



Management, learning and the role of this book

Learning outcomes

By the end of this chapter you should:

- have considered the challenges facing managers in the twenty-first century
- understand how this book can increase your chances of both MBA and career success
- have started to think in detail about the challenges MBA study may present
- understand how to use the book to help you meet these challenges
- be preparing to gain maximum benefit from your MBA.

INTRODUCTION

Studying for an MBA or other postgraduate management qualification is a major investment of time, money and emotional energy. Many students do not do as well as they had hoped and too many gain little, save the letters after their name. This book is intended to help you approach your study so that your MBA can have a substantial impact on your effectiveness as a manager and on your whole subsequent career.

This first short chapter explains how the book is designed, in terms of both content and features that will help you to use it to enhance your learning and your grades. It gives an overview of the likely challenges an MBA will pose, helps you decide your learning priorities and suggests how you can tailor your use of this book to gain the most from it. This will start a process of examining your aims, assessing your learning needs and taking action in the light of this assessment which continues throughout the book.

First, you need to understand something about MBAs and the thinking behind them. An MBA originally was seen as a differentiating qualification for managers already in senior roles. More recently it has been seen as a means of accelerating career paths towards such a level. In deciding to study for this qualification you have chosen to make a substantial investment in yourself, one that may radically affect your future career.

The challenges that managers face have changed dramatically since MBAs were first offered in Europe. The nature of the MBA has also changed, partly in response to these

new challenges, and partly because of a growing understanding of leadership and management learning and its relationship to professional practice. Understanding these changes will help you to engage with your studies more effectively.

Your investment in MBA study goes beyond the purely financial. It takes time – around 1,800 hours of study – and there will be a major emotional investment as well.

Part-time, executive or distance-learning programmes now account for a substantial proportion of MBAs, so you may well be studying in parallel with a demanding job, and often while raising a family.

The prime objectives of this book are to help you succeed in your studies and to develop as a professional: many of the study skills it covers are highly transferable. The handbook is designed to help you gain more from your courses and does not in any sense replace them. However, as almost all the skills it addresses are as relevant to work as to study, working through the book can itself increase your effectiveness as a manager and leader.

MBA challenges and the handbook

An MBA or similar qualification poses both academic and practical time management challenges. This section outlines these challenges and previews how the book will help you meet them while at the same time having an immediate impact on your professional life, if you are currently working.

The MBA is a postgraduate qualification, and seeks to develop conceptual skills *beyond* the level of a first degree. It may be your first formal study in years. You may be studying in a different country and educational culture from your first degree. In either case, the academic aspects of the programme may seem daunting. You may have done no maths for 30 years, yet find yourself needing to ‘read’ numbers and perform some calculations. You may be asked to write essays and reports for assessment, and again this may not be a skill you have used recently. Above all, you will be asked to think critically about what you read and what you do, which may be totally unfamiliar.

If these demands make you nervous, relax. The book will help with all of this. And remember: an MBA is a vocational qualification, aimed at improving your professional practice as a manager. Universities, as well as their students, find it a challenge to balance the academic and the practical. You may know more about the practice of management than your teachers. In an ideal world they would learn as much from you as you from them. This handbook aims to guide you through both practitioner and academic aspects of learning. I hope it will also help you to engage in dialogue with work colleagues, fellow students and your lecturers about key aspects of management, helping all participants to develop their understanding of emerging issues.

Relevant chapters look at the requirements of practice-based learning, and can help you develop skills for individual and collaborative reflection and action learning. Others can help you to find and read academic material efficiently and critically and to take useful notes. Yet others help you analyse assessment questions in order to address them effectively, deal with basic mathematics and statistics, analyse case studies, and pass examinations. There is guidance on choosing and carrying out a final consultancy project or research dissertation and suggestions are offered as to how to exploit your learning and qualification once you graduate.

Connecting thinking and practice

An important strand running through the book concerns the link between thinking and practice. Throughout the book there will be activities which will prompt reflection on your own management learning and practice, and suggestions for recording your reflections. The importance of collaborative reflection is also stressed, and the skills needed for this are addressed.

