

MBA PROGRAMMES

# MASTERING THE CHANGES

● Do SA business schools need to be continually prodded by education authorities to improve MBA standards, or can they be relied on to do it for themselves?

Most schools are still bedding down MBA academic and management changes introduced in 2016. The process has been complicated by the need to run parallel programmes: one for students who began their studies in 2016; the other for those who began earlier.

The previous time the local MBA was redesigned was in 2004, when the Council for Higher Education (CHE) stripped 10 schools of the right to offer MBAs and forced the rest to meet new content and teaching criteria. At the time, the council said it hoped to reaccredit every five years, forcing schools to keep raising standards. Lack of capacity stopped it doing so until last year. Helena van Zyl, director of the University of the Free State Business School, hopes

STUDY PREFERENCES	
Applications for 2017 programmes	
Full-time	612
Distance	1,783
Part-time	1,643
Modular	1,186
Blended	502
Block-release	367
Total	6,093
Offers made	3,304
Enrolments	2,614

The biggest difference between the two programmes is that the outgoing MBA, despite being nominally a master's degree, is academically an honours. Its replacement is a real master's, which has required some schools to upgrade the academic content of their programmes.

Segran Nair, head of the MBA programme at the University of Cape Town's Graduate School of Business (GSB), can't wait to be shot of the old.

"Running two parallel programmes has been a nightmare. Though we communicated the differences, there has been some confusion, particularly where supervisors and examiners operated across both curricula." Some student dissertation projects have overrun "but we have learnt lessons and will try to avoid a repetition".

The North West University School of Business & Governance has also taken time to settle but for more complicated reasons. The beginning of 2016

The transition to a new MBA regimen has had its challenges. Not everyone has come to terms yet with the implications

the next exercise won't take 12 years. "If you want your MBAs to be respected internationally, quality updates need to be more frequent," she says.

Stellenbosch University Business School dean Piet Naude, however, believes market pressure can achieve the same results. "You don't need specialist quality assurance," he says. "University schools, in particular, are driven by their faculties and senates to keep raising standards. In the broader market, peer pressure is the driver. Our sector is already overregulated. We don't need more outside pressure."

Employers hope he's right. Of 300 companies canvassed for this cover story, many say they are still coming to terms with the 2016 changes. Half say the new rules have caused them to reconsider the way they sponsor employees' MBA studies. The finding mirrors that at schools, where 50% say there has been an impact on the rate at which companies sponsor employees on MBA programmes.

marked not only the start of the new MBA but also the merger of the university's two business schools, in Potchefstroom and Mafeking.

Acting director Tommy du Plessis says the workload from running two programmes from two schools has been enormous and stressful.

For some, it's been business as usual. An initial reduction in MBA applications – the result of bachelor's students not qualifying for direct entry – has evened out as candidates have made their way through the PGD pipeline. Louise Whittaker, academic head at Pretoria University's Gordon Institute of Business Science, says: "The system seems to be effective. Students are progressing well from one to the other."

Almost too well, in some cases. At least two deans say they may have to expand MBA teaching capacity in the near future if strong demand for PGDs translates directly into MBAs. x

## SHARING THE CREDIT

Academic credits required for MBA degree

	Total	Core courses	Non-core	Research
Cape Town	215	140	20	55
Free State	221	141	20	60
Gibs	184	64	60	60
Henley	200	130	10	60
Limpopo	200	124	16	60
Mancosa	180	120	15	45
Milpark	200	136	10	54
Nelson Mandela	216	142	24	50
North West	210	144	–	66
Regenesys	225	150	30	45
Regent	200	140	10	50
Stellenbosch	213	152	16	45
Unisa	180	108	24	48
Wits	220	135	30	55

Since 2016, students undertaking an MBA have required at least a four-year bachelor's or honours-equivalent qualification. Previously, three-year bachelor's degrees sufficed. Most students now have to first complete a one-year postgraduate diploma (PGD) in business studies. While a number of schools have compressed their MBA programmes so the combined new PGD-MBA study time is the same as the old MBA, costs can be considerably more.

Several schools are preparing to graduate the last students taught under the former curriculum. Though some were given permission to continue the old MBA while they prepared its replacement, nearly all accepted their final intake midyear 2015.

