Understanding the instructional preferences of transnational MBA students

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Profile: Mary has been involved with numerous profit and non-profit organisations and associations. Throughout her working career she has held senior management positions in the public sector, non profit sector, as well as owning and managing a small business. She has worked and studied in many countries and has taught MBA classes in Switzerland, Singapore, Hong Kong and Malaysia. Mary holds a PhD from the University of South Australia. Her postgraduate teaching experience includes supervision of graduate students and teaching with the IGSB MBA program. Her research interests include Human Resource Management, Organisational Behaviour and tertiary education.

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ABSTRACT

This paper reports on a preliminary investigation into the instructional preferences of students studying in a transnational Master of Business Administration (MBA) program of an Australian university. The teaching and learning environment of the program is characterised by an intensive teaching regime which utilises a mixed mode of face-to-face and online delivery to promotes independent and collaborative learning for students who have Confucian-heritage backgrounds. The aim of the investigation was to provide lecturers with an understanding of their students' instructional preferences so that, where appropriate, they can better assist the students to meet the learning objectives of the MBA program. Survey data was collected from students studying the MBA in Hong Kong and Singapore in English (EMBA), and in Hong Kong, Singapore and Taiwan in Chinese (CMBA). Findings demonstrated that whilst students ranked teacher directed, face-to-face instructional delivery highly, they indicated that an independent, online learning environment was their least-preferred approach to learning. These findings not only enable lecturers to understand their students better, but also provide useful knowledge in terms of how to best assist students to work productively and successfully in the face-to-face and online teaching and learning environment.

This research paper is an example of lecturers using the teaching-research nexus as an opportunity to investigate the instructional preferences of international students in a transnational Master of Business Administration (MBA) program. The information will be used to inform lecturers of areas in which students may require assistance to work productively and successfully in the blended face-to-face and online teaching and learning environment. In doing so, the lecturers-as-researchers have embraced a scholarly approach to teaching in which data about the teaching and learning environment (in this case, their students' instructional preferences) is gathered so that it can be reflected upon and used to better support student learning. Such a practice is highly regarded by leading scholars in the area of teaching and learning in higher education (for example, (Biggs 2003; Ramsden 2003) and demonstrates a strong commitment to student-centred learning.

Whilst the research is interested in documenting students' instructional preferences, this is not done so that lecturers might attempt to continue to offer them the same sort of approaches to education that they have previously experienced in their home countries and are perhaps used to and comfortable with. Indeed, Biggs views such accommodation strategies as a deficit model of education which 'cannot be justified empirically or in principle' (2003: 138). The aim, instead, is to understand students' instructional preferences so that lecturers can assist them where necessary to develop the knowledge and skills that are required to meet the learning objectives of their MBA studies. This approach to teaching, according to Biggs, is inclusive because it focuses on what students *do*, rather than on what some students *are* or what lecturers *do* for some students (2003: 122-125).

Initially, some background is provided about the transnational MBA program under investigation to help contextualise the research. The literature review then sets the scene for the research and is constructed around a complementary, two-stage conceptual framework. The first stage outlines the importance of lecturers understanding their students so that they can better assist them to meet the learning objectives of their MBA subjects. Biggs's (1996) Presage-Process-Product model of teaching and learning is used to establish this important aspect of teaching. The second stage of the conceptual framework provides a concise review of work advanced by Eugene Sadler-Smith & Riding (1999) on cognitive style and instructional preferences. This literature informs the research framework of this investigation. The research aims and method are then described. Following this is the presentation and discussion of the research results. The paper is concluded by revisiting the three key research questions that direct the investigation.

Background information

The Graduate School of the Australian university involved in this research has been successfully teaching transnational MBA programs in English (EMBA) and in Chinese (CMBA) for the past 11 years. The EMBA has been delivered to students in Hong Kong, Singapore, Thailand, Switzerland and Malaysia. The CMBA has been taught in Taiwan, Singapore, Hong Kong and Mainland China. Entry criteria require students to have completed a recognised professional qualification, for example at the Bachelor degree level, have at least two years of managerial experience and have an acceptable command of the language of tuition. Holders of a diploma or equivalent qualifications with substantial work experience are also considered for entry.

