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# Developing a learning organization through management education by action learning

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## Abstract

Explores ideas and issues related to management education and development for the new learning organization and presents an example of a course design for experienced managers who wish to make a considerable contribution to their organization and receive a university degree in recognition of their work. This MBA (Executive) course by action learning is a work-integrated, learner-centred, problem-focused, interdisciplinary degree, designed on adult learning principles. It aims at organizational learning and development as well as personal and professional development of senior managers, who can upgrade their knowledge and skills and exchange their work experience and ideas with fellow executives in small groups. Invites readers to provide feedback and ideas.

## Introduction

Management education, and especially Master of Business Administration (MBA), Doctor of Business Administration (DBA), and PhD programmes have been heavily criticized for being too theoretical and irrelevant to the needs of industry, not only in Australia, but elsewhere in the world.

In the November-December 1992 issue of the prestigious *Harvard Business Review*, eight management specialists commented on whether business schools were delivering what business needs. Many referred implicitly or explicitly to the need to break away from the current, positivist paradigm of most business schools.

*The Economist* has reported that the recruitment of MBA graduates in the USA and Europe is falling as employers are becoming “disillusioned with conventional business schools” and the “academic specialists” they churn out[1] and the situation in Australia may become similar. Furthermore, more than 30 different MBA courses are on offer around Australia[2] and “a major shake-out is inevitable”, says an Australian deputy vice-chancellor[3].

The international research programme of the Task Force on Leadership and Management Skills, funded by the Commonwealth of Australia, has come to the same conclusions. For example, one research group, Barraclough *et al.* [4], identified a gap between the requirements of the business community and the educational services being provided by educational institutions, in terms of both “content” issues (what managers learn) and “process” issues (how they learn it). Participants in this research included human resource professionals, senior managers, company directors, management consultants and academics. Virtually all of them saw closer relationships between business and educational institutions to be essential. Table I describes the management practices considered most effective by these participant groups[4, p. 30].

It is interesting to quote the report’s section on action learning programmes:

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The author wishes to thank colleagues on the course-planning team for their comments on the draft course submissions.

Table I Most effective management development practices

Development practice	Percentage of participants
1 Job rotation	53
2 External providers – including business schools	50
3 Mentoring and coaching	42
4 On-the-job experience	36
5 “Action learning” programmes	36
6 Job assignments	35
7 In-house training and development programmes	24
8 Work with other organizations	12

A relatively recent management development option, “action learning”, was mentioned by around 36% of participants. Action learning programs straddle the academic and working environment by incorporating classroom components, group discussion, simulations, team work, peer networks, case studies and in-company assignments.

An attractive feature of these programs is flexibility, since many are developed jointly by educational institutions and organisations, which allows a closer match between course content and the organisation’s needs. In some cases it is possible to reflect company values, leadership models, strategy and language in course material, placing learning in the context of company culture.

Programs also provide “learning in action” since company assignments involve “real-life, real value projects”, rather than projects set up solely for the purpose of learning. The focus on real organisational problems also attracts greater commitment from organisations who seek to maximise the value added by education and training programs[4, p. 33].

Another research team, the Boston Consultancy Group[5] concluded that the traditional MBA programme was dated in terms of its length, its discipline-based approach to problem solving and its classroom teaching. One of the key findings was:

Business will increasingly look to a new style of MBA and to customised courses that meet particular organisational needs. Traditional functionally based two-year MBAs will no longer be seen as the best basis for training high potential senior managers[5, p. 68].

In response, the group recommended a more organizational focus and four sorts of changes in programmes for developing the next generation of senior managers[5, p. 57]:

- (1) shorter programmes (less time away from the organization);

- (2) development programmes more focused on an individual company’s needs (customization);
- (3) development programmes more closely linked to the workplace than the classroom (experiential);
- (4) a project-based approach to learning.

## Purpose

The purpose of this article is to explore these ideas and issues related to management education and development for the new profile of senior managers in the 1990s and the twenty-first century, and to present a proposal for an MBA (Executive) course which deals with the conceptual change conditions, processes and practices of the “learning organization” [6] or the “learning company” [7] or the “new paradigm enterprise” [8] in the management paradigm, also called the “fourth blueprint” [9].

