and usual action that draws on daily practices. It can be identified when practitioners learn how to do something and are able to execute smooth sequences of activity, recognition, decision, and adjustment without having to expend conscious energy thinking about it. However, professional practice often surprises practitioners with unusual experiences that occur when something fails to meet their expectations. In an attempt to preserve the constancy of their usual patterns of knowing-in-action, practitioners may (1) respond to a surprise by brushing it aside, selectively ignoring the signals received; or (2) respond to it through reflection (see Figure 1). According to Schön (1983), this reflection occurs in one of two ways:

- Practitioners may *reflect-in-action* in the midst of an action, without suspending it. They reshape what is being done while doing it. In this case, “we respond to the unusual or anomalous by restructuring some of our strategies of action, theories of phenomena, or ways of framing the problem; and we invent on-the-spot experiments to put our new understandings to the test” (Schön, 1983: 26).
- Practitioners may *reflect-on-action*, thinking back on what they have done in order to discover how their knowing-in-action may have contributed to an unexpected outcome or they may pause in the midst of an action to reflect. Raelin (2002) defines this process as “thinking about thinking” (2002: 66).

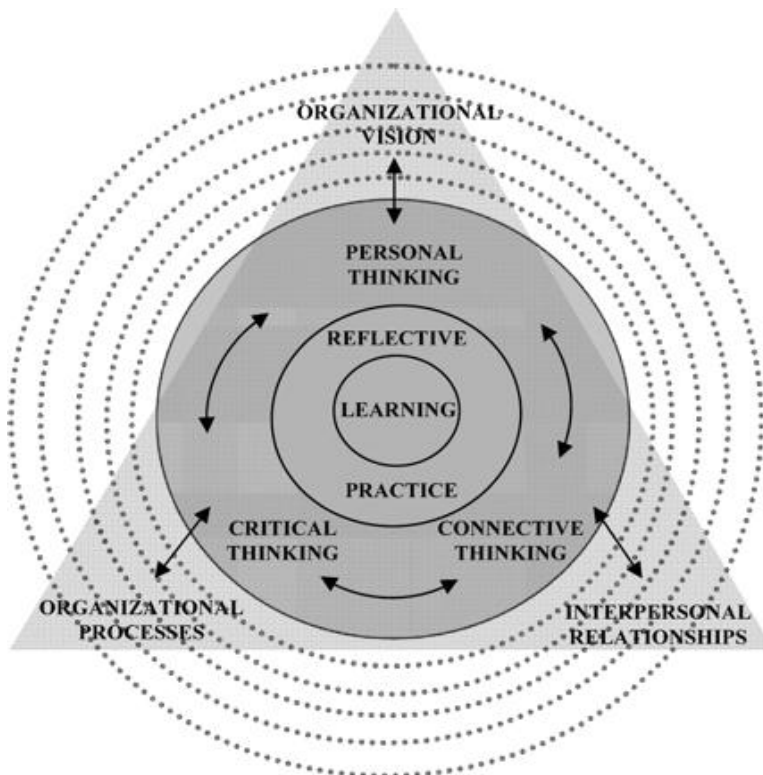


Figure 1: Knowing-in-action approach

Source: Schön (1983)

Executive education programmes have three quite different goals: providing students with focused business understanding and knowledge, helping students solve pressing business problems, and improving students' on-the-job performance and prospects. With few exceptions, executive programmes specialize by discipline, topic, industry, skill, or the role, level, and career stage of participants (Gavin, 2007).

The normal university training programmes aims are to develop students' knowledge and the skills needed to solve problems and conduct rigorous analysis. However, the Executive training typically comes to programmes with particular business problems in mind. They are less motivated by broad intellectual concerns than by pressing practical dilemmas (Gavin, 2007).

The study by Gavin (2007) also pointed out that while other Masters students were in a formative and developmental stage of life, the executives masters programmes were in a more pragmatic and instrumental stage of life. Executive teaching therefore demands far more attention to explicit information and knowledge transfer and far less emphasis on basic skill development than teaching.

A similar study by Newman and Stoner (1989) indicated that normal MBA students are typically in their mid-to-late 20s, with 3 to 5 years of business experience. Most of that work experience has been in relatively low-level positions, such as analyst, associate or individual contributor roles. However, the same study confirmed that most Executive MBA students were typically in their 30s, 40s, and 50s, with extensive business experience.

Many hold mid- and senior-level executive positions; often, they have worked for several different companies and held a variety of jobs. They were usually savvy and well informed about the realities of organizations and management practice; for this reason, “they resent being told the ‘facts of life’” (Newman & Stoner, 1989: 133). What they frequently lack is a larger context: a means of viewing their own experiences from afar and assessing or organizing them around a larger framework or theory.

