

AMERICAN UNIVERSITY OF BEIRUT

A DESIGN ASSESSMENT PROCESS FOR STUDENT  
SELECTION IN THE MHRM PROGRAM AT AUB

by  
MAYA ALAM DAOUK

A project  
submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements  
for the degree of Master of Human Resources Management  
to the Suliman S. Olayan School of Business  
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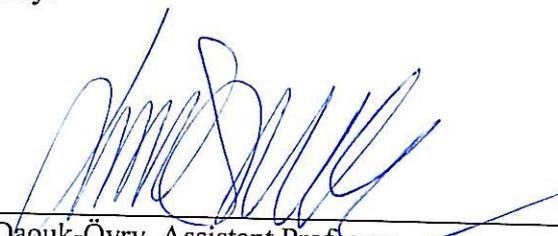
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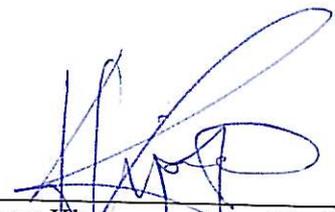
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Approved by:

  
\_\_\_\_\_  
Dr. Lina Daouk-Oyry, Assistant Professor  
Suliman S. Olayan School of Business  
First Reader

  
\_\_\_\_\_  
Dr. Haitham Khoury, Assistant Professor  
Suliman S. Olayan School of Business  
Second Reader

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## AN ABSTRACT OF THE PROJECT OF

Maya Alam Daouk for Master of Human Resources Management  
Major: Human Resources Management

Title: A Design Assessment Process for Student Selection in the MHRM program at AUB.

The rise in demand for graduate education today has created a need for more effective, selective and reliable admission procedures. Universities are taking an active role in their admissions process by considering which prospective students would be a “good fit”, and by identifying the requirements needed in order to successfully complete the program. Research regarding the selection process of graduate programs shows that though undergraduate GPA and test scores are relied on as the primary emphasis and best predictors, alone they are not enough. More and more, researchers are realizing that academic performance is very much related to soft skills. In this paper, we identify the selection criteria and design the selection process for graduate students applying for the Masters of Human Resources Management (MHRM) program at AUB OSB. This is done through 1) a literature review on selection criteria in the educational industry, 2) an examination of existing selection criteria for graduate HR students across various universities, 3) an analysis of the vision and objectives of the newly established MHRM program, and 4) and data collection from interviews with MHRM professors and focus groups with students. The results show that the competencies needed for the MHRM program are analytical skills, teamwork, communication, achievement orientation, positive attitude, conscientiousness, time management, emotional intelligence, strong command of English, interest in HR, aptitude, numerical ability and knowledge of workplace. This study reveals the importance of soft skills / qualitative data in the successful completion of the program, and designs a process on how to assess them.

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To  
*Lily and Zeid*

# CHAPTER I

## INTRODUCTION

More and more, the demand for graduate education is on the rise. Over the past few decades alone, the number of students enrolled in graduate schools has more than doubled each decade (Brink, 1999). With such an increasing number of applicants, universities are under pressure to accurately and fairly select those with the expected requirements, characteristics and probability to succeed. The consequences of selecting inadequately prepared students to undertake graduate studies are not limited to putting the reputation of these universities at risk, but also to sending out into society those who are least likely to be high achievers (Brink, 1999). Furthermore, with a high focus on peer to peer learning in the classroom nowadays, universities would be jeopardizing the quality of learning if they have unqualified students on board. The rise in demand for graduate education today has created a need for more effective and selective admission procedures (Gould & Hoefler, 2000).

Universities today are focusing their efforts on putting in place fair and reliable methodologies that can be used to predict applicants likely to succeed. They aim to effectively screen applicants for admission, and assess their suitability for the field of study as well as ability to successfully complete the program (Leverett-Main, 2004). The toughest challenge in accomplishing that, is to define the program's specific admission criteria; what qualities should applicants possess, what are the requirements they should meet, as well as decide on the mechanisms/tools best to be used for evaluating the applicants (GlenMaye & Oakes, 2002). Once those criteria are defined, business schools across the United States and other areas are trying to obtain

information on applicants and assess whether or not they meet those defined requirements from a variety of sources which can either be in numerical form or narrative form, hard or soft, quantitative or qualitative. Only then can they make their final acceptance decisions.

While such redirections are mainly driven by the need to better sift and select applicants from large pools, there are also external forces impacting this shift. For example, in 1991, the American Association of Collegiate Schools of Business (AACSB) implemented a new set of standards for accreditation mandating that ‘each (Business) school must be able to demonstrate empirical documentation that its admission practices and policies are contributing to the realization of its mission’ (Hoefler & Gould, 2000, p. 226).

Many universities are putting ample efforts in refining their graduate selection processes, yet, competency models that highlight the general and specific competencies required for successful performance in graduate studies are still scarce.