Reflection on practice lies at the heart of professionalism, and can have an immediate impact on management practice.¹ If you are studying while working, you will have daily opportunities to reflect on your own practice, prompted by what you have just studied. Chapters on interactive and team working skills may be of immediate use. Report writing and presentation skills may be useful long before your MBA is complete.

Career-long relevance

Even more importantly, what you learn by working through this book has the potential to make you more effective *throughout your career*; it can help you develop abilities – and habits – which will generate continuing professional development. This will enable you to respond to a changing management environment, and to develop as a manager and leader long after your studies finish.

The academic requirements of your course may be unfamiliar. But many of the skills needed to meet them are actually key management skills. The ability to learn is itself crucial in an uncertain and rapidly changing world. (The impact of a truly global economic system is beginning to be fully felt only now, as is the impact of relentless growth in both population and resource consumption.) A successful management career will require an ongoing ability to adapt to new economic and social structures, new technologies and changing ways of thinking.

Such adaptability will require the ability to make sense of unfamiliar, complex and uncertain situations using relevant information, and evidence will be crucial. This itself will depend upon an awareness and sensitivity to the wider context, rather than a narrow focus on the immediate issue.

Developing such abilities demands considerable skills in identifying and managing information. But you may also need to be prepared to ‘unlearn’ some of the things you currently believe about management. You may need to question some of the assumptions that you currently hold about yourself as a manager, about those you manage and/or about organisations. Some of this ‘unlearning’, as well as much other learning, may be achieved best through *dialogue* with colleagues, another transferable skill (see Chapter 11).

→ Ch 11

Practical challenges

The purely practical challenge of finding enough time (and energy) for study may be as great as the intellectual challenge. A full-time programme may feel highly pressured. If you are studying part time, and aiming to complete in three years, the pressure may be even greater. You will need to ‘find’ 12 or more hours a week for course work. This poses a serious time-management challenge, particularly if, like most part-time MBA students, you have a family to consider.

→ Ch 6

If you currently work substantial overtime you may need to manage your time *at work* more effectively (see Chapter 6). Success may depend upon cutting your working hours. Whether or not this is the case, it will be important to manage your hard-won study time to best effect. This is an obviously transferable skill. I have talked to MBA graduates who claim that the greatest lasting benefit of their MBA was greatly improved time management.

Managing time at work and home will require you to manage some of the key stakeholders in your MBA: your work colleagues and your family. One of the things that an MBA seeks to develop is an awareness of the importance of stakeholders and of potential conflicts between stakeholder objectives, and the ability to manage these. So, again, the skill you will need for MBA success is highly transferable to your management role.

Another stakeholder group consists of those teaching and assessing you. One form of communication with them will be via written assignments. You may also need to make presentations on your course work. Writing and speaking clearly will thus contribute to good grades, but again are important skills for any manager.

Most MBA programmes will entail substantial group discussion. Many will require you to submit group work for assessment. Some of the collaboration may be online. Learning with others, especially through dialogue, and working collaboratively on specific tasks will require a range of interpersonal skills. The ability to listen and question will be even more important than the ability to talk. Again, these skills are highly transferable: most managers need to work effectively with others.

MBA benefits

If you are now starting to feel nervous about what you have undertaken, this is appropriate. An MBA is a serious undertaking. Recognising this from the outset, and understanding the nature of the challenge, will enable you to plan to succeed in terms of gaining the qualification and, more importantly, to use your study to transform your management practice. Many MBA graduates find that the benefits of the programme far exceed their expectations, and differ significantly from what they imagined when they started the programme. Many, sadly, do not. This book can ensure that you are in the former category.

ACTIVITY 1.1

Before reading further, imagine yourself five years into the future. Imagine that your career has progressed more than you could have hoped and think of all the ways your MBA has helped you.

Being able to write 'MBA' after your name, while valuable, is likely to be the least important benefit. I recently read a draft autobiography by John Horsler, the owner/chairman of Adroit Holdings.

John gained his MBA some 20 years ago. He had already been successful as a manager, and had just been head hunted as managing director for a not very profitable plc.² Clearly he did not need the letters for his career. He said of his decision to study:

'I also decided at this time to enroll on the Open University's MBA programme. Given my poor academic background [he had left school at 16] I felt it was time to actually go and learn how to do things properly ... It was to become a life-changing decision, for which I will be eternally grateful ...'