IMPLICATIONS FOR EXECUTIVE MASTERS PROGRAMME TEACHING

The study by Gavin (2007) indicated that Executive trainers need to be far more attentive to the parallels between cases and the work experiences and industry backgrounds of their students. In executive classes instructors need to develop teaching plans that explicitly ask for and draw out their students' experiences. The trainers are expected to help executives use what is already inside them.

To do so effectively, however, requires that students first be given the opportunity to give voice to their experiences; they must then be encouraged to abstract from them and draw broader, more general lessons. The preparation of executive students, on the other hand, is often uneven. At times, this reflects language problems, since executive education students are less likely than ordinary students to have been screened for language proficiency due to many years of staying away from books.

PRINCIPLES OF EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING IN EXECUTIVE CLASSES

The process of experiential learning proposed by Kolb (1984) is represented in a cycle composed by four “adaptive learning modes” namely: concrete experience, reflective observation, abstract conceptualization, and active experimentation Learning is defined as “the process whereby knowledge is created through the transformation of experience” (Kolb, 1984: 38). The concept of experiential learning implies that all learning is relearning: Nobody enters a learning situation without some experience or ideas about the topic at hand. As such, it is essential for educators to relate these ideas to the learning process. “If the education process begins by bringing out the learner's beliefs and theories, examining and testing them, and then integrating the new, more refined ideas into the person's belief systems, the learning process will be facilitated (Kolb, 1984: 28).”

CONSIDERATION FOR STUDENTS TO JOIN EXECUTIVE PROGRAMME

The considerations students use in deciding if (and when) an executive programme is right for them can be classified as personal considerations, academic considerations, financial considerations, and other considerations. Personal considerations would include decision considerations such as a student's perceived need to become a more

effective manager or community specialist, the likelihood of remaining with the company, the pay-off or perceived value of the investment, the design of the executive programme to minimize interference with work responsibilities, and the ability to stay on the job while attending classes.

Academic decision considerations might include the reputation or prestige of the college or university, the accreditation of the college or university, the programme's interaction or partnerships with the community and the rigorousness of the curriculum. Financial consideration would include the actual cost/tuition of the Executive programme and the availability of payment or credit terms for financing participation in the programme. Other considerations would include its convenience in terms of scheduling, the short duration of the programme and the time commitment outside of the classroom.

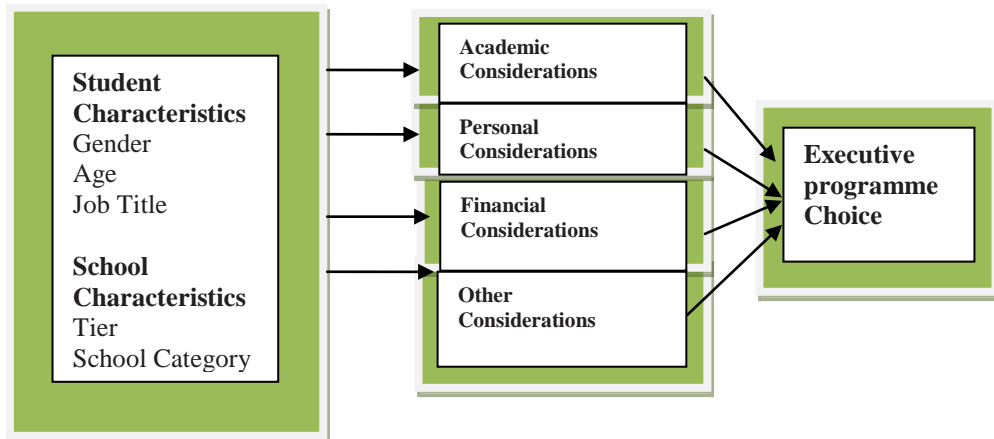


Figure 2 Decision Consideration Model for Executive programme Students
Adopted from: (Carrel and Schoenbachler, 2001)

PROSPECTS AND CHALLENGES OF EXECUTIVE MASTERS PROGRAMMES IN OTHER COUNTRIES

The reviewed literature points out an intense debate about the quality, value and mode of delivery of executive programmes worldwide. For instance, in terms of prospects, Utley (1992) confirmed that Executive Masters graduates were in a good position to combine theories, knowledge of business and case studies in the classrooms. The study also highlighted deficiencies with certain non-executive programme and the timing for careers. The study by Lewis (1992) justifies the popularity of executive masters programmes in other countries (USA) where many senior managers are motivated to take on this extra burden of office work and attendance of executive programmes.

