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Learning action learning: Action learning in Australian MBA programmes

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Abstract

This paper looks at the 'learning' of action learning through an investigation into the use of action learning in Australian MBA programmes. It examines the theory and practice of action learning and uses a search of the literature to determine the key elements that define the method. It then explores the use of action learning in Australian MBA programmes searching for an increased understanding of how the method is taught and applied. The intent of the research was to reveal the essence of what the method involves, how action learning is being taught and how it is used for the education and development of managers.

The research involved interviewing Australian MBA directors and those involved with introducing action learning into MBA programmes. The results confirmed much of what had been reported in the literature and highlighted the variety of interpretations of what was reported as being 'action learning'. Analysis of the teaching methods used with action learning in MBA programmes provided insights into how action learning is being taught for providing managers with experience in working with a team and applying management skills.

Key Words: action learning, MBA programmes, education, managers

Introduction

Although it has yet to obtain widespread recognition as a method for developing managers and for bringing learning to the workplace, action learning is receiving increased attention from business (Boshyk 2000; Dotlich and Noel 1998; Harrison 1996; Horan 2007; Marquardt 2004; Parkes 1998) and business education (Abraham, Arnold and Oxenberry 1996; Adams 2001; Chan and Anderson 1994; Dilworth 1996; Jones-Evans, Williams and Deacon 2000; Mumford 1995; Revans 1971; Teare and O'Hern 2000; McGill and Beaty 2000; Pedler 2008). The affirmed benefits of action learning programmes include the development of an enquiring, democratic, networking form of organisation, and for individuals they include the development of self-confident people who can think clearly, who challenge and ask questions. These are people who seek responsibility and a sense of achievement, who listen to and value different perspectives, and who know the benefits of collaboration rather than confrontation (Weinstein 1995). The promises of action learning invite research into how and why the method is being used. This study investigates the use of action learning in Australian MBA programmes - insights into the reasons for its inclusion in the curriculum and its application for the education and development of managers.

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This investigation is important. The MBA qualification is recognised as an accepted course of study for those who would pursue a management career (Ainslie and Wills 1997; Baruch and Leeming 1996; Simpson 2000; Williams and Parker 2001). The MBA is not without its critics, however, and their concerns are important to this study because they challenge the traditional processes of education used at the postgraduate level of study. The criticisms indicate that an MBA programme may not be sufficient to provide the knowledge, skills and experience needed to develop an effective manager (Dwyer and Marshall 1993; Mintzberg 1989; Sinclair and Hintz 1991). Some of these commentators suggest that the most valuable kind of learning for those who would aspire to management positions or for those who are current managers looking to improve their practice, involves learning in the workplace on real issues of concern to the manager (Bourner and Frost 2000; McGill and Brockbank 2004; Smith 1989). Some of those who hold this view of management development, recommend action learning as the most appropriate method for obtaining this experiential learning, including within an MBA programme (Smith 1997; Williams 1996; Yoong and Gallupe 2001).

While the teaching and application of action learning principles is not confined to educational institutions, much of what has been written about the method has its origins within these learning environments (Bowerman and Peters 1999; Dealtry 1998; McGill and Brockbank 2004). Whereas the workplace is promoted as the ideal 'classroom' for action learning, there are a number of problems with action learning that is taught and assessed within the confines of an MBA programme (Robinson 2001). The difficulties of making action learning work, of taking action learning into the workplace and making each project relevant for the individual learner, are some of the issues addressed in this research, with case studies of MBA providers that claim to be using the action learning method. The importance of this study is in revealing the reasons for including action learning in the MBA curriculum, and rather than focus on curriculum development, the study looks at the practice of how managers can be developed in MBA programmes that use action learning. The insights from this investigation are then used to contribute to the further development of theory and practice.

This paper has four sections. The search for knowledge and understanding about action learning commences with the literature, by comparing the different definitions of action learning and then examines how the writers describe the inputs, activities and outputs involved with action learning programmes and projects. A study of British universities and colleges reveals examples of how action learning is being used in postgraduate management programmes for the education and development of managers. The mention of action learning programmes in Australian universities (Zuber-Skerrit 1995) prompted the initial question of how many Australian MBA providers were using action learning. The setting for the research is then established with a discussion of the reasons for selecting the MBA qualification as a suitable focus for the study of action learning in educating and developing managers. Next, the case study research method is explained, with consideration of the data collection processes that were applied to the research questions, and discussion of the findings about how and why action learning is being used in Australian MBA programmes. The report concludes with a review of the research questions and a proposed checklist of features to be used for defining action learning.

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Action learning

The theory of action learning can be explained as a process for the development of managers using a live issue or problem in the learner's workplace as the primary vehicle for learning (Pedler 1997). This is done with the help of a project team formed for the dual objectives of resolving the problem while at the same time developing the knowledge, skills and capability of all the team members (Zuber-Skerrit 2000). Action learners come together to work and to learn (Boshyk 2000), and the resolve to make learning a key part of the activity distinguishes an action learning team from other work projects where the primary focus is on achieving very specific business objectives (Hale and Margerison 2004). While project team members are generally selected on the merits of their knowledge, or expertise considered most relevant to achieving project task outputs, this is not necessarily the case with action learning projects where learning and development of team members is also an expected outcome (Keys 1994). Action learning teams benefit from inclusion of inexperienced people from different areas to tackle unfamiliar problems (Marquardt 2004). These participants are more likely to acknowledge their ignorance, and because they are prepared to ask questions, will be more open to learning and development. Due to the applied nature of this learning process, the action learning approach has been gaining increasing attention as a method that can be used for the development of managers (Gregory 1994; O'Hara, Webber and Reeve 1996).

In its simplest form, action learning was expressed by Revans (1998) in the learning equation:

$$L = P + Q$$

- P represents the acquisition of programmed knowledge. This is what is generally understood as expert knowledge or that which is acquired from books, lectures and experts. It is the kind of knowledge that has been developed and tested over time but is not always useful when answers are required for problems of today or tomorrow.
- Q represents questioning insight. It starts from the acknowledgment of ignorance with a particular issue and examines the possibilities from within the realms of existing knowledge and then explores what other alternatives may be available.
- L the combination of P and Q is action learning. It requires the learner to take responsibility for questioning current knowledge, assessing its relevance to the situation at hand and determining a suitable course of action.