John says that the MBA helped him to realise just how differently people saw things and thought about them, and the MBA gave him the final confidence to buy a business of his own for the first time.

The following comments by past MBA students give some idea of the wide range of benefits of postgraduate study.

Quotes by past MBA students

'My MBA course altered the whole way I approach my job.'

'I am now far more creative in the way I approach problems.'

'I am now good at seeing what we need to do to fit in with overall strategy.'

'I find I am far better at coping with complexity – I no longer try to over-simplify situations in order to make them manageable.'

'I now see that my own perspective on a situation is no more valid than the perspectives of others involved, and that I have a lot to learn from them.'

'I couldn't see the point at first, but I now think I shall always carry my "reflective notebook" with me, and also make time to reflect over the past week.'

MBA's were once available only to the elite, but now they – and a range of other management Master's degrees – are widely available. This means that employers often now look at the reputation of the university providing your MBA, and at your achievements during the programme (and any jobs you have held since). So while an MBA may still increase your chance of being interviewed, it is what you learn while gaining it that is increasingly important. How you perform, and the impression you make on your seniors, will have far more impact on your subsequent career.

Sadly, many students gain marginal passes with little apparent benefit from their studies. This will soon become apparent to their new work colleagues. Or perhaps they learn the wrong things – Mintzberg (2004) suggests that being exposed to management education can leave a 'distorted impression of management. Management is a practice that has to blend a good deal of craft (experience) with a certain amount of art (insight) and some science (analysis).' An education that over-emphasises either aspect at the expense of the other can produce either technocrats or heroes. Neither is helpful. What we need, rather, is 'balanced, dedicated people who practice a style of managing that can be called "engaging". Such people believe that their purpose is to leave behind stronger organisations, not just higher share prices' (*op. cit.* p. 1).

Mintzberg concludes his argument by saying, 'No one can create a leader in a classroom. But existing managers can significantly improve their practice in a thoughtful classroom that makes use of those experiences' (*op. cit.* p. 3).³

These short quotes cover themes that will run through this book, in particular the balance between theory and practice and the need for ‘thoughtfulness’, or thinking, or reflection, if you are to benefit from study. One aim of this book is to help you to develop the skills for such ‘thoughtfulness’. But they may also cause you to question some of your reasons for study.

ACTIVITY 1.2

Read the above quotes carefully and note the points that Mintzberg is making and whether you agree or disagree with them, and why.

Later chapters explore critical thinking in more detail. This activity is asking you to try thinking in this way. Being *critical* involves questioning assertions. It involves making judgments in the light of evidence, arguments and your own experience. It requires you to question your own assumptions and ways of thinking.

You cannot properly assess the validity of Mintzberg’s arguments and evidence unless you read his book. But even a superficial ‘unpicking’ and evaluation of the quoted statements may have started to bring to the surface some of your own beliefs about management, learning and its purpose. If you can discuss your reaction to these quotes with others you may find interesting differences of opinion – exploring these will help you identify assumptions you and they are making that you may not be aware of.

In case you are not in a position to share your views on the quotes, here are some of my reactions so that you can see how you differ from me. I chose the quote because, like Mintzberg, I feel that any MBA programme needs to be built around the idea that *management is a practice* and must *draw upon management experience* if it is not to produce MBAs who are a liability to any organisation. Furthermore, I think he raises a really important ethical issue which MBA programmes need to address: is the role of a manager merely to add value for shareholders, or do managers have social responsibilities?

Where I *disagree* is with the implication that there is a great deal wrong with all management education: Mintzberg was writing mainly about MBAs in the USA and those he experienced in the early 2000s. Some US programmes were already very different from those he criticises, and more are now, as are the majority of European MBAs.

This handbook aims to enable you to complete your MBA with good grades but, more importantly, to help you to gain real and lasting benefit from the learning opportunities an MBA can offer. If you *really* learn, rather than merely learn what is needed to pass assessment, you will be transformed as a manager and leader, and stand out as one destined for rapid promotion. This, however, requires a far deeper level of learning than you may have experienced before.