Although the transnational MBA programs have the same requirements as the onshore MBA based in Australia, there are some differences between the two in terms of scheduling of classes and availability of Australian lecturers in the transnational locations. For example, the transnational MBA is an intensive program which targets managers who work full-time and who want to complete an MBA in 18 months. Transnational students enrol in double the load of courses per semester compared to onshore MBA students in Australia. Further, the intensive face-to-face delivery of the transnational MBA occurs over four consecutive days in each course, with four hours of teaching on both Thursday and Friday evenings, and 16 hours equally distributed between Saturday and Sunday. This teaching regime, when considered in association with the cultural, language and educational backgrounds of the transnational MBA students, gives cause for lecturers to carefully consider their teaching approach and how best they might support student learning.

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LITERATURE REVIEW

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This paper is fundamentally concerned with lecturers having an understanding of their students. This, according to Biggs (2003) and Ramsden (2003), is perhaps the most important activity lecturers can
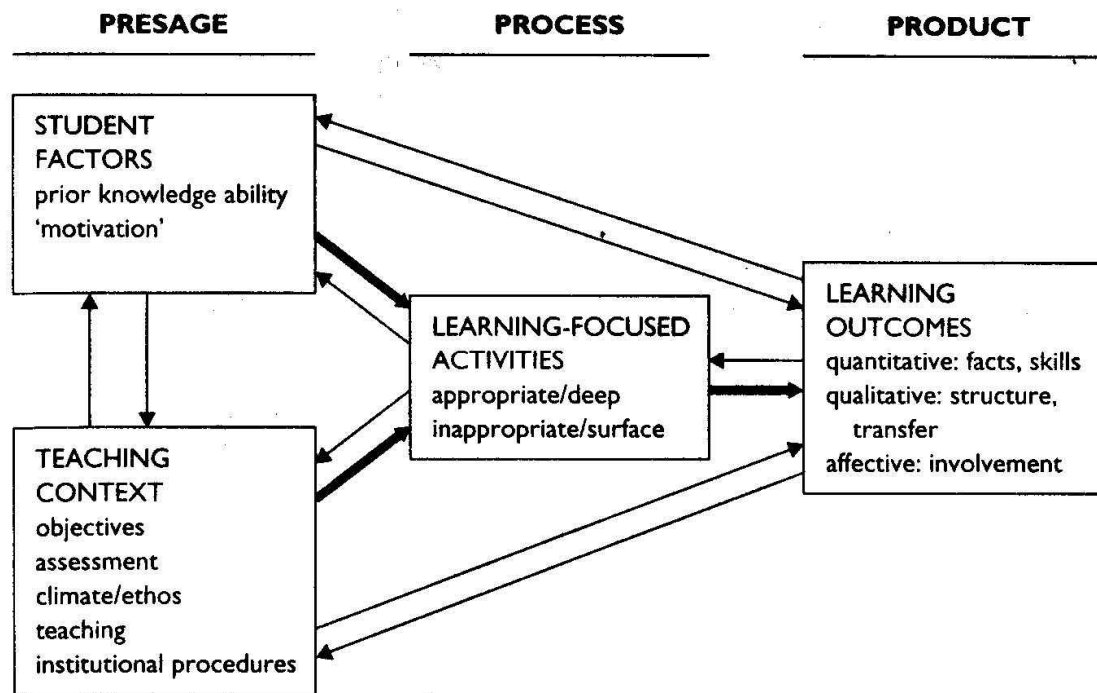
engage in to assist students to meet educational objectives in higher education. By understanding their students, particularly in terms of their approaches to learning, lecturers can assist them to adjust to the requirements of the academic program. Given that this research is interested in understanding what students 'bring into' the classroom with them in terms of learning preferences, the literature review is divided into two complementary parts. The first describes Biggs's (1996) Presage-Process-Product (3P) model of teaching & learning. The interests of this paper clearly reside with the Presage element of the model and how an understanding of students can help lecturers plan appropriate support in the future for the teaching and learning arrangements (the Process element of the model.) This, in turn, can support the Product element of the model, or the learning outcomes of the MBA courses. The second part of the literature review elaborates on cognitive style and instructional preferences by mobilising related concepts on this topic advanced by Eugene Sadler-Smith & Riding (1999). This will inform the research framework of this paper.