Typically, action learning requires a group of people (called a 'set') coming together to work on an issue, problem or opportunity of common concern. In addition to resolving the problem, set members also plan to acquire new knowledge or learning from the process. Herein lies the power of the process: all the set members acknowledge their willingness to work at solving a real, live problem while learning and developing themselves at the same time (Revans 1998).

Features of action learning

An action learning programme can be distinguished by its structure, purpose, principles and processes. A frequency listing of these elements has been compiled

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from writers who define the features of an action learning programme and the results are shown in Table 1.

Table 1 Features of an action learning programme

| | Abraham (1996) | Bourner (2000) | Bowerman (1999) | Brockbank (1998) | Coughlan (2002) | Dilworth (1998) | Dotlich (1998) | Margerson (1988) | Marquardt (2004) | Marsick (1999) | Mumford (1997) | O'Hara (1997) | Passfield (1996) | Pedler (1992) | Peters (2003) | Revans (1982) | Smith (2001) | Spence (1998) | Weinstein (2001) | Zuber-Skerrit (2002) | Totals |
|--|----------------|----------------|-----------------|------------------|-----------------|-----------------|----------------|------------------|------------------|----------------|----------------|---------------|------------------|---------------|---------------|---------------|--------------|---------------|------------------|----------------------|--------|
| 1 Real problem (work project, strategic mandate) | X | X | X | X | X | X | X | X | X | X | X | X | X | X | X | X | X | X | X | X | 20 |
| 2 Set (action learning group) | X | | | X | X | | X | X | X | X | X | X | X | X | X | X | X | X | X | | 16 |
| 3 Process (learning with and from each other) | | X | X | X | | X | X | | X | X | X | X | X | X | X | | X | X | X | X | 15 |
| 4 Outputs (commitment to action) | X | X | | X | X | X | | X | X | | X | X | X | | X | X | X | | | | 13 |
| 5 Emphasis on learning | | | X | | X | X | X | | X | X | X | | X | X | | | X | | X | X | 12 |
| 6 Set adviser (facilitator or action learning coach) | X | | | | X | X | X | X | X | X | | | | | | | X | X | X | | 10 |
| 7 P and Q elements | | | X | | X | | X | | X | | | X | | | | X | X | | | | 7 |
| 8 Reflection | | | | | | X | X | | | X | | X | X | | X | | | | | X | 7 |
| 9 Program duration | | | | X | | | | | | | | | | | X | | X | | X | | 4 |
| 10 Report (presentation) | | | | | | | X | X | | | | | | | | X | X | | | | 4 |
| 11 Client (sponsor) | | | | | | | X | X | | | | | | | | | X | X | | | 4 |
| 12 Project with impact on the enterprise (ROI) | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | X | X | | | | | 2 |
| 13 Self managed learning | | X | X | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | 2 |
| 14 Ground rules | | | | X | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | 1 |

Features 1-8 from Table 1 are treated as critical for consideration as an action learning process and are described as the major features of action learning. The remaining features 9 to 14 provide insights for understanding of the structure, purpose and operation of action learning programmes, but are not considered in this study as essential elements for the achievement of successful work or learning outcomes.

The Master of Business Administration

From the first Master of Business Administration (MBA) qualification offered at Harvard University in 1908 (Mintzberg 2004) until now it could be argued that the value of the MBA has been established by its numbers. In America alone, 70 000 or more MBAs graduate each year (Carnall 1995). The reason for this popularity can be ascribed to the aims of MBA programmes in preparing graduates for managerial roles, helping them gain a better understanding of the industrial and business world and its needs, enriching their skills, and providing them with competencies relevant to their careers.

Criticisms. MBA programmes claim to cover a wide variety of subjects, but can generally be distilled down to a small number of disciplines including: Marketing, Ethics, Accounting, Organizational Behaviour, Quantitative Analysis, Operations, Finance, Economics and Strategy (Silbiger 1999). For a programme designed to develop the knowledge, skills and effectiveness of managers, one might well wonder where the subjects on ‘management’ are to be found (Sayles 1970), and this concern has been voiced by the critics of MBA programmes who say that they are too theoretical and lacking in work-related orientation. They claim that participants on MBA programmes do not have the opportunity to learn real management skills because the programmes have no focus on the acquisition of people skills, the ability to lead, to solve problems and produce results by working together with other people.

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The first MBA programmes were criticised as lacking in academic rigour and relevance to business. Bickerstaffe (1997, p. 2) refers to reports commissioned by the Ford Foundation and the Carnegie Corporation on the state of management education and business schools, indicating that, 'the schools [had been] filled with second-rate students taught by second-rate professors who did not understand their fields, did little research, and were out of touch with business'.

These criticisms confirmed the general opinion at the time, that business subjects taught in the MBA programme were not at the same level as other academic subjects and that the business schools could not be afforded the same credibility as the other university departments. These reports and this kind of thinking spurred the changes that led to improved levels of business and management research and the development of a new MBA model. This MBA offered a first year of core courses and a second year of electives, allowing for a degree of specialisation in the programme. This is essentially the standard structure of today's MBA.

In terms of content or curriculum, Talbot (1997) describes the traditional MBA as based on a model of management that embraces knowledge and skills in the three areas of strategy, functional management and management skills. These areas align with the traditional big business or corporate organisation model and, not surprisingly, the content of the MBA shows a focus on management as an organisational function as opposed to the development of individuals as managers. The primary task of management has been defined as decision making and, by reducing this to the even narrower dimension of analysis, the traditional MBA has become highly academic (Mintzberg 2004). It has an emphasis on the analytic and numeric skills required in subjects such as economics and finance and has been criticised as an inadequate approach for the education of managers.

Despite the widespread acceptance of the MBA as a de-facto standard for management qualification, there are still reservations about an MBA course being able to prepare and develop a manager for their role as a manager. Many criticisms have been expressed about the adequacy of MBA programmes and a list of the shortcomings identified by management writers appears in Table 2.