The book will help you achieve this, but only if you use it as *a prompt to thinking*, and thinking seriously, about yourself, your strengths and weaknesses, and the way in which you habitually think about learning, and about management and leadership. You need to be prepared to challenge some of your own deeply held beliefs in ways that may redefine your sense of your own identity.

When the first edition of this book appeared, MBAs were the predominant management qualification at Master's level. Enrolments on generalist MBAs have now stabilised, but there has been a substantial expansion in specialist management-related Master's programmes. Although, for continuity, the title remains *The MBA Handbook*, it should be useful equally for any Master's level post-experience management programmes. Large parts of it will be helpful also if you have moved straight from an undergraduate degree to a full-time Master's in a specialism such as HR, Marketing or International Management.

HOW TO USE THIS HANDBOOK

This handbook is *not* a textbook. It does not seek to give a definitive view of anything, it is not full of facts, and referencing has deliberately been kept to a minimum. Instead it draws upon some 30 years of teaching and examining management students, primarily at MBA level. This is supplemented by some of what I have read that has helped make sense of what experience suggests helps managers learn and develop as professionals. It is designed to prompt your own thinking in directions that may help you learn – and often manage – more effectively.

To gain full benefit you need to work through the activities and exercises provided as well as reading the words in the chapters which you think are most relevant to you. This takes longer than merely reading. However, because of the diverse backgrounds of MBA students, some chapters will be more important to you than others, and some you may not need at all, or it may be enough merely to scan them briefly to remind yourself of the ideas involved. *Chapters 2 and 8 are, however, important for everyone.*

You will find that, although some skills are dealt with in a specific chapter, some topics are revisited several times. This is because learning, particularly practically oriented learning about complex issues, can be seen as a spiral process. You may need a broad grasp of several aspects of a topic as a basis for further more in-depth learning. Thus you will find that topics such as knowledge, theory and learning are revisited in several chapters.

Your first challenge is to identify the chapters that are a priority for you. If you are to gain full value from your MBA, you will need to actively manage your learning. The same applies to optimising your benefit from this book.

ACTIVITY 1.3

If you have not already done so, glance at the contents pages to familiarise yourself with the scope of the book. Identify areas that you already know are high or low priorities for you. As you work through the book you will be able to check your initial assessments and identify other areas where development might help.

The book will contain many activities, designed to prompt useful thinking. You will gain far more benefit from the book if you actually write down your thoughts. You may like to scribble in the margins or stick in a Post-it, carry around a small notebook,

create a specific file on your PC, or PDA or use a mix of methods for different types of thought.⁴ The important thing is that you choose an approach that is convenient and comfortable for you, and one that you can easily refer to later. You will find it really helpful to revisit your thoughts from time to time. Sometimes you will have forgotten them, and going back will prompt you to action. Sometimes you will be amazed (and encouraged) at how far your thoughts have developed in a short period. There will be more on the role of such reflection in professional learning in Chapter 8.

HOW THE BOOK IS STRUCTURED

In looking at the contents list you will have seen that after this introductory chapter the remainder of the book falls roughly into five parts. The first deals with understanding the MBA content and its demands, the second with preparation you could usefully do even before starting your study. The third, and probably the most important, section deals with learning skills. The fourth deals with demonstrating your learning in order to do well in assessment. The final and shortest part looks towards life after you have completed the qualification. It may help to explain these parts in a little more detail.

Understanding the MBA: Chapters 2, 3

These chapters help you understand the context for your study. Chapter 2 seeks to increase your understanding of the MBA as a qualification, and the likely perspective and priorities of those who designed your chosen course. If you have yet to select a programme, this will help you make a wise choice.

Chapter 3 helps you consider the characteristics of the other key element in your 'learning system' – yourself. If you understand your own development priorities and your aims, you will be in a better position to make the course work for you to help you achieve your career aims. If you are unsure about whether an MBA is for you, this will help you decide. If you are still at the stage of choosing an MBA programme, a Helpfile is provided at the end of this chapter with useful questions you may wish to ask in the light of your reading Chapters 2 and 3.