Understanding Students Using Biggs's (1996) Presage-Process-Product, Or 3P Model

The lecturers involved in the research believe that it is important for them to have an understanding of their students' approaches to teaching and learning. Further, given that they are teaching international students in the transnational MBA program, they have to particularly acknowledge that students enter the classroom with diverse cultural, language, and educational backgrounds and possibly with different expectations of teaching and learning. The lecturers have to respond to international students' different social and learning needs with supportive curricula. This approach is supported by Caffarella who insists that it is not enough merely to recognise how different people communicate, regard lecturers, or take part in the educational process; lecturers have an obligation to design their education offerings to 'fully engage people in learning who might have very different cultural traditions and expectations' (2002: 27). A model of university teaching and learning that is useful in relation to this is Biggs's (1996) Presage-Process-Product, or 3P, model which was designed to express the interactions between lecturers and students with regard to the expectations that both would have of the teaching and learning process (see Figure 1).

The Presage stage refers to individual states of being that foreshadow the educative process. At the level of the individual student, it describes the worldview of each participant in the MBA classroom. For example, the student Presage state describes the learning-related characteristics of the student in terms of prior knowledge, abilities, preferred approaches to learning, values, expectations, and competence in the language of instruction (Biggs 1996: 51). The teaching and learning literature supports this view. Prosser & Trigwell (1998) state that students' approaches to learning are a function of their prior experiences in teaching and their learning environments. Ramsden (2003) too, indicates that a student's approach to study would be influenced by their previous experiences. Ballard & Clancy believe that all students enter university with 'expectations, knowledge and behaviour' (1997:

10) which can be attributed to their individual personalities and their educational experiences. Having lecturers gain an insight into the Presage states of the MBA students, then, is an important step in them understanding their learners and how this might inform support for various teaching and learning arrangements.

PRESAGE   **PROCESS**   **PRODUCT**

STUDENT FACTORS
prior knowledge ability 'motivation'

LEARNING-FOCUSED ACTIVITIES
appropriate/deep
inappropriate/surface

LEARNING OUTCOMES
quantitative: facts, skills
qualitative: structure, transfer
affective: involvement

TEACHING CONTEXT
objectives
assessment
climate/ethos
teaching
institutional procedures

FIGURE 1: THE PRESAGE-PROCESS-PRODUCT, OR 3P, MODEL OF TEACHING AND LEARNING
Source: Biggs (1996: 62)

Understanding Students' Presage States Through Their Instructional Preferences

Now that a rationale for having lecturers understand their students has been provided, the remainder of the literature review refines the focus on student Presage states by concentrating on their instructional preferences. A number of researchers have argued that such preferences (or, more correctly, approaches to learning) differ amongst individuals (Biggs 2003; Prosser & Trigwell 1998; Ramsden 2003; Sadler-Smith, Allinson, & Hayes 2000; Sadler-Smith & Smith 2004). It has been suggested that to ignore individual instructional preferences may ultimately lead to reduced motivation and engagement with the learning process. Again, it needs to be stressed that the interest in understanding students' instructional preferences is important not because lecturers should adapt their teaching to suit such preferences, but so that appropriate assistance can be provided to students to help them adjust to the teaching and learning arrangements in the transnational MBA programs.

This research focuses on two elements of student learning as described by Eugene Sadler-Smith &

Riding (1999). The first element relates to an *instructional preference inventory* which describes specific modes of teaching and learning such as face-to-face lecturing, reading course materials, learning in groups, and online learning. Modes of teaching such as these are all characteristic of the transnational MBA programs. The second element relates to how learners might respond to particular modes of teaching and learning. Eugene Sadler-Smith & Riding calls these *learning preference styles* or *types* and identifies three categories which 'may be defined as an individual's propensity to choose or express a liking for a particular instructional technique or combination of techniques (1999: 357). They are *dependent learners, collaborative learners,* and *independent learners*.

For Sadler-Smith & Riding (1999) teaching environments that foster *dependent learners* typically conjure up images of teacher-directed, didactic, and highly structured programs. Interestingly, international students from Asian countries are often thought of as being this type of learner. That is, they venerate the lecturer as a source of wisdom, think that their own opinions are not as correct as those of their teachers, repeat what they have been told, and reproduce the words of their teachers and texts rather than create their own arguments (Kenyon & Amrapala 1991: 69-72). They can appear to lack confidence, be dependent upon lecturers for direction, and struggle with independent learning (De Fazio 1999).

