

Prescription for professional success

Experts working in all areas of the healthcare sector can benefit from improving their business and leadership skills, says **Paul Bray**

As the NHS faces a perceived crisis of management, and clinicians are forced to shoulder more non-clinical responsibilities, postgraduate degrees in business and management are becoming increasingly sought after in the healthcare sector.

Some healthcare professionals opt to take conventional MBAs, and, according to the latest Corporate Recruiters Survey Hiring Report by the Graduate Management Admission Council, healthcare and pharmaceuticals are seeing some of the greatest growth in demand for MBA graduates.

But an increasing number of universities and business schools are also offering masters degrees specifically tailored to healthcare, usually part-time courses intended for practising clinicians, managers and other professionals.

There can be some overlap in content with MBA courses, such as getting to grips with organisational behaviour, but students are also likely to study specifics – healthcare economics or measuring service quality, for example. The overall focus of these programmes tends to be more on management and leadership than on business per se.

“Subjects like marketing and finance may be important, but the mindsets of business and healthcare are quite different,” says Prof Henry Mintzberg, co-founding director of the International Masters for Health Leadership at the Desautels Faculty of Management at McGill University in Canada.

“We focus on helping people to develop a managerial mindset. Often clinical people have had no education in management, and have no experience of it except what they’ve happened to pick up.”

How to get things done is a common theme. “A lot of people come with ‘good ideas’ that they want to learn how to implement,” says Dr Kay Mohanna, director of postgraduate medicine at Keele University, which runs an MMedSci in Leadership and Management. “Often they don’t know how to gain support for an idea, influence others, write a business case, and so on. You may see something that needs improving, but if you lack the skills to do it you can feel powerless.”

Many courses can point to major projects that have been kick-started by someone who has taken a masters degree. Ashridge Business School even insists that students

New focus: courses at the likes of Ashridge Business School (right) can prove useful for clinicians as well as administrators



enrolled on its Masters in Leadership (Quality Improvement) for healthcare professionals come with something specific in mind that they want to improve.

As well as learning the “soft” skills they need to get their project under way, masters students may also acquire the “hard” scientific skills required to measure the quality and effectiveness of what they have done. Is it safe? Does it advance care quality? How could it be improved?

When business subjects are covered, it is often from a specific healthcare perspective. “One of the big problems for people who come from a clinical role is understanding finance,” says Prof Simon Jones, chair in healthcare management and policy at the University of Surrey, which offers an MSc in

Health Care Management. “It’s surprising how many quite senior clinicians don’t realise how funding flows through the NHS.”

Health economics can be complex, Jones explains. A surgical procedure may appear costly when measured by conventional, short-term payback models, for example, but it can prove to be cost-effective in the longer term.

The focus of health-related masters degrees tends to be practical and project-based rather than purely academic. “We try hard to embed our masters programmes so our students get academic and professional development that aligns with their workplace goals,” says Dr Mohanna.

Most students are already managers, sometimes at a senior

level, and the average age is usually late thirties or early forties. They represent all walks of healthcare: GPs, consultants, pharmacists, nursing managers, heads of clinical and administrative departments, community health specialists and senior executives.

The opportunity for, say, doctors and nurses or NHS managers and charity workers to meet and exchange views on equal terms can be uniquely valuable, while international students often introduce an even wider perspective.

“All the students come to us with lots of issues and experience, and we position the course as an opportunity for them to learn as much from one another as from us,” says Liz Wiggins, business director of Ashridge Business School.

“Understanding different perspectives is absolutely vital, and our skill is partly in creating conditions where students will open up and share conversations they don’t have back at base because the topics are too political or they are simply too busy.”

There can be career benefits for the individual. “People realise that the jobs market is very competitive and they may need a masters in management to give them an edge,” says Prof Jones. “Our masters graduates say they’ve definitely found their degree useful in obtaining a promotion.”

For many, however, the rewards are more subtle. Mark Wilkinson is chief officer of NHS Barnsley Clinical Commissioning Group, running an organisation that

serves 250,000 people, with an annual budget of £350million. He graduated from the Desautels International Masters for Health Leadership course in 2010.

“An important benefit of the course was simply having the time to reflect,” he says. “An NHS management job tends to be a series of short, rapid, interaction-based decisions, which develops the opposite of a reflective mindset.

“Another was learning about how decisions are made. It helped me towards an improved understanding of how NHS policy is formulated and some of its apparent contradictions. The better you understand the complexity of different people’s perspectives and motivations, the more likely you are to get the outcomes you want.”



RICHARD LAMBIE

Lambie is a pharmacist in the first year of an executive MBA at London’s Imperial College Business School.

“You train as a health professional in order to help people, but you soon realise that you can only achieve this if the organisation you work in stays viable,” he says. “I chose the executive MBA as a way of rounding off my business knowledge base. With that dual background you can make a greater impact than with healthcare knowledge alone.”

As an example, he cites a recent MBA assignment. He and his

colleagues helped an Italian dentist to turn a philanthropic project assisting children with facial malformations into a fully fledged charity benefitting youngsters in Italy.

Lambie advises prospective MBA candidates to look at what else a university excels in. “Imperial College has an excellent medical school so I knew there would be crossovers between its health sector expertise and the MBA,” he says.

“A third of my fellow students are from the healthcare sector, which gives the critical mass to take a healthcare slant on the course. But the other two-thirds are equally important. Healthcare professionals tend to hold a similar view of the world, so having a different outlook to challenge you adds another level of knowledge.”

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