Early preparation: Chapters 4–6

These chapters cover mainly personal management skills. You could usefully work through them as preparation before the programme starts or early in your studies. Chapter 4 helps you consider the resources you will need if you are to study effectively, including the support you are likely to need from your work colleague, your family and any other stakeholders. Negotiating resources and support at the outset may be both easier and more effective than part way in.

Chapter 5 explores some of the personal management skills that will be vital if you are to cope with the demands an MBA programme is likely to make. You will need to plan your study time, organise resources. Key among these will be information resources. There is an exploding body of writing and other information relevant to management and you will need to be able to select that which is relevant and find ways of organising it.

No matter how organised you are, the additional demands of study are potentially stressful. The ability to manage stress levels will be crucial. You may need to be assertive in order to resist pressures to over-commit at work in order to allow time for study. You may also need to become more aware of your emotional reactions to situations, and better able to manage these.

Because a major stress is likely to be time pressure, Chapter 6 is devoted to time management. This is equally relevant to work and study. Effective time management at work can free time and energy for study (vital if you are studying while working). Managing your study time carefully will mean that you use this scarce resource to best effect.

Developing learning skills: Chapters 7–13

Chapters 7–13 address the more specific learning skills you will need for postgraduate study. Some, such as reading management materials, could be worked on before your course starts. Some might be better addressed when you first start to use them in the context of your studies. A key aim is to deepen your understanding of the specific nature of professional development and the role of reflection within such development. This part of the book seeks to help you develop the habit of reflective learning, widely recognised as essential to professional practice. It is suggested that you create some form of personal development file to help you to manage your learning and capture insights gained.

Chapter 7 looks in more detail at practical ways of managing your learning and related activities to optimise your use of time. Chapter 8 looks at the nature of learning and professional development in more detail with particular emphasis on both individual and collaborative reflection, and the different ways of capturing your reflections, the insights that result, and the implications for your professional practice.

An MBA programme typically will require you to read extensively. There will be books, academic and professional journal articles, web resources and case studies that you will need to absorb, evaluate and draw upon to support arguments and conclusions. Unless you can read *effectively*, identifying and retaining what is relevant, you will flounder. Unless you read *critically*, you may not gain much of lasting value. Chapter 9 addresses these key skills.

Many of the issues you will address will be complex, and difficult to describe purely in text. Diagrams are an invaluable aid when analysing or communicating complex issues, and Chapter 10 introduces a wide range of diagrams. You need to be able to choose and use these appropriately for different purposes as an aid to thinking and communication.

Teams are a key element in most organisations' structures, and group learning activities (face-to-face and online) are a feature of much of MBA learning. Chapter 11 looks at factors that contribute both to working and to learning in a group context and the hazards that need to be avoided. It addresses the skills you will need to contribute to the group's effectiveness and those that will help you derive learning from the process. Because action learning sets can contribute substantially to management learning the chapter also provides guidance on forming and managing sets.

Most MBA programmes make extensive use of case studies. Chapter 12 looks at why cases are so widely used, and at the skills you need to analyse them and draw defensible conclusions. Because many MBA graduates go on to become consultants, the relationship between case analysis and consultancy is also explored.

Chapter 13 looks at an aspect of MBAs that students either love or hate, working with numbers. One of the expectations of an MBA graduate is that they will be comfortable working with financial or other numerical data. If you are already happy with numbers, the maths involved in an MBA will seem trivial and you can skip this chapter. If you are terrified of the quantitative elements in your programme, this chapter will help you refresh (or even develop for the first time) the basic mathematical skills you will need. It will help you to play with numbers, turn them into pictures, and draw sensible conclusions from the story that they tell.

Doing well in assessment: Chapters 14–19

The *learning* you gain from the programme will have most impact on your long-term career success, but an important short-term goal is to gain those letters after your name, preferably with a merit or distinction. To gain good grades you need both to learn and to *demonstrate* this learning, via whatever assessment is used on your course. Assessment may involve written assignments, assessed group work, examinations and a substantial thesis or dissertation. Read the relevant chapters slightly ahead of encountering each type of assessment, and revisit them as an aid to learning from grades received.