The study by Baruch and Leeming (2001) indicated that executive MBA programmes has add value to its graduates and make them better managers. Reports on this study provided a comprehensive evaluation for the impact of a programme of a leading UK business school on the competencies, skills, self-perception and careers of its graduates. The results demonstrate the value that a programme generates for individuals and their

employers. The output of the study clearly indicated increased managerial skills, self-confidence and several aspects of career development.

Despite all these prospects of executive programmes, the literature has as well pointed out some challenges. For instance, Desanctis and Sheppard, (n.d.) found the social aspects of this learning process, especially with regard to learning in the executive mode. The study mentioned the challenges in linking traditional university education with corporate life. Other challenges include teaching methods used in the provision of the executive programmes. For example, Siebert and Martin (2003) outlined the dominant variance theory approach based on a positivistic hypothetical-deductive and do not adequately take into account sufficiently either the diversity of students' interests or the contexts in which business or community operate.

The literature also indicates few studies to establish opinions and perceptions of graduates in the Executive programmes in Tanzania. Louw, et al. (2001) did a study to elicit the opinions of graduates on the future development of the MBA programme in South Africa. There has been, however, a concern on the increasingly uncoupled from practice and real-world relevance. The relevance gap in the provision of executive education affects the quality of teaching as well as the institutional legitimacy of our higher learning institutions. Tushman, et al. (2007) argued that executive education is an underutilized context that can enhance the quality of faculty as well as impact on managerial practice.

METHODOLOGY

This study surveyed students enrolled in the MCED and EMBA executive programmes offered by The Open University of Tanzania. This survey covered students enrolled in two academic years, namely: 2011/2012 and 2012/2013. The population was of 250 students. (150 for MCED and 100 for MBA), who are spread in various regional centers, namely: Dar-es-Salaam, Arusha, Mwanza, Zanzibar, Mbeya and Dodoma. Since it was difficult to reach all students we selected using simple random and convenient sampling a total of 120 students to form our sample. Interviews were also done to Coordinator's of both programmes and four selected instructors teaching in the executive masters programmes.

This study employed a survey research methodology. Research instruments used included well-structured questionnaire, interviews and documentary analysis. The questionnaire had both close and open-ended questions and was administered to ongoing students in the selected sample from various executive programs centers. Questionnaires were mailed and/or hand delivered to respective students. Pilot testing of the questionnaire was done to a few students in Dar-es-Salaam in order to verify its content. Interviews were done with coordinators and a four randomly selected instructors of the executive programs in order to get more insight in the delivery, challenges and prospects of the programmes. Various published reports of the two executive master's programmes and literature review was used in undertaking documentary analysis. Data collected was analyzed mainly using descriptive statistics and content analysis.

Presentations of results and discussion

(i) Description of respondents

(a) Sex

Of the surveyed respondents, 65% were male and 35 % were females. This indicates more male are enrolled in our executive masters programmes as compared to females.

(b) Age

Table 1 shows that majority of respondents (55%) were in the age category of between 31 and 40. Those of the age between 41 and 50 accounted for 35%. The implication of these results is that executive programmes attract more students with over thirty years as compared to the young ones.

Table 1: Age category

| Age category | Response rate |
|-----------------|---------------|
| 26-30 | 10% |
| 31-40 | 55% |
| 41-50 and above | 35% |

Source: Author's survey (2013)

(c) Marital status

Our survey indicates that 85% of the respondents were married. 15% were single, 8% were widowed and 2% were divorced. This implies that most of the respondents had extra responsibilities of maintaining families while studying at the same time.

(d) Status of employment

The survey also investigated on the respondent's status of employment. The results are indicated in the table below:

Table 2: Status of employment

| Status of employment | Response rate |
|----------------------|---------------|
| Employed full time | 90% |
| Employed part time | 5% |
| Self employed | 4% |
| Not employed | 1% |

Source: Author's survey (2013)

90% of respondents had full time employment, while 5% were employed part time. 4% were self employed and 1% was not employed at all.

(e) Work experience

Results from the survey indicate that respondents have significant work experience. 55% have working experience ranging from 5 to 10 years, while 33% have work experience of more than 10 years.

Table 3: Status of work experience

| Work experience | Response rate |
|--------------------|---------------|
| No experience | 1% |
| Less than 5 years | 11% |
| 5- 10 years | 55% |
| More than 10 years | 33% |

Source: Authors survey (2013)

(f) Motives for joining OUT executive programmes

Results indicate that respondents’ leading motive to join OUT executive programmes was career advancement (41%). The second leading motive was flexibility of OUT executive programmes (28%). Development of better working skills was the third motive (19%) and the quality of OUT’s quality of the curriculum ranked as the fourth motive (11%).

