

THE ROLE OF THE GREEN WEEK IN THE MBA CURRICULUM

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Abstract: *The purpose of the paper is to demonstrate the potential of experiential learning in fulfilling the role of higher education institutions in teaching and promoting an MBA education. The educational achievements of the Green Week of the MBA in Agribusiness and Commerce (AgriMBA) are highlighted and challenges and areas in need of improvement are discussed.*

Curriculum serves as the foundation of teaching students. While progress has been made in MBA curriculum, including economics, informatics, finance, marketing, and management, integrating these knowledge areas into experiential learning should be a key component of an MBA education. The AgriMBA provides such an integration of knowledge areas within an experiential learning environment of the Green Week. The Green Week has included 343 students representing 21 countries, six continents, and 11 universities, involved 34 case studies, and hosted by six universities during the 17 years it has been held.

Although most MBA programs include case studies in their curriculum, the Green Week is unique in providing “live”, real-time case studies, where students representing multiple universities and countries come together to present their recommendations to business executives. This intensive, experiential learning opportunity exhibits how students from different cultural backgrounds are able to quickly form functional teams, apply curriculum knowledge areas, and effectively achieve this ambitious goal.

Keywords: *Interactive case study, experiential learning, integrated curriculum, cross-culture, international agribusiness MBA*
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INTRODUCTION

Curriculum serves as the foundation of teaching students. For teaching business students, general knowledge areas may include economics, finance, marketing, organizational behavior, social responsibility (sustainability, diversity, and ethical behavior and approaches to management), and other specified areas depending on emphasis areas (AACSB INTERNATIONAL, 2018, pp. 35-36). Technology agility is also an essential element of a business education. It includes decision making processes that include integration of current technologies and application of statistical tools and techniques, data analytics, and information technology across the curriculum. Beyond decision making processes, technology agility includes analysis, solution development, and the ability to effectively communicate the results to clientele. A general business program at the master's level should also have learning experiences, such as managing in a diverse global context and integrating knowledge areas, in addition to teaching the general knowledge areas (AACSB INTERNATIONAL, 2018). Finally, a specialized MBA should include learning experiences to understand the specified discipline from multiple perspectives, apply specialized knowledge in a diverse global context, and conduct high-quality research.

The curriculum of the MBA in Agribusiness and Commerce (AgriMBA) emulates the curriculum content recommendations of the AACSB International (2018). The curriculum serves as the foundation of the AgriMBA and includes required modules on general economics and law, accounting and finance, marketing and trade, and management as well as the thesis module (AgriMBA, 2016). In addition, two rural related elective modules are included in the curriculum. For example, agribusiness and rural tourism are two potential elective modules. Informatics is to be included and applied within the various modules of the AgriMBA and is the technology agility component called for by the AACSB International (2018). Likewise, the required modules and elective modules of the AgriMBA are analogous to the general and specialized business knowledge areas of the AACSB International. Moreover, the required thesis module achieves the learning experience to conduct high-quality research as part of a specialized MBA.

The objective of this paper is to demonstrate how the Green Week in the AgriMBA curriculum fulfills the goal of a specialized MBA to include learning experiences to understand agribusiness from multiple perspectives and to apply specialized knowledge in a diverse global context. The Green

Week provides for an international, cross-cultural, teamwork and experiential learning opportunity for students that is highly relevant in today's education and business environments.

METHODS

Many MBA programs organize, offer, and present curriculum in a silo approach with individual, stand-alone courses or modules, such as accounting, finance, and marketing, and relatively little exposure to a global perspective (NAVARRO, 2008). These programs often lack multidisciplinary integration together with experiential learning methods that better reflect the real-world business environment, where teams integrate different skills to solve complex problems. Case studies, including those of the respected Harvard Business School, are an initial attempt to provide a real-world business environment for MBA students. However, the prepared case study is static and not particularly timely to current issues. Instead, a better way to teach is to extend the conventional case study to include experiential learning (YIN, 1989; CORCORAN et al., 2004), also known as learning by doing (KOWALSKI, 1994). The extension of the case study to experiential learning can be further extended to include action research (McNIFF and WHITEHEAD, 2003). In a teaching environment, this requires the active involvement of all participants—students, instructors, and the management of the company included in the case study.

This paper in itself is a case study on how to integrate knowledge areas, i.e., create a multidisciplinary learning environment, that includes a multicultural global perspective, experiential learning, active research, and teamwork.

