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The resilience of the MBA in emerging economies: student motivations for wanting an MBA in China and the United Arab Emirates

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Abstract

In recent years, domestic demand for MBAs has fallen in most major Western markets but has increased or remained stable in emerging economies such as China and the United Arab Emirates (UAE), which are the two countries globally that host the largest numbers of international branch campuses. Thus, this research aimed to discover why students in China and the UAE still want an MBA. A survey questionnaire was completed by a total of 354 MBA students, at two universities in China and two universities in the UAE. Some of the results were surprising and unexpected. For example, recognition, prestige and networking – all key features in Chinese and Emirati societies – were found *not* to be key motivators for wanting an MBA. Instead, the desire to acquire knowledge and skills was the strongest motivator among respondents, accounting for 32.4 per cent of variance. This was followed by reasons associated with intrinsic benefits. The findings have implications for institutional strategy, curriculum design, programme delivery and the marketing of programmes.

Keywords: management education; Master of Business Administration; student decision-making; careers; higher education marketing

Introduction

The Master of Business Administration (MBA) remains the flagship programme of most business schools. Throughout the second half of the twentieth century, MBA enrolments grew dramatically, particularly in North America, Western Europe and Australia. Universities responded by introducing a range of programmes, with various specialisms, modes of delivery, accreditations and entry requirements (Wilkins & Huisman, 2012). Tuition fees were increased to the extent that they were often much higher than those of specialist master degrees in the broader business management field. University managements welcomed the revenue that the MBA brought and many institutions treated the programme as a ‘cash cow’. The MBA also helped bring higher education institutions closer to businesses, which often resulted in research partnerships for innovation and demand for consultancy services. As a result, MBA programmes have become a prevalent component of business schools around the world (Blass & Weight, 2005). By the end of the twentieth century, the popularity of the MBA had spread to all corners of the globe, but particularly in Eastern and South Eastern Asia, as well as the Middle East (Datar et al., 2011; CAA, 2017; Li-Hua & Lu, 2014).

The MBA was originally positioned as an elite qualification for senior managers, who would use the knowledge and skills they gained in the programme to enhance organisational (and national) performance (Kedia & Harveston, 2002; Wilkins & Huisman, 2012). Most programmes required participants to hold an undergraduate degree and to have several years of relevant work

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experience. Despite these prerequisites for entry into programmes, the demand for places generally far exceeded the number of places available. This enabled institutions to expand existing programmes, introduce new programmes and increase tuition fees.

By the late 1990s, the rapid and dramatic increase in student enrolments resulted in the qualification losing its exclusivity, which, in practice, meant that it no longer enabled candidates with MBAs to differentiate themselves in the labour market (Blass & Weight, 2005). Furthermore, despite the global popularity of the MBA among students until the start of new millennium, the qualification has always received criticism of some kind during its evolution. These criticisms have changed in nature over time, but they have increasingly encouraged employers to question the value of an MBA (Pfeffer & Fong, 2002). The market situation nowadays is that in North America and Western Europe, as well as in Australia, the supply of MBA places considerably exceeds the domestic demand (Blass & Weight, 2005).

In recent years, middle and lower ranking MBA providers in North America and Western Europe have increasingly struggled to achieve student enrolment targets. In some cases, this has even led to programme closures. For example, in 1984, the University of Plymouth's MBA was ranked among the top 20 in the United Kingdom (Wilkins & Huisman, 2012). However, in 2013, the programme had only two registered students, and in 2014 the programme was withdrawn, leaving the University of Plymouth with no MBA. Between 2009 and 2015, enrolments in MBA programmes in the United States fell by 11 per cent (Leiber, 2016), and, in Australia, MBA enrolments fell by a third (around 10,000 students) between 2005 and 2013 (Hare, 2013).

Institutions have responded by reducing tuition fees (by offering more financial aid and scholarships), improving career services, introducing loans that don't require guarantors and increasing their efforts to recruit international students (Gee, 2018; Leiber, 2016). Since 2009, business schools in the United States have been trying to prevent the reduction in total MBA enrolments by recruiting larger numbers of international students, mainly from China, South East Asia and the Middle East (Leiber, 2016). In these emerging economies, demand for the MBA is still healthy and there are no signs that the qualification's popularity will fall in the next few years.