Following a critical literature review, Bunning[10, p. 21] defined organizational learning as:

personal learning (directly from experience or from others) by a sufficient number of persons with the organisational power to act, such that future collective behaviour by the people in one or more of the organisation’s units is affected.

The literature clearly distinguishes two kinds of organizational learning:

- (1) “instrumental” learning[6] or “single loop” learning[11,12], which is basically concerned with improving efficiency; and
- (2) “generative” or “double loop” learning, which is more radical and challenges existing beliefs and paradigms; it is concerned with effectiveness, including the appropriateness of existing goals, assumptions and beliefs.

Both of these kinds of organizational learning are appropriate in certain situations. However, generative learning, both of individuals and organizations, is needed for effecting significant change and for learning faster than change, yet it tends to be resisted most.

Recent research in Australia has concluded that much of our current management development technology is obsolete or inadequate for today’s organizations[9]. It has shown that managers today and in the future will need to develop skills and competences to solve complex problems in new situations; anticipate

change; adjust rapidly to change; and manage the process of their employees' learning. In higher education too, academics need to develop competences as managers and facilitators of learning. Management development for the future across all sectors has to be process-oriented, as well as content-oriented. Action learning and action research have been suggested as appropriate methods to develop process managers for the year 2000[9,13-16]. An evaluative study by Zuber-Skerritt and Howell[17,18] of MBA and doctoral programmes by action learning confirms these suggestions.

The gap between theory and practice identified in the management literature has also been confirmed in a joint pilot study[19]. Results showed that managers gave more emphasis to practical skills, and management educators to specialist and theoretical knowledge, while both groups considered communication and interpersonal skills to be important. Again this suggests a need for a more process-oriented approach to management in the private and public sectors, and a collaborative approach to research.

There is a gap between the advanced theory of adult learning[20], including manager learning[21] on the one hand and management practice on the other. Crucial questions yet to be answered include:

- What stops managers from sharing their learning and learning together?
- How can they learn collectively and interactively from one another and from experience?
- How can we prepare managers educationally to internalize the necessary values and to create the ideal culture and maintain it after they have graduated?

### MBA (Executive)

The MBA (Executive) course addresses these questions and will demonstrate the educational shift from knowledge transmission in a formal setting to the facilitation of integrated workplace learning off-campus, that is a shift in paradigm from training (*Ausbildung*) to an integrated, holistic approach to the formation of management knowledge, skills and attitudes (*Bildung*) and an organizational culture of continuous learning, improvement and quality management.

This course by action learning is designed to promote generative learning at the individual and organizational levels. It is a work-integrated, learner-centred, problem-focused, interdisciplinary degree, based on adult learning principles. It aims at organizational development as well as personal and professional development of senior managers who can upgrade their knowledge and skills and exchange their experience and ideas with fellow executives in small groups.

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 experience in the private and public  
 sectors...'  
 .....

The feasibility and framework of this course were established by a taskforce consisting of management educators from three different universities, managing directors of private consultancy companies and the chief executive officer of a major Australian manufacturing and retail company. All members have had substantial experience in the private and public sectors, in action learning and in action research. Most of them were involved in the first and second World Congress on Action Learning, Action Research and Process Management (ALARPM), held in Brisbane in 1990 and 1992, and the third in Bath (UK) in 1994. They are members of ALARPM, the professional association formed as a result of the first international congress. Outlines of the course and of each subject were approved by the Graduate School of Management (GSM) Board and by the University's Academic Committee. A concise outline and discussion of the course follow relating to characteristic features of the course, target group, flexible delivery mode, teaching methods, benefits, subject outlines and limitations.