Table 4: Motives for joining executive programme

| Motive for joining executive programme | Response rate |
|--|---------------|
| Quality of the curriculum | 11% |
| Flexibility of the programme | 28% |
| Career advancement | 41% |
| To develop better skills | 19% |
| Location and class convenience | 7% |
| Cost of the programme | 2% |

Source: Authors survey (2013)

(g) Programme expectations

The survey also wanted to know how the executive programmes have met student’s expectations. Results indicate that 45% of the respondents advanced their career, 30% were of the opinion that flexibility of the programmes met their needs, 18% indicated that the programmes helped them to develop better working skills and only 7% revealed that the programmes managed to facilitate theory and practice.

Table 5: Programme expectations

| Programme expectations met | Response rate |
|--------------------------------------|---------------|
| Development of better working skills | 18% |
| Career advancement | 45% |
| Linking theory and practice | 7% |
| Flexibility of the programme | 30% |

Source: Authors survey (2013)

Challenges encountered by student respondents

Student respondents indicated the following challenges encountered when undertaking studies in the OUT Executive programmes.

- (i) Loaded lectures within a short period of time in the face-to-face sessions. Normally students meet for two weeks for a module which has three subjects. Time allocated for a course is not aligned to the required course coverage.
- (ii) Most of the students are employed with very busy schedules hence it is difficult to cope with after class assignments. Balancing demand from employers and studies becomes a great challenge and therefore contributes to delays in meeting assignments deadlines.
- (iii) Accessing relevant reading materials is a bit difficult due to poor internet connectivity and lack of libraries in centers' which are outside Dar-Es-salaam.
- (iv) The available executive programs do not have adequate ICT interactive forums for students and lecturers. This has in a way hindered the required continuous follow-ups between and after face-to-face sessions.
- (v) Delivery methodology considered not very friendly to adult learners. This is because time allocated for face-to-face during modules was is not adequate to cover all the three courses comprehensively. Hence delivery is mainly dominated by teaching leaving very little room to share information and knowledge between students and lecturers.

Interviews with the coordinator of Executive MCED programme revealed that there is a chronic problem of students submitting their term papers on time due to their busy working schedules. In addition full time attendance during the module session is not regular as per requirement mainly explained by responsibilities and busy working schedule of students. Decreasing completion rate of projects/dissertations was also singled out as another outstanding challenge. Experience has shown that once students finish coursework, writing the project paper/dissertation is not prioritized. The MCED coordinator explained that "Project/dissertation completion rate has decreased from approximately 90% in 2010 to below 50% in 2012."

Delay of fees payment was cited as another challenge. Many students pay own fees as most of their employers have not been supportive in financing their studies. This has in a way contributed to the decreasing enrollment of students in the MCED programme. "Many students are selected but normally only half of the selected students finally enroll. Financing is mentioned as the main constraint" (MCED coordinator).

The MBA Coordinator also echoed the problem of poor dissertation completion rate. Busy work schedule and lack of continuity after completing the coursework were mentioned as major constraints. He also cited decreasing enrollment of executive

masters students as a result of intense competition from other universities and financing constraint.

MCED lecturer interviewed expressed concern on the quality of term papers submitted as they were done in a rush in spite of having a break of two months to prepare the papers. He further went on to say that “Copy and paste type of papers have been the order of the day and students do not respect given deadlines”.

On the other hand, another Lecturer in the MCED programme testified that the group presentation by students as part of their coursework was very effective in ensuring that all students participate in learning and sharing work experience as related to theory acquired.

MBA lecturer supported using timed tests and examinations as an effective way of solving the delay of assignments and term papers. “He further went on to say that having examinations improves attendance and knowledge acquisition.”

CONCLUSION

OUT Executive Master’s programmes have mainly attracted adults who have significant work experience. Career advancement, flexibility of programmes, need to develop better skills and quality of the curriculum are singled out as driving forces for joining OUT executive programmes. Students’ expectations have been met in regard to career advancement and flexibility of the programme.

However much needs to be done in ensuring that our programmes help in building working skills required by students and link theory and practice in the industry. Since most of our students are adults it is crucial to ensure that more relevant adult teaching methodologies are adopted in order to create a friendlier teaching environment. To ensure effective continuous assessment there is a need to use more interactive forums for learning purposes. Since our students are busy workers this approach can also go a long way in reducing the face-to-face sessions and instead adopt ICT in delivery methodology. It is imperative to develop blended learning mechanisms in order to mitigate challenges and be more competitive.

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