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Table 2 Criticism of MBAs

| <u>Criticism of MBAs</u> | Ansle (1997) | Anderson (1998) | Barry (1996) | Carnall (1995) | Cudd (1995) | Dilworth (1996) | Hicks (1996) | Holman (2000) | Hubbard (1990) | Kable (1989) | Kretovics (1999) | Lamond (1995) | Lataif (1992) | Louw (2001) | McCracken | Milton-Smith (1991) | Mintzberg (1988) | Neelankavil (1994) | O'Hara (1996) | Peters (1998) | Raelin (1994) | Sargeant (1996) | Schaafsma (1997b) | Schatz (1997) | Schmoller (1994) | Shipper (1999) | Snow (1995) | Talbot (1997) | Vinten (2000) | Zuber-Skerritt (1995) | No of references | | | |
|---|--------------|-----------------|--------------|----------------|-------------|-----------------|--------------|---------------|----------------|--------------|------------------|---------------|---------------|-------------|-----------|---------------------|------------------|--------------------|---------------|---------------|---------------|-----------------|-------------------|---------------|------------------|----------------|-------------|---------------|---------------|-----------------------|------------------|----|---|---|
| Too theoretical | X | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | 12 | | |
| Insufficient work-related orientation | | X | | X | X | X | X | X | X | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | 11 | | |
| Too much emphasis on financial and analytical skills | | | X | X | X | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | 9 | | |
| MBA graduates distanced from human dimensions | | | | | | X | X | | | | | X | X | X | | | | | | | | X | X | | | | | | | | | 9 | | |
| Does not teach them to be managers | | | X | | | | | | X | X | X | X | | | | | X | | X | | | | | | | | | | | | | 8 | | |
| Unrelated to needs of the clients | | | | | | X | | | X | | | | | X | X | | | | | | X | | | | | | | | | | | 7 | | |
| Not enough focus on management skills (training) | | | X | X | | | | | | | | | | | | | X | | | | | | | X | X | | | | | | | 7 | | |
| No international focus | | | X | X | | | | | | | | | | | | X | X | | | | | | | | | X | | | | | | 6 | | |
| Not useful for developing ability to deal with problems | | | | X | | | | X | X | | | X | X | | | | | | | | | | | | | X | | | | | | | 6 | |
| Do not teach leadership or entrepreneurship | | | | | X | | | | | | | | | | | X | X | | X | | | | | | | | | | | | | | 5 | |
| Faculty have little business experience | | | X | | | | | | | | | | | | | X | X | | | X | | | | | | | | | | | | | 5 | |
| No involvement from industry or politics | | | X | X | | | | | | | | X | X | | | | | | | | | X | X | | | | | | | | | | | 5 |
| Overly dominated by academic subjects | X | | X | | | | | X | | | | X | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | 4 | |
| Do not teach importance of teamwork | | | | X | | | | | | | | | X | | | | X | | | | | | | X | | | | | | | | | 4 | |
| Not enough focus on learning to deal with change | | | X | X | | | | | | | | | | X | | | | | | | | | X | | | | | | | | | | 4 | |
| Based on "teaching" rather than "learning" | | | | | X | | | | | | | | | | | | X | | | | | | | | | | | | X | | | | 3 | |
| MBA graduates ill prepared to cope with diversity | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | X | | | | X | X | | | | | | | | | | | | 3 | |
| Irrelevant | | | X | | | | | | | | | | | | | | X | | | | | | | | | | | | X | | | | 3 | |
| Not enough focus on personal development | | | X | | | | | | | | | | | X | | | X | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | 3 | |
| No advantage over non-MBA graduates | | | | | | | | | | X | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | X | | | | | | | | 2 | |

Criticism in the literature about the MBA approach to education and development of managers revolves around the lack of relevance to the workplace. A common perception is that what MBA graduates learn cannot be readily applied to the work expected of managers.

Jayne (2003, p. 53) refers to Mintzberg's aversion to the use of MBAs for educating managers because he prefers learning from management in action as opposed to management in theory. His favored approach is for learning by reflection rather than by analysis and he argues that MBA programmes are not able to create managers. He warns that:

The MBA is really about business, which would be fine except that people leave these programmes thinking they've been trained to do management. I think every MBA should have a skull and crossbones stamped on their head and underneath should be written: 'not prepared to manage'.

Other criticisms more directly refer to perceived deficiencies in the MBA programme (Carnall 1995; Dilworth 1996; Hicks 1996; Holman 2000; Lamond 1995; Mintzberg 2004; Neelankavil 1994; Raelin 2006, Sargeant 1996; Schaafsma 1997; Zuber-Skerritt 1995). Common missing elements were the lack of business knowledge and relevance with:

- faculty members lacking in real-world business experience,
- subjects that 'cover' management by concealing the practices of management under the guise of strategy, analysis and decision-making rather than explaining practical skills needed to manage, and

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- many MBA programmes suffering from applying a classroom approach which is too theoretical and too distant from the practical knowledge, experience and skills required of managers.

Addressing the criticisms: action learning for management development

The criticisms leveled against MBA programmes (see Table 2) can be broadly summarised into three key areas:

1. MBAs are too theoretical and lacking in work-related orientation.
2. Participants on MBA programmes do not have the opportunity to learn real management skills.
3. MBA programmes have no focus on the acquisition of people skills, the ability to lead, to solve problems and produce results by working together with other people.

Each of these concerns is addressed in the action learning literature (Table 1). Essentially, the responses are:

- (1) A fundamental requirement of action learning is that the learning is centred on the need to find a solution to a real problem. While this does not exclude the use of appropriate management theories and models, it relies on the use of a work problem or issue that needs to be resolved through the interaction of a project team. The team recognises that both work and learning outcomes are required and this experiential approach to learning ensures that people learn about management work, while at work, with a real live work issue.
- (2) The action learning project has a manager or facilitator who must use management skills to resolve the problem or issue with their team. In many cases, the project will enable the manager to acquire new skills or develop existing competencies to new levels.
- (3) The facilitator is a key element of the action learning process and working with a team of people provides many opportunities for the person in this role to develop the human skills required of leaders and managers.

Perhaps the real criticism of MBA programmes hinges on how a management education process is expected to deliver management development outcomes. Some MBA programmes have addressed this problem by including action learning in their curriculum (Ainslie and Wills 1997; Dilworth 1996; Milton-Smith 1991; O'Hara, Webber and Reeve 1996; Peters and Smith 1998; Raelin 1994; Zuber-Skerrit 1995).

Action learning in MBA programmes

As a response to the criticisms leveled at the content, delivery and outcomes of MBA programmes, some of the critics noted in Table 2 suggest that MBA programmes should adopt a more experiential approach to the learning of management, by actually engaging in the practice of management. Many of these recommend that this can be achieved through the use of action learning in the MBA programme. An outspoken critic of the value of MBA programmes for developing managers, Mintzberg (1996, p.