Chapter 14 looks at the challenges you are likely to face in assessments, and will help you think about what you will need to do to rise to these challenges. Chapter 15 focuses on written assignments and the skills for planning, thinking and constructing arguments that you will need. It looks at the formats typically required and the challenges of writing clear English. It explains why plagiarism is such a hazard, and how to avoid it. It contains useful appendices on common spelling mistakes and on understanding the words that are likely to appear in the instructions in assignment briefs.

Many MBA programmes require you to make oral presentations on your work, whether for assessment, or merely to develop what is a valuable management skill. Chapter 16 looks at how to design and deliver a presentation that will communicate your message most effectively to your particular audience. It looks not only at structuring your presentation but also at how to use visual aids effectively and to overcome any nerves. MBAs still tend to require you to pass some form of examination, despite their inadequacy as tests of professional practice. You may not have faced a written examination for many years. Chapter 17 is designed to help you to do so with the minimum of stress and to gain the mark your study deserves. Chapter 18 will help with other forms of assessment, typically *viva voce* (oral) examinations, portfolios and assessment centres. Chapter 19, addresses the dissertation or project. This is typically the final module in an MBA and a common cause of failure. It is likely to require you to work far more independently than previously, and to demonstrate skills relevant to a subsequent academic and/or consultancy role. This independence may be a challenge and the

academic requirements hard to understand. But this module has huge potential for developing highly relevant management. This chapter should help you choose a topic that will be of maximum relevance, and to approach it in a way that will not only help you gain a good mark, but also exploit the learning opportunities to the full. It will also, of course, help you to do research at work into issues that you might wish to do something about.

Afterwards: Chapter 20

This final chapter reinforces the point that gaining an MBA is a beginning not an end. It is intended to help you sustain the learning habits you will have developed and to reconsider your career goals in the light of your achievement. It suggests that you draw on branding ideas from your marketing module to increase your chances of success, and to sustain and develop a professionally relevant network. The chapter also gives guidance on finding and successfully applying for the job you want.

CHAPTER STRUCTURE

Many of the features of the book are outlined in the 'Guided tour' of the book on pp. xiv–xv. If you have not yet looked at this, it would be helpful to do so now. All chapters follow a similar pattern to this first one, starting with a set of learning outcomes for the chapter followed by an introduction. Think about the outcomes first, highlighting any that are particularly important for you, and adding any others that you would like to achieve by reading the chapter. At the end of your work on the chapter, check whether these additions have also been met.

To achieve the outcomes you will need to work through any activities and exercises included in the chapter. Exercises are intended as a check on your understanding of techniques or concepts and normally will have an answer. These answers are printed at the end of the chapter in which the exercise occurs. Activities do not have answers, though the subsequent discussion in the text may draw upon what you have written. You can jot down short answers to activities on the text itself. It will be helpful to construct a file of some sort where you can put longer answers (there is more on this in Chapters 2, 7 and 8).

At the end of each chapter you will find suggested sources of *further information* or relevant interesting reading. Note that this is not a list of the references for that chapter. References for the whole book are provided at the end of the book. Note that you will find far fewer references than in most texts, as this is intended as a practical rather than scholarly handbook, and draws as much on experience as reading.

'*Further information*' offers a list of sources that you might find useful if you wish to read more on a particular issue. It is an idiosyncratic selection – on many topics there are dozens of possible sources. I have picked those that seemed to go beyond the chapter, but not so far beyond that they would take an unreasonable amount of your time or effort, and that seemed to me to offer reasonable advice or information. If you can find something that suits your needs, then use that rather than feeling you need to stick to the *further information* list.

What you draw from a chapter will depend upon your current thought processes and mindset, and the issues that are of concern to you at the time you read it. If you re-read it later you will almost certainly find additional messages or points that seem to be significant. It is therefore well worth revisiting chapters *whenever* the content is relevant to an aspect of your study or relates to something in your management role that is proving even slightly problematic.



As indicated, there is also a companion website associated with this book. You will find it at www.pearsoned.co.uk/cameron and items on this website are shown in the text by the symbol shown here. There you will find a range of proformas for activities, additional exercises for some of the chapters and links to other useful sources of information.