### Characteristic features of the course

A group of about 20 academics and senior consultants, facilitated by a CEO of a major manufacturing and retail company in Australia, had a one-day strategic planning meeting in February 1995 to work out a vision and goals for the new Centre for Action Learning and Action Research (CALAR) in the Graduate School of Management (GSM), and to determine strategies for developing

and marketing the MBA (Executive) course by action learning. They identified the novel features of the course, which might be used as “selling points” in the promotion and marketing of the course:

- students/Associates do not have to attend on-campus lectures after work;
- course is work-based, flexible and provides recognition (MBA), while working;
- high proven return on investment;
- high-tech approach;
- advantage of working in small groups;
- networking and forming strategic alliances;
- personal and individual support with work-based problems, both at group and Set Adviser levels;
- collaboration with other experienced and seasoned managers working at Master’s level;
- access to the latest information, internationally, on chosen topic;
- immediate value, and continued ongoing value for the organization, long after the individual staff member finishes the MBA;
- high level of personal growth;
- excellent staff-student ratio, with group sizes of five to six;
- recognition of prior learning (not necessarily a degree);
- students acquire lifelong learning skills which they are able to pass on to others in their organization;
- the course is individually structured/ designed to suit needs of the students and their organization – a “custom-made course”.

### Target group

The MBA –(Executive) by action learning is designed initially for local and national – and eventually for international – senior managers in the private and public sectors with five or more years of experience. They might own their own business, or hold an executive position of considerable responsibility within their organization, and/or are sponsored by their organization on the basis of high managerial performance and top management potential. This course is for keen, busy executives who wish to make a significant contribution to their organization and receive a university degree in recognition of their work.

### Flexible delivery mode

Since the managers’ work and organizations become the focus of their study and assessment, this course of 12 semester units (SUs) can be completed as an intensive course of three semesters in 13 months (including the summer semester) or as an option in two years.

Senior managers who would not normally enrol in a traditional MBA course with on-campus lectures, tutorials and a set timetable of evening classes, will appreciate the flexible delivery mode of this off-campus MBA (Executive) by action learning which consists of:

- two residentials of two weeks each (four SUs in total);
- two off-campus reading courses (two SUs in total) with regular meetings of action learning groups (three weekend seminars each);
- two work-based projects: an action learning project (two SUs) over two semesters and an action research dissertation (four SUs) in the last semester, both supported by regular action learning “Sets”.

In both projects, managers address a work-related problem of significant importance to their organizations and themselves. They share their ideas and problems in regular meetings with their action learning group and an adviser, who acts as a group mentor and resource person.

### Teaching methods

Teaching methods will be based on a combination of specialist input and learner-centred methods. It is assumed that practising managers have a wealth of experience, knowledge and skills, which can be built on, and that knowledge can be gained not only from “grand theory” (in texts or lectures), but also from “grounded theory”, which is theory developed from practice. Emphasis will be placed on team and group work. Teaching staff will include international visiting professors and noted speakers from industry.

Teaching methods will also be based on the principles of action learning and flexible learning to which Griffith University is committed. Apart from the Centre for Action Learning and Action Research already men-

tioned above, the university recently established a Flexible Learning Development Unit, which uses an approach based on the works of Hodgson[22], Race[23] and Rowntree[24].

“Flexible learning” [25] is a combination of an educational philosophy and a set of techniques for teaching and learning. It describes an approach to education that increases the learner’s control over learning and enables him or her to develop increased responsibility and independence. This approach recognizes that learning is a lifelong process and that “generic” lifelong learning skills should be important attributes of all graduates.

In flexible learning, instead of expecting students to adapt to a fixed teaching method, ways of learning are adapted as far as practicable to learners’ requirements:

- Interaction between teachers, students and learning materials, in terms of time, place, content, sequence, entry and exit, is as adaptable as possible, so that learners have maximum control and choice over how they learn.
- The distinctive needs of students from diverse backgrounds are accommodated, access is improved, and different needs are addressed through appropriate learner support systems.
- Appropriate educational technologies to enhance learner independence and control are used; these may range from written study guides to sophisticated interactive multimedia programmes.
- Flexible assessment procedures are used to help develop lifelong learning skills.