The purpose of this research is to investigate the reasons for the MBA's continued popularity in emerging economies at the same time it is struggles to recruit domestic students in many major Western countries. The data for the study came from MBA students in China and the United Arab Emirates (UAE). Many Western universities are turning to these two countries in particular, in order to recruit international students or to establish a physical presence through international branch campuses or partnership ventures (Bradford et al., 2017). An international branch campus may be defined as 'an entity that is owned, at least in part, by a foreign education provider; operated in the name of the foreign education provider; engages in at least some face-to-face teaching; and provides access to an entire academic programme that leads to a credential awarded by the foreign education provider' (C-BERT, 2017). In fact, China and the UAE are the two countries globally that host the largest numbers of international branch campuses, and the MBA is the most popular graduate programme offered at these campuses (OBHE/C-BERT, 2016).

Thus, China and the UAE were selected as the survey countries in this study because Western-style MBAs are popular in these countries; both countries are higher education hubs in their respective regions of East Asia and the Middle East; and both countries also supply large numbers of international students to Western universities (AEI, 2006; Bradford et al., 2017; Flew, 2006; Knight, 2014). Thus, this study investigates what motivates students in China and the UAE to enrol in MBA programmes, as this provides valuable market intelligence for institutions in identifying determinants of success in what has become a crowded marketplace (Ivy & Naude, 2004).

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The following two sections provide an overview of the possible benefits and criticisms of the MBA for graduates and organisations. After this, we examine the popularity of the MBA in China and the UAE, and discuss some of the issues related to MBA delivery in these countries. Then, we explain our method, before presenting our results. We conclude with a discussion that analyses the key reasons why students want an MBA in emerging economies such as China and the UAE. The research provides a valuable insight into MBA student motivators, which will be of interest and value to researchers, education policy makers, programme managers and institutional marketers.

Benefits and value of the MBA

According to human capital theory (Becker, 1964), MBA programmes may generate three distinct types of human capital for graduates: *intellectual capital* (the knowledge acquired), *social capital* (e.g. social contact and networking), and *symbolic or cultural capital* (the value that society places on symbols of status and prestige). To these, *inner value capital* (Baruch, Bell, & Gray, 2005) and *market value capital* (Coleman, 1990) may be added.

The intellectual capital that is derived from an MBA is the product of the historical and cultural development of the Western system of management education, which originated in the United States (Vaara & Faÿ, 2011). MBA programmes provide students with a core set of knowledge, skills and competences that are remarkably similar in business schools worldwide (Baruch, 2009). Students gain awareness and knowledge about relevant management theories and the latest management ideas and techniques. The intellectual capital gained from an MBA is generally regarded as legitimate and valuable among key stakeholders such as employers and professional associations, and therefore this form of capital delivers both use and exchange value for graduates (Wilkins, 2002). The knowledge and skills gained enable the individual to perform better in their job (use value), which may increase self-esteem and job satisfaction. The individual may also be able to change their job, employer or career, or gain promotion and/or higher financial reward (exchange value), either through enhanced work performance or simply for gaining the new knowledge and skills (Shimizu & Higuchi, 2009). The improved remuneration that a graduate receives from holding an MBA may be regarded as market value capital.

The social capital derived from an MBA can benefit both organisations and individuals. Nohria and Eccles (1992) claim that networking outside the organisation can contribute to a firm's success. For the individual, an MBA can generate personal contacts and networking opportunities. Baruch and Leeming (2001) found that networking was the pre-enrolment aim of MBA students that was most fulfilled upon graduation. Mixing with university staff and fellow students that are bright, able and competitive can be inspiring and motivating, improving the student's commitment, academic achievement and satisfaction (Wilkins et al., 2016). Apart from the career and employment benefits, some students may simply enjoy meeting and socialising with fellow students in class and outside the university.

An MBA can generate symbolic or cultural capital for graduates because it helps others to recognise the status and achievement of an individual. Social capital is, of course, greatest when the MBA is achieved at a top-ranked school (Baruch, 2009; Vaara & Faÿ, 2011). For this reason, university reputation is often a key factor influencing the student's choice of institution (Blackburn, 2011). The professionalisation of industries such as management consultancy and investment banking has made an MBA essential for an individual to gain respect and legitimacy in their organisational field (Pfeffer & Fong, 2002). The recognition and admiration received from work colleagues and business contacts can be a source of satisfaction and self-esteem for individuals. The sense of self-esteem, self-efficacy and confidence that results from undertaking an MBA programme may be regarded as inner-value capital (Baruch, 2009).