In contrast to a teaching environment that cultivates dependent learners are ones that are normally associated with a student-centred, Western model of higher education. That is, environments in which *collaborative learners* work in discussion-oriented groups and *independent learners* take responsibility for their own learning and use the instructor as a resource. Paradoxically, despite the assumption that contemporary teaching in the Western academic tradition is based on the student-centred model, Watkins (1998) and Biggs (2003) note that research has established that, in practice, much of the teaching at universities in Western countries such as Australia and the United States is more about lecturers being knowledgeable about their subject and being able to impart this knowledge to their students in a more or less didactic fashion. This observation notwithstanding, value is still clearly attached to notions such as student-centred learning, independent learning, and critical and analytical thinking. Further, such notions definitely underpin the learning objectives of the transnational MBA programs which are the focus of this investigation.

RESEARCH AIMS & METHOD

This research project, carried out at the end of 2005 after gaining ethics approval, had three key research questions:

1. What does the data indicate about the students' learning preferences in the transnational MBA program?

2. Can the data inform lecturers about likely areas of support required by their students in order to meet the learning objectives of the MBA program?
3. Can the data help lecturers understand their students better?

The method that was used to gather data to answer the key research questions was a questionnaire. The benefits of using questionnaires is well-established in the research literature. For example, Saunders, Lewis, & Thornhill (2000), Bryman (2001) and Bernard (2000) report that questionnaires can be used to gather data from large samples efficiently. They are not necessarily time consuming for the research participant to complete. They can cost little to administer. They can be constructed with a view to minimising bias. They do not require skilled interviewers. For the purposes of this preliminary research into students' instructional preferences, such benefits were appealing to the researchers.

Initially, the items of the draft questionnaire were evaluated by faculty members who taught in the EMBA and CMBA programs. Further, translation of the questionnaires in Chinese for the CMBA students was completed using the 'back translation' method as advocated by Brislin (1980: 431). Translation took note of the accuracy of the information as well as the cultural context. The subsequent draft questionnaire was then piloted on two groups of five MBA students in Hong Kong. One group was studying the EMBA and the other was studying the CMBA. The final iteration of the questionnaire was distributed in class during the intensive face-to-face teaching session to 90 students in the EMBA in Hong Kong and Singapore, and 150 students in the CMBA in Taiwan and Hong Kong. Anonymity was guaranteed by students not having to identify themselves in the questionnaire.

The questionnaire initially required the research participants to provide some demographic information including age, gender and work situation. This was followed by three questions. The first question sought the students' instructional preferences by asking them to number different preferences according to their perceived importance to the individual. The second question required participants to outline the learning sequence instructional preference. In the third question, participants had to identify the most useful communication mechanisms they experienced while studying for their MBA. Individual items were selected from the instructional preferences inventory (Eugene Sadler-Smith & Riding 1999). Additional items were derived from discussions with students and staff at the institutions referred to above.

Research validity and reliability was investigated using multiple data collection methods by multiple researcher interviews and questionnaires (Merriam and Associates 2002). Interviews were conducted by two members of the team of investigators leading two focus groups, one in Singapore (EMBA) and the other in Hong Kong (CMBA). Validity of the questionnaire data was established through the focus

groups which presented a holistic appreciation of student's learning preferences (Merriam and Associates 2002). Reliability was established using two academic staff who teaches in the offshore MBA to review the data collected from the interviews and questionnaire and review the consistency of the results.

RESULTS & DISCUSSION

In total, 236 questionnaires out of the 240 that were distributed were returned by students in the EMBA and CMBA programs. Eighty-eight were returned from students in the EMBA (61 from Singapore, 27 from Hong Kong) and 148 were returned from students in the CMBA (29 from Taiwan, 61 from Hong Kong, and 58 from Singapore).