## Benefits

Participants in this course will appreciate the personal treatment because of the excellent staff-student ratio in groups of about five to six instead of sitting in anonymous mass lectures. Therefore, they will be prepared to pay a higher fee (a total of A\$21,000 for Australian residents and A\$30,000 for overseas students) for this self-funding course, conducted by academics and senior consultants with international reputation and industry experience. Each intake of students will be limited to a maximum of 50 per year.

Other advantages of this course include the following:

- (1) Candidates without a first degree from a recognized tertiary institution may be

admitted if they can provide documentary evidence that their qualifications or achievements are equivalent to a first degree. They are required to attach such documents to their application form, or a supporting letter from their company’s chief executive officer.

- (2) Candidates can exit the course after successful completion of: four SUs of specified subjects (which will be awarded the Graduate Management Qualification (GMQ) (Executive) for a fee of A\$7,000/\$10,000); eight SUs of specified subjects (which will be awarded the Graduate Diploma of Management (Grad Dip Mgt) (Executive) for a fee of A\$14,000/\$20,000.

The specified subjects are listed below:

- *GMQ - Executive*:
  - foundation subject (one SU) – residential;
  - strategic marketing and international business relations (one SU) – residential;
  - action learning project (one SU) – organization-based; and
  - human resource management (one SU) – off-campus reading subject.
- *Grad Dip Mgt (Executive)*:
  - foundation subject (one SU) – residential;
  - strategic marketing and international business relations (one SU) – residential;
  - action learning project (two SUs) - organization-based;
  - strategic human resource management (one SU) – off-campus reading subject;
  - managerial accounting and finance (one SU) – off-campus reading subject;
  - the high-performing organization (one SU) – residential; and
  - managers as researchers (one SU) – residential.
- *MBA (Executive)* as for the Grad Dip Mgt (Executive) plus a dissertation (four SUs).

The above subjects may be credited for work undertaken elsewhere, with the

exception of the two foundation subjects, the high-performing organization, and managers as researchers.

- (3) Exemption from specified subjects may be granted by the GSM Board on the grounds that a candidate's educational qualifications include material of the same type and level as the subjects for which exemption is sought.

## Subject outlines

### Foundation subject

As the title suggests, this subject lays the foundation for the whole course. It introduces the fundamental concepts of action learning, action research, quality management, the high-performing learning organization, global competitiveness and information technology. It also introduces the use of reflection log-books and it models the process of action learning, networking and strategic alliances with other experienced managers and organizations.

The residential mode of this subject is designed to facilitate team building, networking and strategic alliances among participants and thus model the content of major segments of the course – practising what we preach. The foundation subject is also important for preparing participants for the design, implementation and evaluation of their organization-based action learning projects.

An active approach to learning is encouraged from the beginning of the course. Assessment is seen as a vehicle for learning. In this foundation subject participants are required to reflect on:

- significant turning points in their careers and the extent to which they have learned from their work experience in the past five years and developed as professionals – an assignment of about 1,500 words (30 per cent) to be prepared before the residential;
- their understanding of the subject content in a short-answer examination (40 per cent);
- the implications of their learning outcomes and workshop results from this foundation subject for their organization's change and development – an assignment of about 1,500 words (30 per cent). They will also be encouraged to state their own philo-

sophical adult learning theory and to submit a reflective log on the learning processes during the course.

### Strategic marketing management and international business relations

In this second residential block of one week's duration, participants develop the knowledge, analytical understanding and action-taking competences required by strategic managers and marketers in Australia and overseas. Strategic marketing, and the development of positive networking within an international and global context, are an essential part of successful management and business development.

Teaching methods will be based on a combination of programmed learning and questioning insight. Learner-centred techniques include:

- workshops;
- problem solving;
- group presentations;
- discussions;
- action learning;
- flexible learning synergistic exercises;
- expert groups;
- nominal group technique;
- case studies;
- simulation exercises;
- projects/reports.