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65) suggested, 'It is time to close down conventional MBA programmes. We should be developing real managers, not pretending to create them in the classroom.' Dilworth (1996, p. 46) suggested the use of action learning as a process for shifting the locus of learning from the classroom into the workplace. He examined the criticism against traditional learning approaches where:

Institutions of higher learning have tended to lose their way, producing individuals who are technologically literate and able to deal with intricate problem-solving models (e.g., MBA programmes) but essentially distanced from the human dimensions that must be taken into account.

This business of management learning is often seen as the domain of educational establishments and consequently the use of action learning has been resisted by many academic institutions that view their role as custodians and disseminators of knowledge. Some educators, however, have chosen to embrace the action learning concept. Lawson, Beaty, Bournier and O'Hara (1997, p. 226) described Master's level programmes that use action learning as a core philosophy and explain how:

The growth and development of action learning has been in line with changes in higher education towards a focus on capability as well as knowledge and a need to bring the worlds of employment and education closer together.

In turn, Bournier and Frost (2000, p. 19) described the inroads that action learning has made into higher education in UK business schools and university departments of management with research funded by the Department of Employment: 'by the end of the 1980s action learning was among the ten most used methods of management development identified out of ninety different methods and approaches to management development'. Talbot (1997) examined the use of both action learning and action research within MBA programmes. He places them alongside consultancy-based approaches as methods for bridging the divide between theory and practice. He provides two UK examples where action learning is a key element of the teaching and learning processes. Neither of these institutions is a University: the 'action learning' MBA at the International Management Centre (IMC), Buckingham and the 'self-managed learning MBA' run by the Roffey Park Management College.

In brief, action learning is now a widely used management development strategy and has been incorporated in a number of postgraduate management programmes in the UK, as shown in Table 3. These writers identify the advantages to be gained from incorporating action learning in a postgraduate management programme and in many of the articles they address the specific criticisms identified earlier in this paper.

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Table 3 British postgraduate management programmes using action learning

| AL programmes in the UK | Ainslie (1997) | Boshyk (2000) | Bourner (2000) | Bourner (1999) | Bowerman (2000) | Bunning (1994) | Catie (1987) | Chan & A (1994) | Deatry (1998) | Dilworth (1996) | Frank (1996b) | Howell (1994) | Inglis (1994) | Johnson (1998) | Jones-Evans (2000) | Kable (1989) | Keys (1994) | Lawson (1997) | Margerison (1990) | Margerison (1991) | McGill (2004) | Mumford (1995a) | Mumford (1995b) | O'Hara (1996) | Prince (2000) | Raelin (1997) | Robinson (2001) | Talbot (1997) | Wills (1996) | Zuber-Skerritt (2002) | No. of references | |
|------------------------------------|----------------|---------------|----------------|----------------|-----------------|----------------|--------------|-----------------|---------------|-----------------|---------------|---------------|---------------|----------------|--------------------|--------------|-------------|---------------|-------------------|-------------------|---------------|-----------------|-----------------|---------------|---------------|---------------|-----------------|---------------|--------------|-----------------------|-------------------|----|
| IMC, Buckingham | X | X | | | X | | X | | | | | X | X | | | X | X | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | 14 |
| Lancaster University | | X | | | | X | | | | | X | | | | | | | | | | | | | | X | X | | | | | | 5 |
| University of Brighton | | | X | X | | | | | | | X | | | | | | | | | | | | | X | | | X | | | | | 5 |
| University of Salford | | X | X | | | | | | | X | X | | | | | | | | | | | X | | | | | | | | | | 5 |
| City University | | | | X | | | | | | | | | | | | | | X | | | X | | | | | | | | | | | 3 |
| Roffey Park Management College | | | | X | | | | | | | X | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | X | | | | 3 |
| University of Surrey | X | | | | | | | X | X | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | 3 |
| Ashridge Management College | | | | | | | X | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | X | | | | | | | | | | 2 |
| Manchester Metropolitan University | | | | X | | | | | | | X | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | 2 |
| Nottingham Trent University | | | | | | | | | | | X | | | | | | | | | | | | | X | | | | | | | | 2 |
| University of Huddersfield | | | | | | | | | | | X | | X | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | 2 |
| Guildhall University | | | | | | | | | | | X | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | 1 |
| Henley Management College | | | | | | | X | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | 1 |
| Middlesex University | | | | | | | | | | | X | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | 1 |
| Northumbria University | | | | | | | | | | | X | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | 1 |
| South Bank University | | | | | | | | | | | X | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | 1 |
| University of Glamorgan | | | | | | | | | | | | | | X | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | 1 |
| University of Strathclyde | | | | | | | X | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | 1 |
| Wolverhampton University | | | | | | | | | | X | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | 1 |

The literature on MBA programmes and action learning thus far reviewed, has been largely based on reports from the UK and USA. An examination of the Australian situation is presented in the following section.

The MBA in Australia and its use of action learning

In Australia, the growth in numbers of MBA programmes has been quite dramatic and supports the claim that they are accepted as an important feature of management education. The ‘Good Universities Guide’ (Ashenden and Milligan 1999) shows that the first Australian MBA programme commenced in 1963. At the time of the Karpin report (1994) there were 38 MBAs being offered and this had increased to 47 different MBA programmes by the year 2000. In Australia, according to one survey, ‘every one of the country’s 43 universities offers an MBA programme’ (Lamond 1995, p. 60), and there are also a small number of private colleges, institutes and consortia that are accredited to deliver programmes leading to an MBA qualification.

Consider how action learning could be used in these MBA programmes. Schaafsma (1996) and Zuber-Skerritt (1995) both use information from data in the Karpin Report to suggest that the major criticism of the gap between knowing and doing can be bridged using the action learning approach to management development. Both authors refer to the survey results of Barraclough, Green, McDonnell, Paul, Wawn and Wood (1994) that describe the management development practices considered most effective by the participant groups. These are shown in Table 4. Schaafsma (1996) [University of Technology, Sydney] proposed that future managers should develop new skills through strategies of action learning in the workplace, whereas Zuber-Skerritt (1995) [Griffith University, Brisbane] suggested that action learning and action research were appropriate methods for the development of managers using educational approaches within MBA and doctoral programmes.

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Table 4 Most effective management development practices

| Ranking of management development practices | Percentage of Participants |
|--|-----------------------------------|
| 1. Job rotation | 53 |
| 2. External providers - including business schools | 50 |
| 3. Mentoring and coaching (on-the-job) | 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 |

Source: Barraclough et al. (1994).

In more detail, Schaafsma (1996) attacked the Karpin Report's emphasis on formal, educational programmes such as the MBA. He stated that Australian managers prefer the informal (on-the-job) approach to learning and suggested that the use of participative action learning programmes would be more effective in developing the learning organizations envisaged by the Karpin Task Force.

