

## **Changing Executive MBA: The Digital Content Debate**

### **Why is the HEC Paris Executive MBA Changing?**

It has been a while since our last interview about the EMBA, but we are very pleased to announce changes to our programme. While we generally subscribe to the notion that if it is not broken, why fix it, it is always good to shake things up. The EMBA in its current format has been in place for 5 years now. It is a solid program with fantastic content, Majors, and a final project that provides value to the participant. However, we would like to refresh it somewhat, ensure that it evolves with current trends, make sure that is still answering the needs of participants, and takes advantages of any changes in technologies.

By the time the new curriculum is in place over 1500 participants will have graduated from this current format

### **What are the main changes in the HEC Paris EMBA for the coming academic year?**

Changes will come in various forms for this new intake, from content to structure and from governance to digital delivery. We are wary of biting off more than we can chew, so in many respects we are advancing piece-meal

### **Academics and Content**

We have taken the opportunity to revise the core courses and their content in the EMBA. The usual suspects are still there such as Leadership, Strategy, Marketing, Finance. It is essential that an EMBA of this standing provide the bulwarks of a general business education. Focus groups with current and previous candidates have highlighted the need to include new subjects in our portfolio of modules, so the Class of 2018 will introduce concepts of Entrepreneurship and Digital Transformation in the core curriculum.

Entrepreneurial Spirit is a new 2-day course designed to enable participants to explore what it means to be an entrepreneur, the mind-set it requires, and potential directions to take. Thereafter, participants have the choice to explore more in-depth entrepreneurial activities through the specialized Majors.

Themes pertaining to digital innovations will weave through the rest of the core courses giving participants an overview of how all business spheres are required to accommodate changes due to digital transformation.

In addition, core courses will be bundled into standardized modules designed to improve the participants' learning journey through the EMBA. Seven, six-day modules (in addition to the Majors) will now comprise the HEC Paris EMBA.

### **Formats**

Some of the formats of our EMBA tracks will stay the same going forward. The One-Day-Week (Tuesdays and the odd Wednesday) and End-of-Week (Fridays and some Saturdays) tracks remain untouched in their structure.

Participants can now skip complete modules in their home track to undertake them elsewhere.

### **Career Services**

More and more of our participants are in periods of professional transition. They are looking to take on more responsibility within their own companies or taking the next step elsewhere. Quite often, however, they are not sure what the next step is. We hope to help. Campus-wide, career services are being centralized to offer a wider array of activities open to all participants regardless of the program. Within the EMBA, career activities have become a key priority and a central service for participants. We will be building on the strength of the existing webinars offering, to rollout more workshop and peer-to-peer activities. There will even be sessions set-apart for participants to co-construct the content based on the needs of the people in the room. While we will not provide outplacement services for participants, we will be providing them with skills required to make that next step.

## **Digital Delivery**

Across the world, the use of digital technologies in higher education is becoming more and more common. At HEC Paris we are experimenting with its application for business education and are beginning to integrate it into the teaching methodologies in the EMBA. We are rolling out more webinars in the curriculum as a means of tying the modules together between periods of presence on site and as a means of preparing participants for the activities to come once they arrive on campus. Additional asynchronous activities are planned throughout the programme as professors experiment with ways of delivering key messages from afar.

The objective is to provide content to participants at home so that when they arrive in class, they are adequately prepared and are placed almost directly in interactive or participatory activities to facilitate peer-to-peer learning and networking opportunity. It is intended that the EMBA will gradually add more and more digital learning in the curriculum over the next years to enhance the learning experience and enable participants to take advantage of the benefits from working at home.

## **What stays the same?**

The fundamental principle of the EMBA; learning from each other, remains the same. The belief that participants have at least as much to learn from each other as the teaching faculty is key the HEC Paris EMBA experience. Our professors bring a lot to the table: fundamentals and basic theories, current trends and future disruptions, and the latest from research and case study development, but the practical advice provided by others in the room is key to learning by-doing. How one person solved a particular issue is valuable information for others.

For this reason, we intend to capitalize on key change to foster even more dialogue amongst participants.

Practically speaking, the Majors, which are a central feature of the EMBA, remain untouched. There will be the usual tweaks in content from year to year and new destinations may be added to the portfolio of global cities, but the objective of immersing participants in a thematic or industry-specific 2 week Advanced Certificate program continues to provide value to participants. There are now eight choices of

Majors including Entrepreneurship, which remains extremely popular amongst participants as is Digital Transformations. These two, for example, allow participants to delve deeper into subjects they may cover in the core modules.

The Capstone continue to cap the end of the participants' experience. It has proven to be a vital tool in summarizing and bringing together skills developed in a strategic project. Participants will have the choice to work in teams or solo on projects that are pertinent to their own companies, third parties, or even have the possibility to present strategic recommendations for the creation of their own companies and start-ups.