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This section has discussed the main benefits for individuals of undertaking an MBA. The concept of human capital discussed above provided the framework for development of our survey questionnaire.

Criticisms of the MBA

In the 1950s, MBAs were widely criticised for lacking a strong scientific foundation (Pfeffer & Fong, 2002). Then, in the United States in particular, business schools responded by enthusiastically promoting and applying a scientific paradigm that focused on quantitative methods and testable models (Bailey & Ford, 1996). In doing this, business schools were able to improve the status and reputation of management research, but this approach did not necessarily meet the practical needs of business. Slater and Dixon-Fowler (2010) observe that the MBA is widely criticised for not providing individual or organisational benefits because students do not gain the required knowledge and skills. Managers are often poorly prepared for their roles in business because of insufficient emphasis in MBA programmes on soft skills such as leadership, interpersonal and communication skills (Navarro, 2008).

Management is a practice craft but the typical MBA experience is too far removed from the context of business (Mintzberg, 2001). Although some programmes have elements of open and/or experiential learning, MBAs are still largely delivered through formal classroom-based lectures and seminars, which frequently involve the analysis and discussion of case studies. However, case study learning may not adequately prepare students for dealing with the complexities of real business environments. The MBA may be adequate for assessing knowledge and understanding, but it cannot reliably assess or predict workplace competence (Wilkins, 2002).

Several studies suggest that possessing an MBA doesn't improve the chances of business success or avoiding business failure (Pfeffer & Fong, 2002). With employees possessing an MBA largely failing to demonstrate superior individual or organisational performance, many firms have stopped offering salary premiums to MBA graduates. Consequently, the economic rationale for individuals to invest financially in an MBA has often disappeared. Nowadays, in North America and Western Europe, it is generally only graduates from the top-ranked schools that see an immediate economic return from obtaining an MBA (Pfeffer & Fong, 2002). This section has provided an overview of some of the main criticisms and weaknesses of the MBA. However, as the MBA is still recruiting strongly in China and the UAE (China National MBA Education Supervisory Committee, 2016; KHDA, 2011; Zaman, 2018), students in these countries must perceive that the qualification delivers benefits and offers value.

The MBA in China and the UAE

In 1991, only nine universities in China offered an MBA (Goodall et al., 2004). Then, with the rise of the new middle classes and an increased interest in how the West does business, 'MBA fever' took hold across much of Eastern and South Eastern Asia, as well as the Middle East (Flew, 2006; Goodall et al., 2004; Pimpa, 2009). There are three types of MBA programmes in China: full and part-time programmes, which require applicants to pass nationally-set entrance examinations, and an Executive MBA (EMBA) that only recruits managers with eight years of work experience, who are required to pass only an institutional entry exam. Part-time students on non-Executive MBAs (which represent the respondents in our sample) are generally expected to have at least three years of work experience. In 2014, there were 236 universities in China offering a full-time MBA, with 31,944 registered students, 60 universities offering a part-time MBA, with 3,164 registered students, as well as 62 universities offering an EMBA (China National MBA Education Supervisory Committee, 2016).

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The competition to gain entry into many Chinese MBA programmes is fierce. Applicants for a full-time MBA programme must pass the National MBA Entrance Exam, and applicants for a part-time MBA programme must pass the national Guanli Ruxue Kaoshi (GRK) examination, which involves tests in maths, language and logic. Students must also have a certain amount of work experience, depending upon their academic qualifications. The national MBA programme specifies a number of core courses in subjects such as financial management, marketing and operations management. It is generally accepted that the US MBA model and its pedagogy run counter to social norms – such as respect and the maintenance of social harmony – in China and other Asian countries (Lamb & Currie, 2011). Thus, in most Asian countries, the US model has been adapted to fit with the local culture and business practice (Goh, 2009; Li-Hua & Lu, 2014; Pimpa, 2009; Sturdy & Gabriel, 2000).