In turn, Zuber-Skerritt used the Barraclough (1994) report on action learning programmes to explain the advantages of action learning for the development of managers:

- 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.
- Many of these programmes are developed jointly by educational institutions and organisations, which allows a closer match between course content and the organisation's needs.
- Programs provide 'learning in action' since company assignments involve 'real-life, real value projects', rather than projects set up solely for the purpose of learning.

Zuber-Skerritt's (1995) endorsement of the action learning approach proposed an Executive MBA programme incorporating action learning, action research and a flexible delivery mode. This approach was designed with the intention of using practising, experienced managers to develop new learning organizations in the process of their obtaining a graduate management qualification.

Based on literature like these, this research sought to uncover whether action learning could be embraced more widely by the educational institutions in Australian MBA programmes. The following research questions were developed to guide the study:

RQ1. What is action learning?

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RQ2. How is action learning recognised?

RQ3. How is action learning used in Australian MBA programmes?

RQ4. Why is action learning used in Australian MBA programmes?

RQ5. What contributions to the theory and practice of action learning can be gained from a study of action learning in Australian MBA programmes?

Research methodology

Case studies are the preferred strategy when ‘how’ and ‘why’ questions are being posed, when the investigator has little control over events and when the focus is on a contemporary phenomenon within some real-life context (Yin 1994, p.1). With the first of these considerations, this research asks specific how and why questions about the use of action learning in Australian MBA programmes. With the second, there was no control over what happened with the use of action learning in any of the MBA programmes, and with the final consideration, the question of why to include action learning in MBA programmes is still topical because some of the institutions in the study were in the process of reviewing the merits of its inclusion in the MBA curriculum. One of these institutions had recently adopted action learning, and another had reviewed their programme and decided to reduce or eliminate the involvement of action learning in their MBA. In brief, all three of the factors for selection of the research method are applicable and confirm the case study method as being appropriate for this investigation. A discussion of the research plan and the methods of data collection and analysis are described in the following section.

Data collection procedures

A combination of interviews and surveys was used to obtain information about the action learning methods being applied within Australian MBA programmes. Four stages were used in the data collection process as shown in Table 5.

Table 5 Case research plan

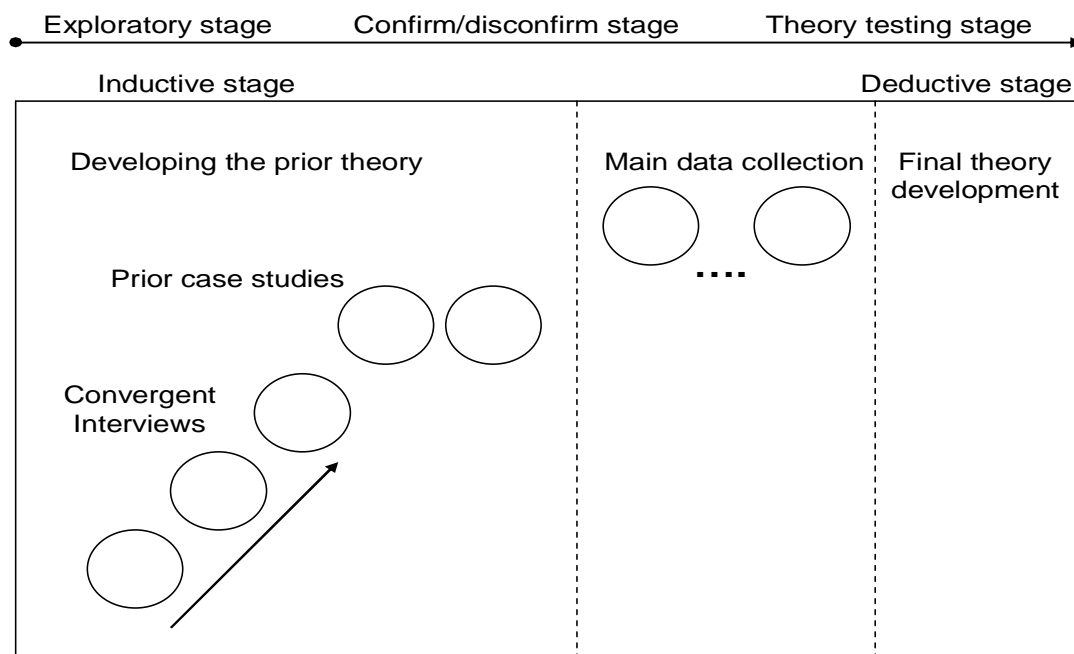
| Stage | Description of method | Purpose |
|--------------|--|---|
| 1 | General survey of all Australian MBA providers. | Identification of MBA providers using Action Learning in their MBA programmes. |
| 2 | Convergent interviews with research supervisor and 2 or 3 MBA providers. | Testing and refinement of the interview questions. |
| 3 | Survey a population sample of the MBA providers that claim to be using Action Learning as part of their MBA programme. | Obtaining data for identification and classification of the various Action Learning approaches being applied within MBA programmes. |
| 4 | In-depth interviews. | Selected MBA providers are interviewed for more detailed data on the key research issues relating to how and why Action Learning is being applied within Australian MBA programmes. |

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In **Stage 1**, the reasons for using action learning in MBA programmes were obtained from the literature and from observation of how action learning was applied within an Adelaide based MBA programme. The first problem to be resolved was to determine how many Australian MBA providers there were and how many of these were using action learning. A number of Internet sites provide ratings on MBA programmes in Australia. These provide a survey of the MBA landscape in Australia, but Hobson's *Good Universities Guide* (Ashenden and Milligan 1999) was a more useful and authoritative resource. It listed all Australian MBA programmes and provided telephone and email contact details that were used for making initial contacts with the providers. Initially, telephone calls were made to the nominated contacts for the MBA programmes. With the institutions where this method proved unsuccessful, and email addresses were available, messages were sent asking for a suitable contact. If these were unable to unearth a representative for the MBA provider, a contact was sought using phone numbers and email addresses provided on the Internet site of the organisation. A survey was conducted using these contacts, and the questions were sent by email asking if action learning was included in the MBA curriculum.