PLANNING YOUR WORK ON THE HANDBOOK

As time is likely to be scarce, you need to target your efforts to meet your own specific development needs in relation to study and your career. You will probably need to revisit this exercise throughout your studies, but a first rough pass in relation to your current study needs will start a thought process that you can continue in more detail later on. Figure 1.1 shows how work on the various chapters might relate to milestones in an MBA or similar course. You should now study this diagram, highlighting priority chapters.

ACTIVITY 1.4

Think in broad terms about your preparedness to study and areas that concern you. List these, noting down reasons for your concern. You will need to do this in a form that you can file for later reference. (There will be suggestions for how you can organise such notes later.)

Now select two of the chapters that seem most relevant to your needs and spend some time skimming these. Try to assess how long they would take you to work through if you were to do all the activities thoroughly. Then think about how long you can afford to spend working on them, either before your course starts, or while you are doing coursework at the same time. Try to be realistic in your estimates. If you have focused on more chapters than you know you can find the time for (being honest), then be ruthless. Discard the least pressing. It is better to set yourself an achievable task, than to attempt too much and then become discouraged and achieve nothing. You can always revise your targets later if you are getting on more quickly than anticipated.

Decide on target completion dates for the chapters you have selected. Complete the chart below, or devise a more extended one. Be sure to note your target dates in your diary, too, to ensure that you do not forget to check your progress. You will need to bear your course timetable in mind, if you are already registered for a course, or your anticipated course start date if not.

Chapter	Target completion date	Notes
_____	_____	_____
_____	_____	_____
_____	_____	_____
_____	_____	_____
_____	_____	_____

Comment

The above activity should have introduced you to one of the key ways in which you intend to use this book, that is, to write on it! By the end of your course you should have absorbed all you need from the book, and need to make only limited reference to it thereafter. So there is no need to keep it in pristine condition. Deface it as much as you like, provided this will help you. Indeed, it will be suggested that you deface other printed materials, too (provided that they belong to you, not the library), so you might as well start now. However, some of your notes will be kept more usefully on your computer. (An electronic version of this and other activities is available from the companion website.)



You should not be locked into your plan. Course demands and other experiences (babies, house moves, promotions, mergers, etc.) will almost certainly cause you to alter your priorities and assessed needs. When this happens you should revisit and revise your plan. You may sometimes wish to look at parts of the book you decided were not important, in order to check that your decision was right. Or you may realise that a topic was introduced in an earlier chapter, and that you need to include the relevant part of that chapter. Marginal flags with chapter numbers show when this may be the case.

The fact that your plan will almost certainly need to be amended makes it more, rather than less, important to have a plan. Regular revisions will improve it and ensure it fits your changing understanding and situation. The key thing is that having developed your plan, you follow it, modifying it only to make it *more* effective. An electronic plan will make revisions easier, but you may find a paper copy is also helpful. There is more on planning in general in Chapters 4, 5, 7 and 19). It is suggested that you keep a learning or personal development file with an action planning section. Your plan for using the book could be your first study planning entry.

You should, by now, have sufficient grasp of the book's structure and features to start working through sections with the highest priority for you. I trust that this will prove a useful and enjoyable exercise in itself, as well as helping you gain a good MBA and achieve your career aims.