GREEN WEEK EVOLUTION AND CONTRIBUTIONS

The Green Week of the AgriMBA began as an international component of the agribusiness module of the AgriMBA at the Czech University of Life Sciences Prague (CULS). AgriMBA programs are offered at other universities in addition to CULS, have a similar structure, and are accredited by the general board of the International Network for the AgriMBA (HEIJMAN, 2009; BIELIK, 2016; DALTON et al., 2017).¹ All modules of the MBA require, in addition to local instructors during the

course of the module, an international instructor for a short period of the module, typically toward the end of the module. For example, an international instructor with expertise in economics would provide lectures for two days toward the end of the economics module. An international instructor from another country in itself provides an international dimension to the MBA and serves as a check on the quality of the particular module.

The agribusiness module is typically the last module in the AgriMBA prior to the thesis, which allows the agribusiness module to be a multidisciplinary module that calls upon the integration of knowledge areas already presented, such as marketing, management, finance, economics, and informatics. The international instructor likewise has the opportunity to have the students apply these knowledge areas in an integrated case study over a short, intense time of four days, i.e., a study week. Like many MBA programs, the case study was a typical static case study, although the case study was augmented with lectures related to the knowledge areas of marketing, strategic management, and finance and in-class demonstrations as appropriate for the particular case study.

The study week evolved after several years to where early career staff from the Warsaw University of Life Sciences (WULS) were invited to participate in the study week in 2005 (Table 1). WULS is the first university to have the AgriMBA and, therefore, had a similar structure as the AgriMBA at CULS and this presented the opportunity for the staff at WULS to see if they would include a study week as part of their curriculum. Supplemental lectures on knowledge areas continued as in earlier years, although the static case study was no longer used. Instead, the study week incorporated a "live" case study with a local business that included discussions with the company's management. In 2007, the WULS invited CULS students to join AgriMBA students in Warsaw to have the first joint study week. The next year in 2008, the CULS hosted students from WULS and the National University of Life and Environmental Sciences of Ukraine in addition to CULS students. At the beginning of the study week, multinational teams were formed creating a dynamic, cross-cultural learning environment for the students. This same year the case study expanded from one to two case studies allowing for diverse applications of the MBA curriculum. This resulted in an integrated study week or Green Week.

Table 1: History of International MBA in Agribusiness and Commerce Green Week

Year	Host	Number of				Company focus
		Participants	Countries ^g	Cases	Company visits	
2002	CULS ^a	6	1	2	0	Brewery; Wet corn milling
2003	CULS	10	1	2	0	Brewery; Meat processing and products
2004	CULS	12	1	2	0	Brewery; Meat processing and products
2005	CULS	11	2	1	1	Brewery
2006	CULS	12	1	1	1	Brewery
2007	WULS ^b	18	2	2	1	Meat processing and products

¹For more information on the history, structure, and operation of the International Network for the AgriMBA, see <https://www.ica-agrimba.eu/>. The International Network for the AgriMBA is a standing committee of ICA (Association for European Life Science Universities, 2021).

2008	CULS	33	3	2	2	General crop, livestock, and dairy farm; Equine breeding & historical rural tourism
2009	WULS	38	6	3	3	Auto dealership relocation and body repair expansion; Seed business with retail garden centers; Brewery
2010	NUBiP ^c	35	4	2	2	Import and wholesale agricultural products, inputs, & services; Large industrial farm with biogas plant
2011	SUA ^d	41	7	2	2	Natural biscuit manufacturer; Traditional bakery with delivery services
2012	CULS	25	7	3	3	University vineyard and wine, tropical agriculture, and dairy research farms
2013	WULS	23	4	4	4	Biogas plant; Large sugar company sustainability; Game meat production & sales; Forest preservation
2014	SUA	25	3	2	2	General agricultural production trade cooperative farm; Organic food wholesale and supply
2015	UZ ^e	13	3	1	1	Agricultural production & tourism
2016	WULS	16	5	3	3	Meat processing and retail; Laboratory testing; Apple cooperative
2017	SUA	12	4	1	1	Agricultural production trade cooperative farm
2019	MULS ^f	13	1	1	1	Dairy farm with distribution