Stage 2 started shortly after the process of identifying MBA providers had commenced. A list of questions was prepared and then tested with two or three people. These were the pilot or convergent interviews (Perry 1998) and used in the formative stages of the research to ensure that the right kinds of questions were being asked to generate the required information. The case interview process is shown in Figure 1. Prior case studies from the literature provided the knowledge base to help design the survey questions. Then the initial convergent interviews were used to refine the questions and ensure that the information generated from later interviews would yield the necessary data for the investigation (the final form of the interview questions is shown in Appendix 1).

Figure 1 **Case interview process**



Source: adapted from Perry (1998).

Interviews

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Stage 3 was the main data collection phase where the case study interviews were conducted with representatives that indicated they were using action learning in their MBA programmes. Including the formative convergent interviews, there were a total of fifteen interviews conducted. These were from twelve different MBA providers with coverage across almost all Australian states and territories, from both large and small organisations with private institutes, colleges, business schools and universities represented. This variety and distribution of MBA providers provided for both literal and theoretical replication with collection of the data (Yin 1994).

The survey interviews were designed as in-depth interviews, and can be described as ‘a conversation with a purpose’ (Kahn and Cannell 1957, p. 149). That is, the interviews were conversations aimed at exploring the merits of using action learning on MBA programmes. Each person being interviewed was encouraged to present their particular perspectives, even though a fair degree of structure was provided with a set of questions used to frame and guide the discussion. One advantage of using interviews was the ability to quickly gather large amounts of data, but the process also has some limitations (Marshall and Rossman 1995). These shortcomings include the difficulty of gaining access to the required people, possible reluctance of the person being interviewed to provide all the information they have on the subject and a lack of understanding of the answers by the interviewer. A skilful interviewer, who is a good listener and is experienced with personal interactions, can elicit large amounts of data by carefully framing the questions and probing for more detail. Such skills are essential in the specialised case of elite interviewing (Marshall and Rossman 1995) of influential, prominent or well-informed people, selected on the basis of their expertise in areas relevant to the research.

The interviews were conducted with professors, deans, a chief executive officer, general managers, directors and department heads; all were senior people in academia and business, with a broad perspective of their environments and wide-ranging knowledge and experience. These elites were top level decision makers and the custodians of organisational memory who were able to provide insights into their organisations’ policies, history and future plans. This prospect for gathering rich, quality information, also presented a number of potential problems.

After identifying these key people, the next step was gaining access. These were busy people, often travelling overseas and always with heavy demands on their time. A number of strategies had to be developed to make initial contact, to convince them of the value of contributing an hour or so for an interview and then arranging a mutually convenient time in which to conduct the interview. This required using either a referral from someone they knew, a good, sound, logical, well-reasoned and presented argument for their involvement, or more desperate appeals to their good nature, the fellowship of the community of scholars or their contribution to research. Fortunately, this combination of tactics proved sufficient to obtain commitment from the elite representatives of all the MBA providers identified in the survey as using action learning in their programmes.

Stage 4 represented the theory testing stage where deductive processes were applied in the data analysis to determine the reasons for action learning being used in MBA programmes.

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Analysis of the data

In this study, a content analysis approach was applied, firstly with a review to determine common features observed in MBA programmes, and then with the identification and ordering of teaching elements applied within Australian MBA programmes. A general approach to analysis was used in this study (1994) with three major operations:

- Description, or the responses to “what’s going on here?” questions that may include survey respondents’ answers
- Analysis, providing possible answers to the “why” questions by showing how things work by identifying key factors and relationships, and
- Interpretation, where the researcher attempts to make sense of the meanings and context, with suggestions about, “What’s to be made of it all?”

This description, analysis and interpretation approach is used in presenting the findings of the research.

How action learning is applied in MBA programmes. There were three levels of action learning observed within Australian MBA programmes, according to how much of the curriculum employs action learning methods or how many subjects are taught in this manner: (1) all subjects; (2) some subjects; or (3) one or two dedicated action learning subjects.

In the first category of MBA programmes, action learning is embedded in all of the courses and subjects and there is a strong focus on learning and reflection on learning. Although none of these programmes was called an ‘Action Learning MBA’ or conferred a qualification such as MBA (Action Learning), these were programmes with a strong commitment to using the action learning method, often with an integrated or holistic approach to the education and development of managers.

In the second category of MBA programmes, where not all subjects applied the action learning method, some subjects such as Finance or Economics were seen as not being appropriate for the use of action learning, but more often they were excluded for the simple, pragmatic reason that not all facilitators understood or were capable of using action learning with their subject. From the way action learning was described with these programmes, it may be that a more liberal definition had been applied to include various kinds of projects and experiential learning bundled together under the term ‘action learning’.

In the final category, where only one or two subjects were applied to the use of action learning, the subjects were described as action learning subjects, and included the name ‘Action Learning’ in the title or were known as a work project that specifically identified action learning or action research as the method being used in the subject. Compared with the other categories that claimed extensive use of action learning, these programmes were more likely to include specific action learning texts, readings and authors. They included a greater number of features identified with action learning processes and involved projects designed to involve students in the workings of an action learning set with an emphasis on action, reflection and learning.

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The extent of action learning used in these MBA programmes was very much influenced by the 'champions' of action learning within the university, institute or college. These champions could be described as 'true believers' in action learning, a status derived from their own experiences with researching and applying the action learning method and their belief in the proven ability of the action learning method to achieve both work and learning outcomes. These supporters are essential for the introduction of action learning to an MBA programme. This was evidenced by the example of an action learning course that cleared the various hurdles for academic approval and yet still failed to be implemented when a champion left the university.

There were programmes that had promoted action learning as a feature of their MBA for more than ten years and there was one case where the action learning subjects were no longer viewed as relevant. In this instance, the popularity or support for a subject such as action learning seemed to rest as much on well reasoned argument and logic as it did on the whims of a new Head of School or Vice-Chancellor. There were newer MBA programmes that endorsed and promoted the use of action learning and others where the method was being applied more subtly, without open acknowledgement as being action learning. In one such instance, the method had to prove its value before it could be accepted by the more conservative elements in the graduate business school.

Action learning was identified as being used by all those that were interviewed and yet there were no two programmes offered by the 12 MBA providers that could be considered the same. The closest matches were programmes with one or two specific action learning subjects. In these instances, there was a certain amount of action learning theory (P) to be learnt, the design of an action learning project, the implementation of that project and a summary reflective report (describing the Q and L) to be produced at its conclusion.

The greater diversity of applications within the other institutions can be viewed as evidence of the flexible nature of action learning or possibly a result of the lack of a commonly accepted definition for action learning. The question of how to define or describe action learning is a persistent theme (RQ2 How is Action Learning recognised?) that recurred throughout this study of action learning.