Leading Chinese firms are increasingly seeking to expand and/or conduct business outside China. These firms favour MBA programmes that have both a global perspective and a Chinese focus (Ma & Trigo, 2011). They need management talent that is able to work effectively in international and multicultural environments, but they also want programmes that reflect Chinese economic, social and cultural contexts. There are a handful of international MBA programmes that are taught in English, which are delivered as joint programmes – e.g. with the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) Sloan School of Management – or at the international branch campus of a foreign university. China is host to 32 international branch campuses, the majority of which offer an MBA (OBHE/C-BERT 2016).

In countries such as China and the UAE, rapid economic growth has contributed to the popularity of the MBA, which is widely regarded as the most prestigious management qualification that prepares individuals for key management roles. Chen and Yang (2010) claim that the MBA has played a vital role in developing Chinese managers. In China and the UAE, there is evidence that business schools are focusing more on innovation and entrepreneurship, to address the needs of both businesses and individuals. Although the global financial crisis caused a temporary decline in MBA enrolments in the UAE from 2009 to 2012 (Alajoutsijärvi et al., 2014), since 2012 demand has increased to beyond the pre-crisis levels. Each month in the UAE, there are almost 14,000 Internet searches for MBA programmes and providers (Locke, 2017). In the UAE, a small country with a population of 9.16 million, there are 39 institutions offering an MBA (CAA, 2017), and these include two of the world's top 10 business schools (London Business School and INSEAD).

As the oil-rich countries in the Arabian Gulf region diversify their economies, there is a need for trained managers with core business and leadership skills. At the same time, multicultural countries such the UAE are increasingly seen as attractive locations for global managers to work and this has created a demand for MBA programmes that provide an experience of Middle Eastern business. As a result, the UAE acts as a regional and international MBA hub, with several schools hosting international students (Wilkins, 2010). For example, the Global MBA of Hult International Business School involves students studying at up to three campuses over one year in locations such as Dubai (one of the UAE's seven emirates), London, Boston, New York and Shanghai, and the University of Manchester runs MBA workshops in Dubai that attract over 500 students from as many as 34 different countries (Edarabia.com, 2017). The UAE is also host to 31 international branch campuses, the majority of which offer an MBA (OBHE/C-BERT, 2016).

Domestic demand for the MBA may be waning in North America and Western Europe (Blass & Weight, 2005), but in China and the UAE, demand for the MBA is still relatively healthy and stable (China National MBA Education Supervisory Committee, 2016; KHDA, 2011; Zaman, 2018). This research investigates the reasons behind the resilience of the MBA in China and the UAE, by exploring student motivations for wanting an MBA in these two countries. The following section provides details of the study's method.

Method

Sample

The data for this study were obtained using a survey questionnaire that was completed by MBA students at two public universities in China and two private universities in the UAE, which were all locally accredited and multi-discipline. The part-time/Executive MBA is by far the most popular mode of MBA study in the UAE – and examination of institution websites indicates that a high proportion do not even offer a full-time MBA – so all students participating in the research were part-time students, to allow meaningful side-by-side comparisons of results. The work experience demanded for entry into the MBA programmes at our four universities ranged from three months to three years, but the vast majority of students far exceeded the minimums expected, illustrated by the fact that none of the universities have many students under 25 years of age (see Table 1). The two Chinese universities are believed to be broadly representative of regional part-time MBA providers in China. Both of these universities are mid-ranking regional higher education institutions in China, in which research is not a key focus. Different from their counterparts in Beijing and Shanghai, these two universities mainly provide higher education for Chinese nationals living and working in South West China.

Although there are no reliable/widely recognised higher education rankings in the UAE, one of the UAE universities is believed to be mid-ranking and the other top quartile in terms of status and reputation. One of the UAE universities offers undergraduate and postgraduate programmes but not doctoral level study, while the other is a graduate only institution that offers only master and doctoral level programmes. As both universities are locally accredited, they appeal mainly to UAE nationals and permanent/semi-permanent resident Arab nationals rather than to international students from outside the Arab Gulf region. Non-Arab nationals generally prefer to study at international branch campuses, where they will gain degrees with international accreditation, but these awards are not recognised by the UAE's public sector for employment purposes. Thus, at one of the UAE universities, approximately 60 per cent of the sample were UAE nationals, 35 per cent other Arab nationals and 5 per cent non-Arab, while at the other, 50 per cent were UAE nationals, 35 per cent other Arab nationals and 15 per cent non-Arab.