Student Demographics

See Table 1 for student demographic data. The important things to note in terms of considerations for teaching and learning arrangements are that the MBA class is entirely comprised of adult learners who speak English as an additional language and whose prior educational histories are likely to have been in an educational environment shaped by Eastern values and Confucian virtues. Whilst this in no way infers that such an education environment is a 'deficit' model of education, it does suggest that lecturers will have to have strategies to assist students to develop skills related to adjust independent learning, discursive writing, and critical thinking. Further, lecturers will have to think of strategies to assist those EMBA students who use English as another language

TABLE 1: PROFILE OF SURVEY RESPONDENTS

Description	Details
Age range	22 to 63 years
Average age	36.4 years
Percentage of male students	67%
Percentage of students working full-time	65%
Percentage of students with Chinese ancestry	100%
Percentage of students with English as an additional language	100%

N = 236

Survey outcomes

Instructional learning preferences

Table 2 provides some insight into the students' preferred instructional style at the Presage stage (Biggs 1996). The researchers believe that students prefer the face-to-face learning style. These learners also moderately prefer learning in groups and clearly value learning online the least. If face-to-face is their preferred learning style what can be done to construct a learning environment to assist students so that they may be able to learn online and in groups (Product stage of Biggs' model)? The answer is for facilitators to structure 'the enabling conditions' (Biggs Kember and Leung 2001). In order that students are able to work autonomously and in collaboration with others (Product stage of Bigg's model) the teaching context at the Presage stage needs to be modified. Changes to the design aspects of the teaching model to include student initiation and training in self-directed and collaborative learning become essential.

Previous student educational experiences that favoured dependent rather than collaborative or autonomous learning methods (Eugene Sadler-Smith & Riding 1999) suggest that learners need to be initiated and trained in the new learning medium. Initially providing opportunities for students to become comfortable with the online learning environment is essential (Smith 2001). These opportunities not only serve in the initial learner acceptance to work with technology but serve to benefit users' later online learning (Salmon 2003). Further, as online requires autonomous learning an important step towards its adoption is the support and encouragement given to new learners by providing them with pre-training (Denis 2003). Consequently, as learner confidence develops, support systems can accommodate learning differences and encourage self-direction (Sadler-Smith, Down, & Lean 2000; Smith 2000; Salmon 2003).

It was also useful to find out that students did not prefer to work in groups so that support in this area can be provided. Collaboration between individuals working in groups is important as it encourages learning through discussion, reflection and exploration of different points of view. In particular students can develop skills and new ways of thinking (Mazen, Jones, & Sergenian 2000).

TABLE 2: MBA STUDENT PREFERENCES FOR INSTRUCTIONAL LEARNING STYLES

Instructional preference	Frequency of first choice (percentage of total)	Instructional preference style or type
Face-to-face	34.5%	Dependent learners
Reading	18.3%	Independent learners
Apply in the real world	16.1%	Learning by doing
Learning in groups	11.5%	Collaborative learners
Discuss with others	10%	Collaborative learners

Doing something in a group	7.5%	Collaborative learners
Online	2.2%	Independent learners

Table 3 offers useful information on the way MBA students preferred to communicate (part of Bigg's (1996) Presage stage). Communication with the lecturer took precedence over communication with other students. Specifically, communication with the lecturer in any form preceded communication with either colleagues or fellow students. Although this is not surprising as Chinese consider the teacher the most authoritative source of knowledge (Pratt, Kelly, & Wong 1999) with support learners can assume more active roles, in learning, becoming partners rather than remain passive recipients of knowledge. This suggests changes to the teaching methods, part of Brigg's (1996) Presage stage. Changing a dependence learning style to an independent and collaborative style implies that facilitators support learners and build an environment of trust. Supporting students' learning in teams can develop skills and thinking in new ways so that they may work together. Mazen et al (2000) suggests that this can be achieved working in partnership reducing the uncertainty and anxiety that is linked to learning. Transformation can follow only when both lecturers and students become vulnerable. Vulnerability is described as becoming genuine, willing to listen, being honest and open in relationships. What emerges is trust between learners who learn from each other.