Defining action learning. The lowest common denominators defining action learning within Australian MBA programmes appear to be experiential learning and projects. Revans' learning equation was recognised in most of the programmes and the different combinations of P and Q elements lead to the inclusion of knowledge, action and reflection. Some working definitions and explanations were offered in the interviews, including:

- Action learning in its simplest form is learning by doing.
- Action learning is based on reflecting in action and reflection on action.
- Action learning involves doing, reflecting and using that insight for the next step.
- Action learning is an experiential and experimental model of learning for applying concepts to a business or activity.
- Action learning requires reflection on knowledge and action based on that reflection.

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- The key elements of action learning are experiential learning, critical reflection and a focus on what is not known.

Many of the aspects of action learning, as defined in the literature, appear in these descriptions of action learning, and the form of the final statement is one that might be used in an eclectic approach to building a workable definition from both the literature and the research. The gathering and testing of major elements observed in the literature and through the application of action learning, is proposed as a method that could be used in the analysis of this research to build a working definition of action learning. This definition should be developed from a sound conceptual framework and tested against the research results gathered from planning, action, observation and reflection. It should be capable of providing guidance for those who would want to use the action learning method for achieving work and learning outcomes. The definition is provided later in this paper using a model that balances the action and learning components.

Perhaps a definition of action learning has little merit unless one can establish the value of using the method. This theme was investigated as the fourth research question (RQ4. Why is action learning used in Australian MBA programmes?).

Why action learning is used in the MBA programme. The literature provides indications that the action learning method can be used to redress some of the deficiencies in MBA programmes which are perceived to lack relevance for the workplace. The research results consistently confirmed this idea, with action learning examples to demonstrate the practical value of working together in teams to tackle 'messy' management problems. It seems to be commonly agreed that when action learning is taken out of the MBA environment and applied to real workplace problems, the promises of workplace learning can be achieved. Learning becomes more credible when it can be used in a practical manner to improve work and learning outcomes. It extends the promises of management education into the realms of management development through the encouragement of experiential learning processes that ignite the learning power of asking insightful questions, of taking action to generate new ideas and capturing the observations and reflection for the acquisition of knowledge and personal learning.

The flexibility of action learning and its ability to be used in a wide range of situations made it attractive for programme designers to build into an MBA programme a real workplace project capable of being used for teaching a range of management concepts with learning from the experience of practical application. This approach appeals to the adult learner and their employer when the results of the education can be observed in the workplace. MBA programmes are also designed with action learning as a response to industry needs and concerns for developing managers and delivering on the promises of workplace learning.

Action learning looks different from other teaching, enquiry and research methods employed in postgraduate studies and yet it employs simple processes such as asking questions and reflecting on the responses. Decisions and actions are shaped with the intention of providing insights and clarity about the problems or opportunities at hand and knowledge is obtained as these are put into action. This knowledge may be generated during the action and will often be generated through observation and reflection after the event. The action learning processes of planning, action,

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observation and reflection are not new or unusual but they are unlikely to appear in MBA programmes unless they are included as part of an action learning project.

Action learning then becomes a way of distinguishing between different MBA programmes. In some cases this is promoted for marketing advantages and with some programmes the process is just included in the mix of teaching and learning methods. All of those who were interviewed in the research strongly supported the action learning method. This applied in the school where action learning was considered by the new management structure as being past its 'use by' date and in two of the universities where action learning had to be introduced under another name before it was able to gain wider acceptance and inclusion in the curriculum.

For action learning to be included in an MBA programme, it needs supporters and promoters who understand the method, have had experience with its use and are able to demonstrate its advantages for the education and development of managers. This research found that the MBA programme directors, managers and lecturers gained their understanding and appreciation of action learning from having used it in business, consultancy and research.

Understanding and applying action learning. An understanding of how the 12 MBA providers taught action learning can be obtained by considering the teaching methods used in the MBA programmes. Table 7 is derived from the research interview responses and lists the specific action learning teaching elements used in an MBA, according to their reported frequency of occurrence.

Table 7 Teaching elements used in the MBA programme

| Teaching Elements | Case Studies | | | | | | | | | | | | Total |
|--|--------------|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|----|----|----|-------|
| | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 | 8 | 9 | 10 | 11 | 12 | |
| Action learning projects | X | X | X | X | X | X | X | X | X | X | X | X | 12 |
| Integrated process with other MBA subjects | X | | X | X | | X | X | X | X | X | | X | 9 |
| Focus on learning and reflection on learning | | X | X | | X | X | X | X | | | X | X | 9 |
| Working in AL sets | | X | X | X | | | X | X | X | X | X | | 8 |
| Exercises or projects in own workplace | X | X | X | X | | | X | X | X | | X | | 8 |
| Assignments | | X | X | X | X | | X | | X | | X | X | 8 |
| Specific action learning subjects | | X | X | X | | | X | | | X | X | X | 7 |
| Recommended texts | | X | X | X | | | | X | X | | X | X | 7 |
| Relevant journal articles | | X | X | X | | | X | | X | X | X | | 7 |
| A major action learning project | | | X | X | | X | X | | | | X | X | 6 |
| Group work | | | X | | X | X | | X | | X | | X | 6 |
| Study Guides | | X | X | X | | | | | | X | X | | 5 |
| Report on implementation of an AL project | | | X | X | | | X | | | | X | X | 5 |
| Case Studies | X | X | | | X | X | | | | | | | 4 |
| Lectures on AL | | X | X | | X | | | X | | | | | 4 |
| Groups do projects in a host organisation | | X | | | | X | | | | | | X | 3 |
| Learning log, diary, journal or reflection paper | | X | | | | | | | | X | | X | 3 |
| Project presentation | | | | | | | X | | X | | | X | 3 |
| Critique of the action learning literature | | | X | | X | | | | | X | | | 3 |
| An action research project | | | X | X | | | | | X | | | | 3 |
| Simulations | | X | | | | X | | | | | | | 2 |
| Facilitated discussion | | | X | | X | | | | | | | | 2 |
| Development of an action learning plan | | | X | | | | | | | | X | | 2 |
| Group report | | | | | | | | | | | | X | 1 |
| Live case study | | | | | X | | | | | | | | 1 |
| Dialogue groups of two or three | | | | | | | | | | X | | | 1 |
| Learning activities | | | | | | | | | | X | | | 1 |
| Online action learning sets | | | | X | | | | | | | | | 1 |