Data collection

A two-step focus group procedure was adopted to develop the survey questionnaire. Each focus group covered all the key types of careers, professional levels, and gender of the students in the programme. Participants were invited by the researchers, to ensure that the focus groups were broadly representative of the programme cohort. First, two focus groups of seven and eight students were conducted at one university in the UAE. Each focus group lasted 45-50 minutes and used mainly open questions, starting with 'Why did you originally decide to enrol in an MBA programme?' The focus group chair encouraged participants to elaborate on topics of interest and to discuss the student motivations for wanting an MBA and benefits of gaining an MBA mentioned in the literature (e.g. Baruch, 2009; Baruch & Peiperl, 2000; Shimizu & Higuchi, 2009; Vaara & Faÿ, 2011). Statements made by individuals were noted and retained as questionnaire items. A draft survey questionnaire was created that consisted of student quotes from the two focus groups.

In the second step of our focus group procedure, two focus groups, with ten students each, were conducted at one university in China. Each focus group lasted about one hour. The purpose of the Chinese focus groups was to validate the draft survey questionnaire developed in the UAE.

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The focus groups started with participants completing the draft questionnaire. First, participants were asked to comment on the questionnaire, for example, identifying questions that they found unclear or ambiguous. Then, the students discussed their motivations for wanting an MBA. Seven items were added to the draft questionnaire, which represented motivations or issues mentioned by the Chinese students that had not been mentioned by the UAE students. Excluding the demographic questions, the final questionnaire had 33 items, which were believed to reflect the overall motivations of students in China and the UAE for wanting an MBA. The items can be seen in Table 2, which shows the results of the exploratory factor analysis that was conducted. Apart from the demographic questions, all items required respondents to give their responses using a 7-point Likert scale, where 1 = strongly disagree and 7 = strongly agree.

A total of 197 hard copy questionnaires were distributed in lectures to all of the students enrolled in the executive or part-time MBA at two universities in China, and, similarly, 118 questionnaires were distributed in lectures to all of the students in the part-time MBA at two universities in the UAE. A total of 235 usable questionnaires were returned (170 in China and 65 in the UAE), representing an overall response rate of 74.6 per cent. An online version of the questionnaire was also used at one university in the UAE, due to difficulties in gaining access to lectures. The questionnaire was developed using Google Forms and was distributed to 405 students using email and social media; 119 usable online surveys were received (representing a 29.4 per cent response rate), which increased the total number of respondents to 354. As the online questionnaire was completed anonymously, it is not possible to know the characteristics of the students who chose to participate or not participate, or their reasons for participating or not participating. As virtually all of the respondents were mature students in employment, and because the questionnaires were completed anonymously, it is believed that the questionnaires were completed honestly and without bias. Table 1 provides a summary profile of the final survey respondents. Official government statistics in both China and the UAE indicate that the overall participation of females in higher education is greater than that of males. Even in management programmes, it is usual to find fairly equal proportions of males and females in both countries, which is reflected in our samples.

Results

Exploratory factor analysis was conducted using SPSS (version 24). The aim was to determine the underlying components of the 33 items that represented the possible motivations for students in China and the UAE wanting an MBA. The Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin Test produced a value of .894, far higher than the cut-off point of .70, which indicated that the sample size of 354 was sufficient. Also, the Bartlett test of sphericity ($p = .000$) suggests that the data have a high enough degree of correlation to justify using exploratory factor analysis.

Using the criteria eigenvalue > 1 and factor loading $> .50$, exploratory factor analysis was conducted, which identified five factors that accounted for 68.3 per cent of total variance (Table 2). The Cronbach's alpha value for each factor was considerably above .70, indicating that all factors possessed strong internal reliability. To fit with the items in each factor, it was decided to name the five factors: (1) Knowledge and Skills; (2) Intrinsic Benefits; (3) Employment Benefits; (4) Recognition and Prestige; and (5) Social and Networking Benefits. The desire to acquire knowledge and skills was the strongest motivator for wanting an MBA, accounting for 32.4 per cent of variance. This was followed by reasons associated with intrinsic benefits, which explained 13 per cent of the variance in student motivations.

Table 1

Summary profile of respondents ($n = 354$).