### **What is the reasoning behind these changes and what are the key benefits for the participants?**

- Really listened and taken onboard participant feedback (being agile, customer centric approach, etc.)
- Less travel (less cost) less time away from the office => better work life balance
- Digital: focus on the basics outside class time => even greater levels of interactivity in class and more time for practical application

### **What are participants looking for in an EMBA (topics, services, ROI...)?**

- Leadership & Strategy
- Soft skills
- Networking...

### **What sets this HEC Paris EMBA experience apart?**

I think the defining differentiator is the quality of our participants. They are increasingly more international, representing over 50 nationalities now, flying in from all over the world. They represent a vast array of industries and sectors, from the corporate world, the public sector, military personnel and entrepreneurs. The expertise in the classrooms now create a unique learning environment that is difficult to replicate.

The teaching faculty at HEC Paris also help define the program. These are the leaders in their fields of research and bring many years of experience to the table. They are central for creating the right conditions for learning in the classroom and are renowned for

asking the questions that cause participants to stop and think about a certain situation in a different light or to address a problem from a different angle.

Pragmatically, why one prospective EMBA participants would choice the HEC Paris EMBA over another, the reasons there are aslo multiple. The choice of tracks allows participants to choice a track that suits their lifestyle or professional constraints best, while still having their opportunity to experience others through the mobility offering. International mobility is also a must. Our participants are generally seasons business travelers already, but international mobility allows them to combine their business education with increased opportunities for international exposure.

Likewise the Majors are an experience like no other. They have become so popular that now it is possible to undertake the Majors alone as Advanced Certificates. We see more and more participants coming back to take another Major after their program has been completed just to experience them again. These are 10 days over two weeks, in both May and October, in which participants are mixed up with other participants from other tracks (and increasingly other programs at HEC Paris) to undertake a deep dive into a particular subject.

Networking is key to the experience too, which is why these Majors and the international mobility offering are so important. It is our responsibility to provide intimate moments of exchange amongst participants to stimulate information transfer and for participants to build their professional networks.

### **1. Why do you feel it has been so important to introduce a digital element to the EMBA?**

All industries are facing the pressure of digital transformation and the higher education and business school industry is no exception. Traditional means of providing an education are changing and newer generations are taking it for granted that they will (and should be) able to access education at a distance and through digital means. Going digital is not only a means of attracting more international participants and those who may not have been previously interested in a traditional education, but importantly, it is a means of reviewing established pedagogies to improve the learning

experience, compliment any residential formats that may remain, and ensure that time spent of site provides even higher value-added experiences for all those involved.

## **2. Was there demand from students/applicants for a greater level or digital engagement?**

It was not necessarily a demand for digital content per se that led to its inclusion in the EMBA, so much as a need to put participants at the centre of the learning experience and relook at how we deliver content in general. 50% of the HEC Paris EMBA participants are now non-French. Some are expats based in the Paris region, but more and more are flyins coming from around the globe. International travel and accommodation costs represent significant portions of the EMBA investments on their part so we needed to look at means of reaching them in their homes, providing them with valuable learning experiences there, and preparing them better for the time they will spend on campus. This means less time (but more meaningful time) spent on site and the associated cost benefits that this brings.

Likewise, participants are now demanding atypical learning methodologies and means of establishing contact with other participants and faculty before even coming to class. While they still demand access to networking opportunities and face-time with leading professors in the field, they want to be able to do so even sooner.

## **3. How does the digital component of the EMBA work? What technologies are used, and what is required of the students?**

We offer both synchronous and asynchronous digital activities. Synchronous activities are used for course introductions or wrap-up webinars, as well as pre-modules (refreshers). Asynchronous activities have different formats: videos, capsules (a group of several online activities), simulation games, etc.

## **4. How is it aligned with traditional learning?**

These webinars or capsules are complimentary to traditional learning. They help participants prepare for when they come to class. Progressively more and more content can be made available to participants via distance learning, but the objective, in the EMBA's case, is to make sure that when they arrive, they have already understood the basics, they have prepared the readings and the case studies, they have already formed

working group to analyse certain business cases, and that they can hit the ground running once they arrive on campus.

#### **5. How does this differ from other Exec MBAs on the market?**

Most high level EMBA programs are experimenting with different forms of digital and distance learning. Some of the leaders have made significant chunks of their teaching available outside the traditional class environment. At HEC Paris we too are still experimenting, but the value that we see in our program from this approach is the balance that we have created between off-site and on-site learning. We may increase gradually as we go forward, but the 10-15% we have now gives participants the

#### **6. What benefit do you feel it provides to the students?**

It creates a sense of community far earlier and they come to class knowing each other better and ready to work on common activities.

They further help with the flow of the modules, ensuring that they are properly introduced and briefed on what to expect. They also help with maintaining connectivity between the modules, which can be up to two months. In this way the rhythm is maintained.

#### **7. Are the online options (webinars ahead of on-campus modules etc.) compulsory?**

Yes, the webinars are compulsory. It is necessary that they come to class prepared. As such we encouraged participants to ensure the best connectivity possible and to organise their work / home activities accordingly.

