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AACSB International
The CityU-FudanU DBA Program

In China, applicants to Doctorate of Business Administration (DBA) programs look for practice-focused doctoral education for various reasons, according to City University of Hong Kong’s DBA Program Director, Professor Douglas Vogel, and Dr. Hao Gang, Assistant Dean and director of the College of Business’ joint DBA Program with Fudan University. Some applicants see academia as a place to bring their business experiences and observations to, a place to distill them into knowledge that can be shared and passed on to others one day when they exit from their business careers, they say, and a doctoral qualification aids in that aspiration. Others seek a platform to work within academia to do research on systematic ways to resolve complex business problems, and for these candidates the degree itself is less important than the understanding, insight, and knowledge of research methodology gained through a DBA program. Applicants of the latter type are more common in Hong Kong, say Professor Vogel and Dr. Hao, where many executives are already typically “degree-heavy,” but both types of students are rich in experience and problem-driven.

Professor Vogel says that the College of Business developed its original DBA program about six years ago, making it one of the first business schools in China to offer one. Compared to more traditional doctoral degree offerings such as the PhD, he says, the DBA is a relative newcomer to the landscape of Chinese management education. Data from AACSB International’s annual Business School Questionnaire (BSQ) support this statement. The first two business schools in China to report offering a DBA program on the BSQ, one of which was City University of Hong Kong, both began doing so in the 2006-07 academic year.¹

The high popularity and growing demand for the DBA led to the College's strategic decision, made approximately two years ago, to expand its offering into mainland China. Serendipitously, at that same time the School of Management at Fudan University in Shanghai was seeking to partner with a highly respected institution to develop a rigorous program to meet a rising demand for further studies and doctoral degrees from its large and growing body of distinguished alumni in business. In so doing it also would expand its own offerings into the new dimension of management education that the DBA represents in China. Dr. Hao says that Fudan’s School of Management and her College soon recognized the compatibility of their interests, and subsequently were able to accomplish the set-up of their joint DBA Program very quickly.

Program Structure

Aiding the effort to launch the joint CityU-FudanU DBA Program rapidly is the fact that its structure is largely modeled on City University of Hong Kong’s previously existing DBA program, an arrangement Professor Vogel refers to as “two programs under the same umbrella." In both cases, the DBA programs involve 27 credits' worth of coursework, split about evenly between electives and the required portion of
the coursework, which includes three core courses on applied business research methods and two residential workshops. The coursework portion is followed by the doctoral thesis, which is worth 30 credits.²,³

Both the original and joint DBA programs also make a point of getting students involved with faculty mentors from the very beginning, to guide them through the programs' "spiral learning approach." Dr. Hao explains this concept as an iterative, "just-in-time" approach to learning, which makes use of academic mentors to progressively focus the students' initial research ideas, arising from the problems encountered in their own business practices and observations, into proposals of feasible doctoral research while they complete their coursework. The process of defining the problem and identifying the approaches is always centered around the problems, often complex and profound, the students bring with them and care most about, she says. The intent is that as the process spirals up, the original broad ideas ascend into better formulated ones.

In implementation, says Dr. Hao, the joint CityU-FudanU DBA has mentors from City University of Hong Kong’s College of Business meet regularly with their students (sometimes in groups) for about the first eight months or so of their coursework, until such time as their thesis proposals have been narrowed down to appropriate levels of specificity and rigor. At that point, the College of Business mentors work with their colleagues at Fudan University to finalize the selection of best-matched thesis supervisors for each student, based on the advisors' expertise and the students' research direction(s).

Both schools put a great deal of effort into ensuring close communications between students and mentors (and subsequent thesis supervisors) throughout the program. More than 90 percent of all DBA students in the original program have successfully graduated with the degree, according to Professor Vogel, and the first set of graduates of the joint CityU-FudanU DBA Program are expected next year. He credits the spiral learning approach with a big role in the high retention rates. It allows mentors to head off any unrealistic expectations of their students in a timely fashion, he says, as well as to intervene at the first signs of frustration.

Where the joint DBA program really differs from the original is in the adaptations made to better fit the needs of mainland Chinese students. For example, City University of Hong Kong’s original DBA is conducted as a part-time program, with regular weekend class meetings every three to four weeks.⁴ By contrast, says Dr. Hao, the joint CityU-FudanU DBA is run in an executive format, in order to better accommodate the availability of the students, most of whom are CEOs, board chairs, or other senior executives of large firms from all over China. They attend intensive four-day weekend courses once a month, sometimes in Shanghai, sometimes in Hong Kong and sometimes in an on-site "mobile-class." Another important difference is that the original DBA program is conducted entirely in English, whereas the joint DBA is primarily Mandarin-based, though supplemented by English.⁵ CityU-FudanU DBA
students are also expected to write their doctoral thesis in Chinese, though with abstracts in both languages.6

**Fulfilling Unmet Needs**

Dr. Hao and Professor Vogel agree that the CityU-FudanU DBA, and for that matter the original DBA program, were specifically designed to serve a very different target audience than a traditional PhD program. In the context of Chinese management education, they say, PhD students are often younger, less experienced, and more focused on careers in academia than in industry, as compared to their DBA counterparts. By contrast, they note that the students of the joint DBA come to their program with an average of 20 years’ work experience,7 but are typically less well-versed in important elements of academic research, such as the value of a rigorous literature review, or the ability to put one’s own perspectives on hold in order to make critical analyses.

As it happens, that disparity is the source of one of the CityU-FudanU DBA Program’s most intriguing innovations. In addition to an academic mentor from each school, say Professor Vogel and Dr. Hao, each joint DBA program student is also assigned a PhD student as a research assistant. The objective of this practice is to give the PhD students exposure to the experience-shaped perspectives and practically focused research problems of the DBA students, while allowing the DBA students to benefit from the PhD students’ help in honing their academic research techniques.

**Impact of the DBA in China**

The joint CityU-FudanU DBA Program has had a number of positive results already, both for the two participating universities and for their students. For example, the need for a greater volume of case studies in the Chinese context is well known and widely lamented by business academics with research interests in China. Because students are expected to come to the CityU-FudanU DBA Program with live business problems that they wish to resolve through the research in the DBA, all the proposed doctoral theses make excellent fodder for increasing the number of such cases, notes Dr. Hao.

The students themselves see significant benefit from their involvement in the DBA program. Those who graduate will gain acceptance and credibility above and beyond the level of consultants or EMBA-holders as people who can handle the most complex and nuanced problems for their employers, because they will have proven their ability to apply the critical analysis skills they learn in the DBA, beyond their original research problem. The research that the students do also resonates within their own business sector, says Dr. Hao. She cites the example of one DBA student, whose research focuses on family businesses in China and their evolution under the potential ‘genetic’ impact from Chinese culture and tradition that may be subtle, but also could be profound. This student also happens to be the chair of an association of Chinese family businesses, and as a result his research will be very meaningful to, and undoubtedly have significant influence on, this sector of the Chinese economy.
Both Professor Vogel and Dr. Hao agree that the experience of running the joint DBA program has been very positive for the two schools. Because of the system of including dual mentors for each student, the program has expanded each school’s reach in their own learning and in providing their students with enriched learning experiences. It has also increased the propensity for joint research projects. Additionally, DBA student research tends to be much more interdisciplinary than that of PhD students, they say, which promotes the interaction of academics in ways that might not otherwise be obvious. Finally, having the program itself targeted at senior executives promotes the interaction of governmental, business and academic sectors in ways that have beneficial impact for all concerned.

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End Notes