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Categories		Total number	China		UAE	
			Number	%	Number	%
Sex	Male	173	80	47.1	93	50.5
	Female	181	90	52.9	91	49.5
Age	Under 25	9	2	1.2	7	3.8
	25-29	161	107	62.9	54	29.3
	30-34	117	52	30.6	65	35.4
	35-39	56	7	4.1	49	26.6
	40 and over	11	2	1.2	9	4.9
Employment	Technical/specialist	91	58	34.1	33	17.9
	Junior manager	131	73	43.0	58	31.5
	Middle manager	99	31	18.2	68	37.0
	Senior manager	24	5	2.9	19	10.3
	Other	9	3	1.8	6	3.3
Sector of employment	Private	148	38	22.4	110	59.8
	Public	206	132	77.6	74	40.2

Note: All students were enrolled in a part-time MBA programme.

Table 2
Rotated component matrix: Student motivations for wanting an MBA.

	Factor 1 Knowledge and Skills	Factor 2 Intrinsic Benefits	Factor 3 Employment Benefits	Factor 4 Recognition and Prestige	Factor 5 Social and Networking Benefits
Factor 1: Knowledge and Skills					
Develop my management skills	.832				
Gain knowledge of management techniques	.830				
Gain access to the latest management ideas	.811				
Learn new ideas about business or management	.804				
Improve my leadership skills	.783				
Gain knowledge about management theories	.679				
Perform better in my job	.597				

Continued on next page

Factor 2: Intrinsic Benefits

I wanted a new challenge	.817
To feel a sense of achievement	.785
To improve myself	.776
To help achieve my potential	.761
I enjoy learning new things	.734
To improve my confidence	.669

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To improve my self-esteem					.581
Factor 3: Employment Benefits					
To enhance my earnings					.859
To gain promotion					.802
To achieve my career goals					.795
To meet industry qualification requirements					.683
Employers expect managers to have an MBA					.662
To be able to change career direction					.657
Factor 4: Recognition and Prestige					
To achieve what everyone else already has					.844
To gain admiration from my work colleagues					.832
To be recognised as well-educated					.766
To improve my status at work					.756
To enjoy the prestige after graduation					.734
Factor 5: Social and Networking Benefits					
Enjoy meeting others in class					.854
Learn things from other students					.827
Gain contacts for future business					.789
Benefit from the alumni network after graduation					.782
Personal, non-work related benefits					.777
Eigenvalue	9.72	3.91	3.01	2.26	1.61
Variance (%)	32.4	13.0	10.0	7.5	5.4
Cumulative variance (%)	32.4	45.4	55.4	62.9	68.3
Cronbach's alpha	.90	.90	.90	.89	.87

Table 3 shows the mean scores and standard deviations for the respondents in China and the UAE. In China, the students were most motivated by knowledge and skills (5.45), followed closely by intrinsic benefits (5.42). In the UAE, students gave their highest scores for employment benefits (6.12) and intrinsic benefits (6.00). In China, recognition and prestige received the lowest mean score (3.90), while in the UAE, the lowest mean score was given to social and networking benefits (4.76). Independent samples *t*-tests were used to assess the significance of the mean score differences between the China and UAE-based respondents. For every factor, the difference in mean scores between the two countries was statistically different at the $p < .001$ level. Although the MBA is generally regarded as a professional qualification for managers, some 35.3 per cent of respondents in the UAE strongly or moderately agreed that they

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intended to progress to doctoral level study, while the corresponding figure for China was 15.3 per cent. In the UAE, 27.7 per cent of students reported that relatively easier admission requirements were a key factor in their decision to enrol in an MBA programme. The corresponding figure for the Chinese students was only 6.5 per cent.

Table 3
Mean scores and standard deviations.

	Overall <i>n</i> = 354		China <i>n</i> = 170		UAE <i>n</i> = 184	
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	Mean	SD
Knowledge and Skills	5.70	0.91	5.45	0.88	5.94	0.88
Intrinsic Benefits	5.72	0.87	5.42	0.78	6.00	0.86
Employment Benefits	5.52	1.07	4.87	0.89	6.12	0.86
Recognition and Prestige	4.71	1.28	3.90	0.92	5.47	1.10
Social and Networking Benefits	5.02	0.91	5.31	0.86	4.76	1.24

Note: All mean values differ significantly between the two countries at $p < .001$.