→ Ch 4, 5, 7, 19

Chapter

20 Beyond your Master's

19 Projects, etc.

18 Other forms of assessment

17 Passing examinations

16 Making presentations

15 Writing assignments and reports

14 Scoring well in assessment

13 Using numbers

12 Case studies, complexity and consultancy

11 Teamwork, leadership and learning

10 Using diagrams

9 Improving reading skills

8 Learning and developing as a manager

7 Managing your learning activities

6 Time management

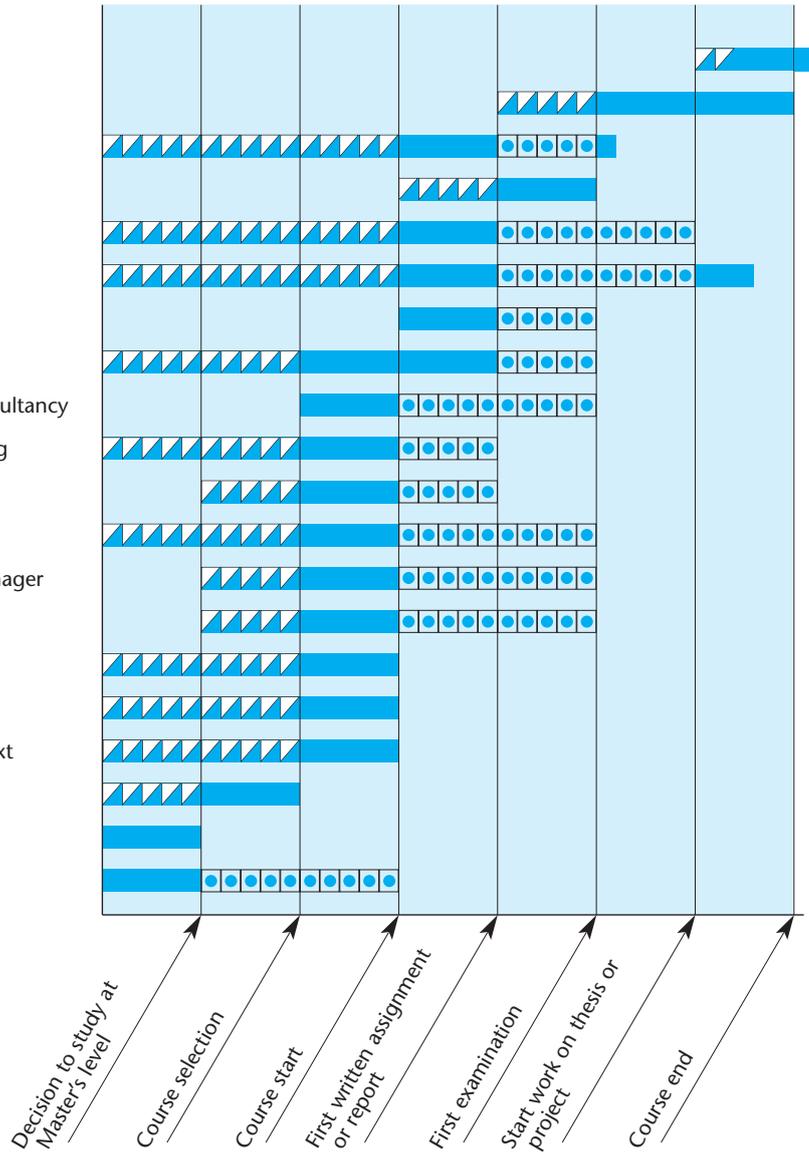
5 Personal management skills

4 Creating a suitable learning context

3 Your objectives for an MBA

2 The nature of MBA learning

1 Management, learning etc.



Key:

denotes optimal study period

denotes scope for bringing study forward

denotes period into which study could be postponed if unavoidable

Fig. 1.1 Optimal study times for Handbook chapters in relation to course milestones

SUMMARY

- Postgraduate management-related study represents a major investment of time, money and emotion but offers equally major potential benefits.
- This book is designed to help you maximise the return on that investment, while at the same time developing a range of skills that transfer readily to managerial work.
- These skills include time management, project management, writing, dealing with numbers, working in groups and learning through individual and collaborative reflection.
- This book is intended to be used selectively, but relevant sections should be *worked through*, rather than merely read.
- Chapters divide roughly into understanding context, preparation, learning skills, assessment skills, and post-MBA. However, much of the book can be worked through (for the first time at least) as preparation for study.
- Your plan for working through the book should depend on your priorities, and the timetable of the course you intend to study. It is important that this plan be realistic. It is also worth revisiting chapters when relevant.
- There is a companion website for this book at www.pearsoned.co.uk/cameron.



Notes

- ¹ If you wish to be convinced of this, read Schön's (1983) *The Reflective Practitioner: How Professionals Think in Action*. Alternatively, if you are a member of a professional institute, look at the institute's website to see what they say about management practice.
- ² A public limited company that may sell shares to the public, listed on the London Stock Exchange.
- ³ The whole introduction is available via <http://www.bkconnection.com/static/Managers-Not-MBAs-EXCERPT.pdf>.
- ⁴ Personal digital assistant (PDA) such as BlackBerry or i-Phone.