^aCzech University of Life Sciences Prague (CZU), Czech Republic; ^bWarsaw University of Life Sciences (SGGW), Poland; ^cNational University of Life and Environmental Sciences of Ukraine (NUBiP), Kiev; ^dSlovak University of Agriculture in Nitra; ^eUniversity of Zagreb, Croatia; ^fMongolian University of Life Sciences, Ulaanbaatar, Mongolia; ^gParticipant nationalities varied by year, but 21 nationalities have been represented in the Green Week and have included Australia, Austria, Columbia, Croatia, Czech Republic, Finland, France, Germany, Ghana, Greece, Kosovo, Lebanon, Malta, Mongolia, Poland, Russia, Scotland, Slovakia, Ukraine, United States, and Vietnam. Source: Author

The Green Week continued to be offered annually with the host university changing each year (Table 1). For the 17 times the Green Week has been held, there have been 343 student participants representing 21 countries and six continents (Figure 1). The average number of countries represented per Green Week was more than three without including the instructors. The number of students have varied from as few as seven to as many as 41 and the number of universities represented were anywhere from one to six. This diversity of nationalities, regions, and universities allowed for a cross-cultural environment where students could learn from the different perspectives, experiences, and business environments that the multinational teams brought to the case studies. The students were exposed to these differences and this in itself was an extremely valuable learning experience.

Figure 1: Nationalities of Green Week participants, 2002-2019^g



^aNations include Australia, Austria, Columbia, Croatia, Czech Republic, Finland, France, Germany, Ghana, Greece, Kosovo, Lebanon, Malta, Mongolia, Poland, Russia, Scotland, Slovakia, Ukraine, United States, and Vietnam. Source: Author

The case studies of the Green Week were varied in number and in type. On average, two cases were presented to the students during the Green Week. Although individual students only worked on one case study, they were exposed to the other cases and learned from the students working on the other cases. The case study companies most frequently represented breweries and farm businesses with seven cases each, followed by five meat processing and products company cases. The farm production businesses were relatively large and included crop, livestock, and dairy production, but also included biogas, concrete, and other production activities. The cases included agro and rural tourism, university research farms, organic food production and distribution (AHRENSEN et al., 2016), an association that promoted apples with a protected geographical indicator (AHRENSEN and MAJEWSKI, 2017), and a sustainability report for a large sugar corporation (SULKOWSKI et al., 2020) among others.

It is important to note that a case study company did not necessarily need to be an agribusiness company (corporation) even though most were agribusiness companies. There have been extremely interesting and successful case study companies, or maybe it is better to say organizations, that were not an agribusiness or a corporation. For example, the 2012 case studies involved three research farms of the CULS. The cases were extremely interesting and pushed the students to think well beyond the profit maximization or wealth accumulation objectives typically taught to business students and to think about social objectives of publically supported research and outreach. Also of great interest to students and instructors was the financial investment case study of Carolina Toyota Car Company, where students analyzed a potential relocation and expansion of its operations in Warsaw, Poland. This was clearly not an agribusiness, but it presented an important application of a competency all MBA students need.

The case studies drew on different competencies of MBA students. The issue of a particular case could be branding, sales, marketing, production, human resources, financing, or investment. Frequently there would be more than one issue, although it was critically important the students focus only on one issue given the limited time to work on the case. By focusing on one issue, students could have sufficient time to conduct analysis, provide insight, and prepare a report and presentation to the management of the case study company. This is an ambitious goal to have individuals from different cultural backgrounds and native languages to quickly form teams, identify a leader, arrive at a key issue, and efficiently and effectively deliver to the company's management the team's recommendations on the opportunities for improvement based on their analysis of the case study.

The Green Week usually lasts four days and examples of the activities undertaken during a typical Green Week are found in Ahrendsen et al. (2016) and Sulkowski et al. (2020). Sulkowski et al. include a schematic representation of the action research cycle that occurs during the Green Week. The action research cycle is comprised of theorizing, planning, action, and evaluation phases. During the first two days, overviews of the cases are presented, relevant coursework is highlighted, teams are formed, supporting information is provided, and companies are visited (theorizing phase). These two days allow the students to understand the situation and put together a plan of action for attacking the case study (planning phase). On the third day, students begin to take action on the case study. They collect data, complete analysis, and draft a report and prepare a presentation for other students, instructors, and company management (action phase). The outcomes of the various case studies are presented on the fourth day and evaluations occur (evaluation phase). Although there has been guidance and feedback to the students from the instructors during the first three days, the final feedback among the participants is shared after the presentations. This is the opportunity for reflection. Students complete different assessments of their teammates, other teams' presentations, instructors, and the Green Week in total. Instructors assess individual student contributions and team presentations and reports.