The independent samples *t*-test was used to investigate possible differences in motivations for wanting an MBA between males and females. No evidence was found of a significant difference between males and females for any of the five factors. Then, the independent samples *t*-test was used to investigate possible differences in motivations for wanting an MBA between respondents employed in the private and public sectors. For four of the five factors, significant differences were found between students working in the private and public sectors: intrinsic benefits ($t = 3.50$, $df = 352$, $p < .001$, $r = .183$); employment benefits ($t = 6.01$, $df = 352$, $p < .001$, $r = .305$); recognition and prestige ($t = 4.57$, $df = 352$, $p < .001$, $r = .237$); and social and networking benefits ($t = -2.38$, $df = 352$, $p < .01$, $r = .126$). The effect size values ranged from $r = .126$, indicating a weak relationship between the motivator and employment sector, to $r = .305$, indicating a moderate relationship between the motivator and employment sector. It was only for social and networking benefits that the mean scores given by the public sector employees were higher than the private sector employees (public sector: $m = 5.14$, $SD = 1.00$; private sector: $m = 4.86$, $SD = 1.23$). This suggests that public sector employees may not have the same networking opportunities in their working lives as employees in the private sector or that the former value networking more.

Finally, one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) was used to assess whether type/level of employment (technical/specialist, junior, middle or senior manager etc.) had an influence on respondents' motivations for wanting an MBA. For both employment benefits ($F = 5.75$, $df = 5$, $p < .001$) and recognition and prestige ($F = 4.99$, $df = 5$, $p < .001$), there were differences between respondents holding different types or levels of job. Further analysis using Hochberg's GT2 test (selected because the sample sizes were quite different across groups) found that for employment benefits there were only differences between technical/specialist job holders ($m = 5.28$, $SD = 0.98$) and those holding middle ($m = 5.74$, $SD = 1.00$) or senior management positions ($m = 5.97$, $SD = 1.00$). Similarly, for recognition and prestige, the only differences were between technical/specialist job holders ($m = 4.36$, $SD = 1.23$) and those holding middle ($m = 4.98$, $SD = 1.26$) or senior management positions ($m = 5.46$, $SD = 1.33$). The results indicate that middle and senior managers expect to derive more employment benefits and are more motivated by the recognition and prestige resulting from holding an MBA compared to technical/specialist job holders.

Discussion and conclusion

In order to explain the resilience of the MBA in China and the UAE, this research aimed to discover why students in China and the UAE want an MBA. Although China and the UAE have very different and distinct cultures, there are also some significant similarities, such as the role of networking and relationships in society, often based on status or family relationships (Hutchings & Weir, 2006). With this in mind, some of the study's results were surprising and unexpected. For example, recognition, prestige and networking – all key features in Chinese and Emirati societies – were found *not* to be key motivators for wanting an MBA. Instead, the desire to acquire knowledge and skills was the most influential motivator. This fits with a previous study conducted in the UAE, which concluded that students had a disposition towards attainment of satisfaction from learning (McLaughlin & Durrant, 2017).

The acquisition of knowledge and skills can help individuals to achieve employment and intrinsic benefits. The implication for institutions is that they must ensure their MBA programmes do actually provide students with new practice and know-how of the business world, with which they are not already familiar, and that programmes are continually updated to include the latest management ideas and techniques. Students must be able to demonstrate that they have actually developed their management and leadership skills, and that these can be used in the workplace to improve both individual and organisational performance.

The literature suggests that exchange value and market value capital are key motivators for individuals wanting an MBA (e.g. Baruch, 2009; Baruch & Peiperl, 2000; Shimizu & Higuchi, 2009). Given that the price paid for an MBA is high in terms of tuition fees paid and the investment in time and effort, it could be assumed that most students expect an economic return from achieving an MBA. Although employment benefits explained 10 per cent of the variance in students' motivations for wanting an MBA, this was exceeded by intrinsic benefits, which explained 13 per cent of the variance in students' motivations. This is an interesting finding. It suggests that many students in China and the UAE *want* to do an MBA for their own self-satisfaction, rather than feeling they *need* to do an MBA. This result may have been unexpected by Western MBA programme administrators, but it may reflect different societal values about learning and higher education in countries such as China and the UAE (cf. Marginson, 2011). The implication for practitioners is that programmes should be creative and challenging, and designed and delivered utilising pedagogic innovations that inspire students. Students should be able to learn new things, improve themselves and feel a sense of achievement. However, if students in China and the UAE are mainly intrinsically motivated, this may mean that MBA providers in China and the UAE are unable to charge as high a price for the degree as in Western countries.