Table 3: The preferred instructional style in communication for MBA students

Communication	Frequency of first choice	Instructional preference styles or types
Face-to-face with lecturer	58%	Dependent learners
Email with lecturer	17%	Dependent learners
Email with other students	9.8%	Independent/ collaborative learners
Web	9.8%	Independent learners
Face-to-face with colleagues	9.5%	Collaborative learners
Face-to-face with other students	5.9%	Collaborative learners

Table 4 presents the most used, second most used and least used instructional learning sequence for the transnational MBA students. These results are linked to the sequence that the current MBA program is delivered which raises some concerns as it differs from the student responses to the previous two questions. The sequence students are currently using presents collaborative learning as a major component of their learning experience when it has previously been shown not to be the students' preferred learning style. This suggests that students need to be supported in this area as

mentioned elsewhere if this is to continue being used as a major part of their experience in learning new material. Similarly, confidence in the use of online learning needs to be enhanced. Boyer, Maher and Kirkman (2006) recommend teaching strategies that facilitate online learning and result in deeper levels of learning. This suggests changes to the design aspects of the model for the courses taught in the MBA (Presage stage of Bigg's (1996) model). For example, Boyer and his associates suggest that a face-to-face orientation session before the start of a program works as a catalyst to relieve student stress and discomfort for students at the start of a program. Further, they suggest that ongoing assurance, support and providing needed resources (ie assistance with IT problems) by the course facilitator achieves learner collaboration and self-direction. This sheds light on the Biggs model at the Presage stage that facilitates learning outcomes. It illustrates the importance of not only methods of teaching within the teaching context but the teaching strategies and the overall design of the courses in the MBA.

TABLE 4: THE INSTRUCTIONAL LEARNING SEQUENCE USED BY TRANSNATIONAL MBA STUDENTS

Sequence	Most used sequence	Second most used sequence	Least used sequence
First choice	Reading 37.5%	Face-to-face 32%	Online 2.7%
Second choice	Discussing with others 23%	Face-to-face 17%	Online 8%
Third choice	Discussing with others 24.6%	Apply in the real world 17.2%	Online 7.9%
Fourth choice	Apply in the real world 23.3%	Learning in group 21%	Online 5.7%

CONCLUSION

The goal of this investigation was to help lecturers better understand their EMBA and CMBA students. Data on MBA students' learning preferences were gathered in order to identify likely areas of support that would be required by students to enhance their likelihood of success in the transnational MBA program.

Students' learning preference for face-to-face learning and in particular for communication with the lecturer suggested dependence on the lecturer for their learning and communication rather than with their colleagues or groups. Interestingly, whilst the preference for reading or learning independently was also reasonably high, the preference for online learning was minimal. Further, the sequence used to learn new course-related knowledge and skills, deviated from the MBA students' preference and was comparable to the sequence of the current course delivery.

This information about the students' learning preferences helps to inform lecturers and program

organisers. It helps lecturers support these students so that the MBA program learning objectives may be achieved. Support needs to be provided so that they can develop skills to be able to use and participate in the online environment autonomously and working collaboratively in groups. Unless the students are supported to acquire new skills so they feel comfortable working in these environments the possibility of doing well academically in the MBA program will most likely to be limited. This information also demands strategic thinking in making changes to the design aspects of the MBA program.

As a preliminary study, the information from the data gives a glimpse of the current MBA transnational student cohort and opens the door for future research. Qualitative data is needed to provide rich data that would enhance our understanding of student needs. Interviewing students in this program would strengthen lecturers' understanding of the support that would be needed to go forward in developing different delivery approaches to enhance student learning while achieving program learning outcomes.

Limitations of the research design relate to the cross-sectional survey design which raises questions about sampling, validity of measures and analyses and inferences (Sekaran 2000). However, the limitation of the survey design was addressed in another study using different data sources aimed at triangulation. Another area of limitation relates to the student sample. The study used students from one transnational MBA program thus making the results highly context specific. More research is necessary to verify the findings from this study to other transnational programs.

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APPENDIX

1 List the modes you use to learn1 being the most important. Only list the modes you use.
------Face to Face ------In Groups ------Online ------Reading
------Discussing with others------Doing something in a group------Applying in the real world

2 What is your sequence of learning? In other words, when learning something new which of the ways of learning (below) would you use first, second and so on? Start the sequence of learning, starting from 1. If you do not use an item, leave it blank.
_____ Face to Face _____ In Groups _____ Online _____ Reading
_____ Discussing with others _____ Doing something in a group
_____Applying in the real world

3 Identify the most essential element of the MBA which helps you achieve your goals
1. Suggestions for improvement by course facilitator
2. Interaction with other students   4. Interaction with lecturer
3. Receive materials on time   5. Other (please state)