Assessment methods comprise three components:

- (1) There is an individual project report of about 1,500 words (30 per cent). Managers will bring an individual work-related project to the block for discussion and subsequent action. The project will outline a marketing management problem in the candidate's organization and suggest possible strategies to resolve the problem.
- (2) Class quizzes (40 per cent) based on exercises conducted during the residential block aim to assess the managers' understanding and insight into strategic marketing in a domestic and international context.
- (3) A group presentation (30 per cent) comprises analysis of an integrative case study of an Australian or international marketing plan developed through the block. This assesses the group's analytical skills and the ability to work as a team.

**Strategic human resource management (HRM)**

This off-campus reading course is designed to replace lectures and tutorials by self-study materials and regular meetings of the action learning “Sets” with academic staff on three weekends during the semester.

The content includes alignment of strategy, structure and culture. Design of jobs and roles, strategic roles for HRM managers, industrial democracy, workplace bargaining, equal employment opportunity legislation, human potential and world-class quality, and teamwork are the basic issues, but participants will bring their own emphases.

Self-study materials consist of book references, videos, compiled collection of articles and a workbook. These provide the basis for seminars conducted by academic staff. Managers will select a seminar topic of their choice, relate readings to practical examples, problems, issues and concerns in their organization and prepare questions for discussion.

Assessment methods comprise a seminar presentation (40 per cent) and a seminar essay of about 3,000 words on the same topic (60 per cent).

During the three weekend programmes, managers have the opportunity to discuss the relevance of the readings to their work in the organization, to present their ideas, learn from others, and revise their ideas before writing the essay for assessment. The essay includes the manager’s reflections on the whole subject and on personal learning.

**Action learning project**

After the theoretical introduction of the action learning concept and of project design, implementation and evaluation in the foundation subject, it is essential that participants actually implement a practical project in an organization, typically their own.

In this project work, participants learn to solve an organizational problem which is significant not only to themselves, but also to their organization. They acquire new skills, create new insights and exchange their experience and ideas with fellow executives in regular meetings.

There will be six meetings of a half-day’s duration in each semester to provide group supervision of projects, as well as regular meetings in action learning “Sets” of five to

six managers with a Set Adviser whose role it is to monitor the progress of the projects. The Set Adviser is usually available “on-call” to discuss projects and provide advice and guidance to students.

Assessment methods comprise an oral presentation of a progress report (50 per cent) and a written outline of the progress report of about 2,500 words (50 per cent) at the end of the first semester for one semester unit (one SU) for those candidates who wish to exit the course with the Graduate Management Qualification (Executive) award. For continuing candidates who wish to gain two semester units (two SUs) of credit, the assessment methods comprise an oral presentation (25 per cent) and a written outline (25 per cent) of the progress report at the end of the first semester and a final written report of about 5,000 words at the end of the second semester.

The progress report is a written outline which is explained orally and discussed in the set. The aim is to make use of the feedback from staff and fellow students for improving the project work and its final presentation. It is a learning experience as well as the result of resolving an organizational problem. Both reports include achievements, problems, limitations and reflections on learning.

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'...Action learning promotes self-critical reflection and advice from critical friends...'  
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Action learning promotes self-critical reflection and advice from critical friends. Therefore, each candidate is required to supply a self-assessment mark, then ask a Set member to provide a peer assessment mark and comments. Both marks will be considered by the supervisor, who then determines the final assessment mark.

**Managerial accounting and finance**

The off-campus reading course introduces students to the central theme: that management accounting exists within an enterprise to facilitate the development and implementation of business strategy. Management uses the information generated to plan, communicate, develop tactics and maintain control over activities. Relevant foundation material

and selected newly emerging technologies will be examined and applied.

This subject will be designed to replace lectures and tutorials by self-study materials and meetings with academic staff on three weekends during the semester.

Assessment methods comprise three components:

- (1) A seminar presentation (20 per cent) addresses organizational problems in the context of the areas covered in the prescribed readings.
- (2) A case study of about 1,500 words (30 per cent) is linked to issues relevant to the manager's own organization. During the three weekend programmes, managers have the opportunity to discuss the relevance of the readings to their work in the organization, to present their ideas, learn from others, and revise their ideas before submitting the completed case study for assessment. The case study will also include the manager's reflections on the whole subject and on the process of learning.
- (3) An examination (50 per cent) is based on an analysis of accounting technologies using quantitative data.