The recognition and prestige associated with an MBA contributes to the intrinsic benefits enjoyed by students; it also contributes to the exchange value and market value capital that students gain. Business school reputation is a key driver of MBA applications (Wilkins & Huisman, 2012), but reputation is a complex construct that has many predictors, which may include innovation, citizenship, service and leadership (Vidaver-Cohen, 2007). Nowadays, the recognition and prestige of MBAs is determined largely by rankings (Wilkins & Huisman, 2012), so institutions need to create and implement strategies that enhance their performance in ranking tables. Brand management, marketing communications and public relations are key activities that can help institutions to rise in rankings. However, it should be noted that ranking tables each use a wide range of indicators, which may include teaching quality, research output, academic reputation, employer perceptions, and average salary after graduation (Johnes, 2016).

Finally, although social and networking benefits had the weakest influence on students' motivations for wanting an MBA, these benefits did still explain 5.4 per cent of the variance in student motivations. This is another interesting finding because China and the UAE are nations

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in which networking and connections have traditionally had a strong influence in business. In fact, there is a considerable body of research that has examined *guanxi* in China and *wasta* in the Arab world – two different terms that in fact mean something fairly similar, based on the concepts of networking, influence and interpersonal connections (Valez-Calle et al., 2015). The students in the UAE may have given the lowest mean score to social and networking benefits not because they don't value social networking but because they already have sufficient existing networks and therefore do not need to rely on the MBA to develop these further.

In summary, it can be seen that our results fit quite well with the concept of human capital proposed by writers such as Becker (1964). Our respondents clearly anticipated that enrolling in an MBA programme would deliver to them (in order of importance): intellectual capital, inner value capital, market value capital, symbolic/cultural capital and social capital. However, given that our samples were gained in only two countries, it is not really feasible to generalise our findings to all emerging economies. But, what we can see is that student motivations for wanting an MBA may be different in emerging economies compared to the traditional MBA markets of North America, Western Europe and Australia.

Institutions could indeed benefit from being aware of these differences so that they can satisfy the needs, wants and expectations of all students. Our findings suggest these needs, wants and expectations may differ between individuals employed in the private and public sectors, and among individuals employed in different types of jobs or at different levels in the organisational hierarchy. Most institutions design and market the MBA as a practical management development qualification. Therefore, it was interesting to discover that over one third of the MBA students in the UAE, and over 15 per cent of the Chinese students, were potentially using the qualification as a progression route to a doctoral degree. In both China and the UAE, the PhD degree is widely regarded as valuable for private and public sector careers. Individuals holding a PhD will gain more respect among their counterparts and the degree will reinforce their authority over subordinates. Also, with China and the UAE seeing rapid expansion and investment in higher education, students may perceive the higher education sector as offering attractive career possibilities.

It should be recognised that this study was concerned only with students enrolled in part-time or Executive MBA programmes. Many of these students have considerable employment experience and some hold middle and senior level management positions, so clearly the motivations of these individuals for taking an MBA may be different to younger students on full-time programmes, who often have minimal work experience. However, it may reasonably be assumed that all students want to develop new knowledge and skills, and gain recognition and/or career advancement as a result of their learning. It should be noted that some of the literature referred to in this paper may have been concerned with full-time MBA programmes rather than the Executive MBA. To our knowledge, no previous study has examined the potentially different motivations of full-time and part-time students for enrolling in an MBA programme, which could be a topic for future research.

The range of individual motivations for wanting to enrol in an MBA programme is so diverse and complex that no model can ever fully capture this level of detail. In other words, the student decision-making process often goes beyond formal or conscious cost-benefit analysis and assessment of value. Future research could attempt to incorporate a wider range of possible motivators, and studies should be conducted in different countries using diverse and varied samples to allow comparisons of, for example, domestic versus international students. Despite its limitations, our research should be of interest and value to researchers, education policy makers, programme managers and institutional marketers, as the findings have implications for institutional strategy, curriculum design, programme delivery and the marketing of programmes.

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