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Analysis of the results in Table 7 leads to the following observations:

- The action learning project is the only teaching element used in all of the MBA programmes. It would appear to be the one essential element that must appear in an action learning programme.
- Four programmes have been designed with action learning projects that do not use action learning sets. This indicates that alternative approaches have been used in the design and operation of action learning projects.
- Although some programmes do not have action learning sets, working in sets or groups is identified as an important feature in most of the programmes.
- In a similar manner, four of the programmes include projects that are not based in a real workplace environment. This is supported by examples where case studies, simulations and consultancy projects are used; however none of these are considered in the literature to be consistent with action learning.
- Seven programmes have specific action learning subjects and there are nine programmes that use action learning methods in the teaching of other MBA subjects.
- Learning and reflection on learning feature prominently in the MBA programmes, with three programmes requiring the use of learning journals to encourage the observation and recording of individual learning experiences.
- Planning has not been highlighted as an important element of the action learning process, but in two of the programmes the preparation of an action learning plan is a required element.
- Project reports are prepared or presented in almost half of the cases. In two instances, this was associated with action research projects.
- Other teaching and assessment methods used for action learning included assignments, texts and journal articles, study guides, lectures, literature critiques, facilitated discussion and dialogue groups.

From this examination of the teaching methods used in the MBA programmes, it can be seen that a similar richness and diversity of techniques is applied in teaching the theory of action learning as exists in the practice or implementation of the method. This result confirms an understanding of the flexible nature of action learning as a method that can be made to fit within an academic environment in the pursuit of work and learning outcomes.

Conclusion

The investigation into the use of action learning in Australian MBA programmes was prompted by the results reported in the literature for the education and development of managers in overseas MBA programmes. There were five research questions that guided the course of the case study research.

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RQ1. What is action learning?

RQ2. How is action learning recognised?

Because there is no generally agreed definition of action learning, a study of the action learning literature was used to identify eight elements that were most commonly observed with action learning. It was proposed that these elements could be used as a checklist to help distinguish action learning from other education and development activities. This list could also be used to provide guidance for those planning to implement action learning projects.

RQ3. How is action learning used in Australian MBA programmes?

All twelve Australian institutions identified in this study as using action learning in their MBA programmes provided details of the teaching methods, activities and assessments they employed to help students learn and apply action learning. A complete list of these elements is shown in Table 7, with the one common feature being the use of an action learning project.

RQ4. Why is action learning used in Australian MBA programmes?

An action learning project was considered fundamental to the learning of action learning because it requires the application of management knowledge and skills in resolving real work problems. MBA programmes use action learning to provide students with practical experience in dealing with 'messy' management problems. Such programmes can better respond to the criticism that students are not properly prepared for the challenges of management.

RQ5. What contributions to the theory and practice of action learning can be gained from a study of action learning in Australian MBA programmes?

The intent of the study was to confirm the extent and nature of action learning being used in Australian MBAs. From the possible 47 MBA programmes, 12 (25%) were identified as using action learning and responded to being reviewed in this study. Many different teaching approaches were identified and these provide suggestions that can be applied to the learning of action learning.

A new approach was proposed for defining action learning using a checklist of eight major features. These features involve the interplay of practice and theory for action and learning outcomes. The checklist shown in Table 8 includes an explanation of each feature from the literature and observations from the research with Australian MBA providers.

In summary, action learning has been identified in many Australian MBA programs and a variety of approaches with the learning of action learning has been observed with the intent of helping students better understand and apply the lessons of management.

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Table 8 **The eight major features of action learning**

| Action Learning Feature | Description |
|-----------------------------|--|
| Real Problem | <p>Research Observations</p> <p>Action learning involves a group of people working together on a real work problem.</p> <p>Only those cases that incorporated a real work problem or issue in their projects could be considered to be using action learning. This is a critical, defining factor of action learning.</p> |
| Action Learning Set | <p>Action learning is a group process involving a small work team of four to eight people.</p> <p>The action learning set is like a small project team that works and learns together.</p> |
| Process | <p>The process of action learning requires planning, action, observation and reflection in a cycle that encourages learning from the use of all these elements by all the set members.</p> <p>Action learning is process-based learning achieved through project-based work.</p> |
| Action Outputs | <p>Both action and learning are required outputs from the action learning activities with the intent of achieving meaningful outcomes for the business or organisation sponsoring the action learning.</p> <p>Outputs are connected to the requirement for work results being achieved with a real problem. Without real action directed at achieving results, there is no real action learning.</p> |
| Emphasis on Learning | <p>If learning is not a planned, measured and achieved outcome, the activity should not be called an action learning project.</p> <p>All of the cases studies demonstrated a strong emphasis on the learning.</p> |
| Set Adviser | <p>Also termed a learning coach or a facilitator, the set adviser plays an important role in ensuring the set members use the action learning processes to achieve work and learning outcomes.</p> <p>Not all action learning projects require the use of a facilitator, but for learning action learning in an MBA programme, better outcomes are achieved with the use of a set adviser or facilitator.</p> |
| P and Q Elements | <p>The learning equation elements of Programmed Knowledge (P) and Questioning Insight (Q) underpin the learning processes used in action learning projects</p> <p>The combination of knowledge (P) and questions (Q) was explicitly referred to in all but two of the case studies.</p> |
| Reflection | <p>Reflection is the process that brings action and thinking together so that individuals in an action learning project are able to learn from the activities undertaken by the team.</p> <p>Reflection was mentioned as an important element of the action learning process in all but one of the case studies.</p> |

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Appendix A ~ INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

1. Why was Action Learning identified for inclusion in the MBA programme?
2. Tell me the story of how Action Learning was introduced and accepted as part of the MBA.
What were the critical incidents and your impressions?
3. How do you describe Action Learning?
Do you base Action Learning on any particular definition or 'school of thought'?
If so, what?
4. How is Action Learning incorporated into the MBA programme?
5. Describe how Action Learning is used.
Teaching methods
Facilitation processes
Projects and Assignments
Assessments
Texts and literature sources
6. Describe your experience with Action Learning.
(Tell me the story of your experience)
7. What evidence is there of the value of using Action Learning as a learning method for postgraduate students?
8. What do you perceive as being the shortcomings of Action Learning as a teaching and learning method?
9. What is the value of Action Learning for the development of managers?
10. Is there anything else you could tell me about the incorporation of Action Learning into the MBA curriculum and the overall value of its influence on the professional development of managers in the programme?