**The high-performing organization**

This intensive one-week residential block integrates the inputs and learnings of the course to date and deals explicitly with the concept of the high-performing organization and related topics such as ethics, information technology, organizational learning and development strategies.

All aspects of individual, group and organizational functioning are potentially included in this subject, but particularly the question of why some organizations are high-performing and many others are not. Many of the previous topics will be revisited but in a way seeking to achieve an integrated and dynamic perspective rather than a fragmented and static mental model.

Assessment methods include:

- (1) An open-book analysis (40 per cent) of student-selected issues and self-designed alternative methods for resolution;
- (2) A written assignment of about 3,000 words (60 per cent) on what action the student has taken to deal with organizational issues, following attendance at the

various subjects of the course prior to this third residential block, *plus* what action has been taken following attendance at this subject's workshop.

**Managers as researchers**

This subject is also taught as an intensive one-week residential block. It prepares managers for their action research and dissertation writing. Participants develop knowledge and skills in systematically resolving a major problem in their organization, using rigorous qualitative action research methods.

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As in traditional quantitative research, rigour within action research and qualitative case study methodology is essential, but it is achieved differently. A wide variety of methods of enquiry and evaluation techniques will be covered in this subject, including the repertory grid technology based on Kelly's personal construct theory; case study methods; survey design methods and analysis; the nominal group technique; illuminative evaluation; participant observation, triangulation, the quasi-historical approach, etc.

Potential supervisors of dissertations will be invited to attend the first session on "standards, expectations, the role and functions of the supervisor, university rules and regulations, communication between, and responsibilities on the part of, the student and supervisor, etc." and any other sessions they may wish to attend.

The purpose of this subject is to avoid the usual problems of attrition and late submission rates in Master's courses by preparing students properly for their tasks of conducting and writing up action research.

Assessment methods comprise an open-book exam (40 per cent) on qualitative research methods and a written assignment of about 3,000 words (60 per cent). The open-book exam assesses students' knowledge and skills in systematically addressing a major problem in their organization, using rigorous qualitative action research methods.

The written assignment is different for MBA (Executive) candidates and those who wish to exit with a Graduate Diploma of Management (Executive) award. The former group will focus on dissertation design and rationale, including problem definition, significance of the project, method and time schedule; and the latter group will focus on practical application of business research within their organization.

**Dissertation**

The dissertation integrates the knowledge, skills and learning experiences from the previous subjects in this course and culminates in the candidate's own comprehensive piece of work on the learning organization. As in the action learning project, the dissertation focuses on an organizational problem which is significant not only to the candidates themselves, but also to their organization. They meet regularly with the action learning "Set" (five to six members) and a Set Adviser to discuss any problems they might have. The aims of the dissertation are to :

- improve an area or aspect of work within and for the candidate's organization;
- develop the candidate's action research and process management skills and competences for future projects; and
- make a contribution to knowledge by virtue of the fact that candidates are taking an interdisciplinary perspective within their specific context.

Assessment methods comprise three components:

- (1) An oral presentation (20 per cent) of the results of field work in the light of the literature and main argument/thesis. The aim is to obtain feedback from peers and supervisor before producing the final presentation of the dissertation.
- (2) The final presentation of the dissertation of about 12,000 words (60 per cent), which is assessed by the supervisor and an external examiner following the guidelines on assessing dissertations.
- (3) A viva of about 30 minutes (20 per cent) in which candidates have to defend the main argument(s) of their dissertations before an external moderator, the internal examiner and invited peer group members. In this viva they can demonstrate that it is their own work and what they

themselves and their organization have learned/benefited and what action has been or will be taken as a result of this project.

**Limitations**

The main limitation of this course is the higher costs owing to its resource-intensive teaching methods in residentials, small action learning Sets and individual project supervision. In addition, this course has to be fully self-funding, and most teaching staff are not on a university salary, but external specialists who have to be paid senior consultants' fees.