#### **8. Currently the EMBA is described as being 15% digital. Are there plans to increase this figure over time?**

At this point we are carefully reflecting on what we have already achieved and plan to make adjustments as participants go through the program. At present, the feedback is overwhelmingly positive. Towards the end of a full cycle in this new curriculum we will make decisions on which direction to take, but always with the participants' experience at heart.

## **9. What has been the initial feedback from students over the new digital elements?**

Extremely positive. Other than some initial concerns regarding Wi-Fi and internet connection, which are ironed out as participants become more familiar with technologies, participants are enjoying and appreciating the experience. As indicated earlier, they enjoy the opportunity to learn from home in addition to coming to campus more prepared and having already met those they will share their residential experiences with.

### **Which are better, traditional residential modules or digital learning**

I do not think there is a right or wrong answer to this question. It all depends on what the participant is trying to achieve. If a participant has limited financial resources to put towards travel and accommodation, heavy family commitments, or a professional life that does not permit much flexibility in terms of time off or periods of absence, but still needs a solid education of business fundamentals and general management skills, then perhaps distance learning is better suited for him. However, if this same person has the ability to travel and to distance himself from daily professional obligations, and is looking for quality time with like-minded individuals, than I believe that a residential module in which he is fully immersed in an all-encompassing experience is a better option.

### **With technological innovations improving access to distance learning, is there still merit to residential formats?**

Yes, beyond a doubt. I think that people tend to forget that MBAs are not simply about the academics. Several business schools have solid, if not exceptional, curricula these days. Participants expect that, but do not necessarily give it much thought when looking back at their experiences. They want time to reflect on their professional lives, and, do not forget either, that for many, if not most, this is the time for change. They want to bounce ideas of others, and they want to be reassured that they have made the right choice. While they will certainly get fantastic insights from participatory webinars, and acquire valuable learnings from flipped classrooms, and grow through interactive distance-based seminars, giving them the knowledge that they need; the real magic often happens on site.



### **What do you mean about that?**

Coffee breaks, lunches, social events, and cocktails are key opportunities for putting learnings into perspective. These informal events are vital off-the-record networking opportunities that allow participants to share, not necessarily only with each other, but teaching faculty and program delivery staff. Whether it is waiting in the buffet line at lunch, or sharing a drink later that evening at the hotel bar, or meeting the next morning for an impromptu pre-dawn jog or spontaneous yoga session, you can bet they are learning from each other. They realise they are not alone...

Informal intimate moments count. You cannot easily achieve without residencies.

So, don't underestimate the power of the coffee break.

Career activities are valuable portions of residential formats.

There is a growing proportion of participants undertaking EMBA's who are in period of professional transition. They are thinking of taking the next step. They are wondering whether it is the right time to make a move. Perhaps they have lost their previous jobs and are using the EMBA as a means of refocusing themselves. Career related activities can be undertaken online, certainly, but we are seeing that participants benefit significantly from peer coaching or peer-to-peer sessions that help them put their future plans into focus. Quite often, simply being away from home and in a safe environment with others in similar situations is sufficient for them to step back and think about what they want. Sometimes it is getting away from the daily grind that is required to help them gain perspective about what is right for them and which direction to take.

International residential modules are valuable too.

International residencies are key to the learning experience. At HEC, we call them Majors. They are thematic or industry specific specializations that take place around the world. We are up to a choice of 8 of these Majors, which participants undertake in different global cities. Although most of our participants come from different backgrounds and are already seasoned international business travelers, we believe that it is necessary to provide opportunities for increased international exposure through these Majors. They bring together a wider mix of participants from across programs and for more extensive networking opportunities that they would not have obtained from remaining at home and covering the same material.

### **So, is there merit to distance learning at all?**

Our obligation is to create these intimate moments of exchange, but that is where the value of technology and distance learning comes in. That is the whole basis for flipped classroom. Let's not throw the baby out with the bathwater either. Academics are a must. The content must be delivered. Teaching faculty have a responsibility to deliver business fundamentals, key theories, contemporary strategies, and future trends. These, however, can be delivered differently and now we have the capacity to do so.

A lot can be delivered online. There are new ways of capturing participants' attention emerging every day. Digital disruption and distance learning is the way of the future without a doubt, but we need to be smart about it. Creating the right mix and making the right decisions about what to put online will take much thought.

What is needed are participants arriving for residential modules having already acquired a certain amount of knowledge and familiarity with a certain subject and are now ready and able to start putting them into practice. Interactive activities, whether simulation exercises or case study analyses debated in small groups, are increasingly permissible if the basics have been covered before arriving in class through digital environments. Anything that gets the participant out of the amphitheater and into breakout-rooms or smaller focus groups will help generate debate, get them talking, sharing about personal experience, and ultimately learning from each other. These then spill over into informal non-academic activities.

### **Concluding remarks**

The debate between in class sessions and digital learning is likely to heat up as the capacity to delivery business education at a distance becomes easier. Less time may be needed in residential formats, but distance learning will allow the time spent on site to be more impactful.

***Learn more about the HEC Paris Executive MBA here:***

<https://execed.hec.edu/en/executive-mbas/executive-mba#Perspectives>