The four days of the Green Week are filled with learning opportunities. Besides the learning that takes place with the case study from the cross-cultural environment of the multinational Green Week, this cross-cultural environment extends to coffee breaks, lunch, evening dinner, and excursions, where both hosts and visitors share their food, drink, music, and other customs. Moreover, the students are able to take their experiences learned from the Green Week and apply them to their respective businesses in the future.

The instructors and companies, in addition to the students, learn from the case study. The instructors are able to build relationships with students and companies from multiple countries. By taking advantage of this networking opportunity, instructors are able to incorporate their learned experiences into their research and other courses of instruction. The companies can use the recommendations presented by the students as a starting point for making changes to their businesses. It would be heroic to assume the work of MBA students over the

course of only four days would provide the level of in-depth analysis to change the business. However, the students' insights, ideas, initial analysis, and recommendations can serve as a basis for companies to adjust their business for its overall improvement.

CHALLENGES AND IMPROVEMENT

The accomplishments realized from the Green Week do not come without the significant efforts and contributions of instructors, companies, and especially the host university AgriMBA director and staff. The host university director is in the best position to identify and recruit a collaborating company. It is critically important to identify a company with management that will be encouraging and receptive of student questions, input, and recommendations. Once such a company is identified, the other contributions by the company will likely occur. For example, it is also important for the company to provide information in advance of the Green Week so that students are knowledgeable about the company and prepared to "hit-the-ground-running" when they begin the Green Week. Students will learn the most and have a better experience from the case if they visit the company, hear from the management, interact with management during a session of questions and answers, and have the management available for follow-up questions during the remainder of the Green Week. The collaborating company and students should both be prepared with clear advance instructions and precautionary advice on what is expected, what are appropriate boundaries, and how to encourage a mutually respectful and constructive approach from case initiation through conclusion as well as possible follow-up after the Green Week. Although the setting of student expectations is the responsibility of the guest instructor, all company interactions typically falls upon the host university director and staff. However, as was already noted, these interactions with the company should lead to benefit the host university, director, and staff in the future.

The host university director and staff also have the challenge to coordinate and budget for the Green Week in addition to the case study company selection. This involves inviting a guest instructor and students from other universities offering the AgriMBA to participate in the Green Week. These invitations should be made well in advance of the Green Week. The most success at achieving significant numbers of visiting and engaging students occurred when the directors at other universities set the expectation (or perhaps required) that their AgriMBA students would participate in the Green Week. University instructors are not the only people that are busy. Students are busy too, and the expectations should be that they clear their schedules well in advance to participate in the Green Week.

Once the host university director is successful at attracting visiting students, there is the coordination of receiving students, identifying accommodations, meal catering, transportation, and workspace for students and instructors during the Green Week. All of these items incur expenses that are to be budgeted and paid by participating students or borne by the host university. The expense will be greater for visiting students than host students because of the necessity of additional travel and accommodations by the visitors. However, the best experience

for both visiting and host students has been when all students stayed at the same accommodations or, at least, when the host students have been available to serve as “hosts” to the visiting students during the evenings to allow for the continued cultural exchange of customs.

There have been Green Weeks when there were fewer than the necessary number of students participate. However, creative ways have been used to expand the number of participants in these instances. Some examples have included inviting students from other master programs participate, such as master programs in economics and rural development, or even crop science and animal science could be particularly relevant given the case study. These students from other programs add to the multidisciplinary of the Green Week and to the recommendations presented to company management that are often needed in complex, real-world problems. As was mentioned, instructors early in their career have found the Green Week to be particularly helpful in their development. Ph.D. students and non-government organization employees have also participated in the Green Week and found the experiential learning of the case study to be useful in their programs.

DISCUSSION

An MBA should integrate knowledge areas into experiential learning and should be a key component of an MBA education. The Green Week of the MBA in Agribusiness and Commerce provides such an integration of knowledge areas within an experiential learning environment. Although most MBA programs include case studies in their curriculum, the Green Week may be unique in providing “live”, integrative, interactive, real-time case studies, where students representing multiple universities and countries come together to present their recommendations to business executives. This intensive, experiential learning opportunity exhibits how students from different cultural backgrounds are able to quickly form functional teams, apply curriculum knowledge areas, and effectively achieve this ambitious goal.

There are limitations to what can be learned and accomplished during the brief four days of the Green Week. However, the life-long experiences learned by students over these four days are perhaps the greatest they will ever have for any four-day period of their lives. The challenge is how to motivate and convey to students just how much of an exceptional experience they will have if they make the commitment to actively participate in a Green Week.

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