Another problem is related to course promotion and marketing. How can this new course be launched? How will senior managers be informed? Apart from sending brochures to CEOs and placing advertisements in newspapers as usual, we believe that a personal approach is necessary to explain the concepts and benefits of action learning to the learning organization, but this approach is time-consuming. Yet, we do know from the ALARPM World Congresses that there is a great deal of common interest in the action learning approach to training and development in all sectors and in the development of the new paradigm.

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 '...The introduction of a new course adds pressure on existing resources...'  
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The Graduate School of Management at Griffith University is very young, only three years old. It is self-funding and under-resourced, and already busy with 360 students enrolled in the traditional MBA. Therefore, the introduction of a new course adds pressure on existing resources. There is also an element of resistance to change, a relative lack of understanding of the new paradigm of, and the perceived "soft" methodology approach to, management education.

Although there is strong support from about 20 senior consultants and colleagues in other universities who have been involved in discussions about the course, most of them are too busy themselves actually to market the course. The question is whether sufficient senior managers will get to know about the

new course, and will be sponsored by their organization, to make this course viable.

Suggestions are welcome from readers of this journal about promoting and marketing the course. If there is little financial and moral support from within the university, is it feasible to get it from outside? What opportunities are there for strategic alliances and collaboration with other institutions and organizations, for example mutual/cross-creditation, double degrees, tailor-made, in-company degree courses, etc.?

### Conclusions

The aims of this article were, first, to present an alternative to the much criticized traditional MBA degree programme – an alternative which prepares senior managers for the task of leading a high-performing organization. A second aim was to invite constructive criticism of the course design, before its implementation, from readers of *The Learning Organization*, who will be in the best position to comment on an MBA (Executive) by action learning because of their knowledge and special interest in this field.

The main features of the course and each subject have been outlined in this article and are summarized below:

- *flexible delivery mode*: two residentials of two weeks each instead of regular timetabled classes on-campus; two subjects by distance education with regular meetings of action learning groups; two work-based projects;
- *duration*: 13 months (high density) or two years (option);
- *course individually structured* to suit the needs of the managers and their organizations through work-based assignments and projects;
- *academic faculty* with international reputation and industry experience;
- *use of action learning and action research*, strategic alliances, networking and the latest information technology with global reach;
- *excellent staff-student ratios* – groups of five to six;
- *recognition of prior learning* and credit for relevant prior management development programmes;

- *flexible exit possible*: after one-third of the course, a Graduate Management Qualification; after two-thirds, a Graduate Diploma of Management.

A comparison of the MBA (Executive) and the traditional MBA is provided in Table II.

It is hoped that this article will contribute to a new approach to management education and development for the learning organization in the 1990s and the twenty-first century. Much has been written about the learning organization in theory and also in practice, as the references and case studies in previous issues of this journal show, but little has been suggested how practising, experienced managers themselves (rather than expert consultants) can learn and be prepared to develop a high-performing learning organization in the emerging national and international social, economic, industrial, technological and organizational contexts. This article has explored one possible way this might be achieved in graduate management education: through action learning and action research.

It is obvious that the expected success and benefits of the proposed MBA (Executive) course by action learning cannot be fully evaluated until the implementation and end of the first cohort of students completing the course. However, the author would appreciate any feedback on the course design and any ideas and suggestions as to how other organizations might benefit from or collaborate in such an MBA (Executive) course, designed to

Table II The MBA (Executive) course in comparison with the traditional MBA at Griffith University

MBA (Executive)	Traditional MBA
Flexible off-campus delivery	On-campus delivery
Local, interstate, off-shore	Local (fixed timetable)
Intensive residentials	Formal classes (weekly)
Off-campus reading courses	Lectures
Action learning "Sets" and project work	Tutorials
Learner-centred	Teacher-centred
Emphasis on the process of learning	Content-centred
Work-based assessment	Subject-based assessment
Interdisciplinary, problem-oriented	Disciplinary
More expensive	More economical

## develop senior managers for their leadership in a high-performing learning organization.

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