The aim of this field project is to identify the selection criteria and design the selection process for graduate students applying for the Masters of Human Resources Management (MHRM) program at American University of Beirut Olayan School of Business. The criteria will incorporate both soft and hard skills assessment and will be operationalized through a multi step process that involves 1) a comprehensive literature review on selection criteria in the educational industry in general, 2) an examination of existing selection criteria for graduate Human Resources students across various universities worldwide, 3) an analysis of the vision, mission and objectives of the newly established MHRM program, and 4) and primary data collection from key constituents (i.e. structured interviews with MHRM professors/selection committee and focus groups

with students). The resultant is a competency model for the role of MHRM student at OSB and a corresponding selection process.

## CHAPTER II

### LITERATURE REVIEW

#### Glossary

<i>Term</i>	<i>Definition</i>
<i>Competencies</i>	Sum of key skills, knowledge, experience, qualifications and capabilities required to successfully fulfill a role and/or be eligible for admittance into any academic program (Halter, 2009).
<i>Predictive validity</i>	Degree to which a tool is able to correctly evaluate or predict the future job performance of those selected (Ekuma, 2012)
<i>Qualitative Measure</i>	Information in the form of descriptive and narrative form. Includes interviews, references and personal statements (Hardigan, Lai, Arneson & Robeson, 2001)
<i>Quantitative Measure</i>	Information in the form of numerical form. Includes test scores and grade point averages (Hardigan, Lai, Arneson & Robeson, 2001)
<i>Reliability</i>	Repeating testing procedures on different individuals, and getting in return consistent measurements (Kreiter, Yin, Solow & Brennan, 2004).
<i>Validity</i>	Implication that the predictor or criterion should be relevant to what is intended to measure. Specifically, it should represent what we want to measure, all we want

to measure, and nothing but that which we want to measure (Ekuma, 2012)

### **Selection Criteria in the Educational Industry**

The selection process of graduate programs revolves around the idea that academic ability will do well at predicting success, but academic ability combined with the suitable personality will do so much better (Rothstein, Paunonen, Rush and King, 1994).

#### **Talking Numbers**

When it comes to the tools that are working strongest and best in predicting graduate academic success, it is all about the numbers. Generally speaking, undergraduate Grade Point Average (GPA) and aptitude test scores are the two most commonly used quantitative measures of potential performance and the primary emphasis for admission (Kuncell & Hezlett, 2010). Grade point averages help predict future performance based on past achievements, and aptitude assessments are able to give an official score for a particular field of study (Coates, Edwards & Friedman, 2013).

Several studies have been conducted to examine the predictive validity of these variables on graduate student performance across multiple disciplines, such as pharmaceutical studies, psychology, social work, counseling education and business administration. Results of these studies consistently showed that GPA and aptitude tests together positively predict future performance on graduate programs, and are relied on as the primary emphasis and best predictors for admission characteristic (Siu & Reiter, 2009). However, such quantitative measures cannot fully account for the prediction of graduate student performance, and other factors ought to be considered (Briehl &

Wasioleski, 2004). For example, a study conducted on an AACSB MBA program at Auburn University showed that, while GPA and standardized scores showed the strongest predictions; English language proficiency was also a strong predictor of graduate performance (Yang & Lu, 2001). Another study conducted by Liao and Adams (1977) concluded that relying on only one variable in the selection of students is not effective; due to the conflicting research data on this measure (refer to Table 1 and Table 2) and since other important aspects are being ignored.

Table 1

*GPA*

<b>Positive</b>	<b>Drawback</b>
Representation of future performance based on past accomplishments (Willingham, 1974)	Limited in range and doesn't differentiate students enough (Willingham, 1974)
Readily available, widely assumed to be fair and equitable and used by almost all graduate schools (Willingham, 1974)	Conversion from one school to another is sometimes a challenge (Willingham, 1974)
Most likely the most important single criterion of success in academic graduate performance (Brink, 1999)	Significance becomes less if more than 10 years have passed between the time of the undergraduate degree and graduate study (Sulaiman & Mohezar, 2006)

Table 2

*Test Scores*

<b>Positive</b>	<b>Drawback</b>
Has 70 years of history in research (Willingham, 1974)	Tests only limited aspects of competency (Willingham, 1974)
Produces reliable standard measures that are highly suitable (Willingham, 1974)	Can be biased against individuals from cultural minorities (Willingham, 1974)
Has developed frameworks to test human abilities (Willingham, 1974)	

As depicted by the results mentioned above, most of the studies today look at hard skills and GPA and have evidence that they predict academic performance. As per the study at Auburn University, this prediction, however, is limited to explaining only 25% of academic performance which means there is still 75% of academic performance unexplained by these hard skills and which could be explained by other means. So, what are those other factors that shouldn't go unnoticed? What are those factors that go beyond numerical GPA and test scores and which can help predict successful candidates? Thus far, the literature does not provide or explore other evidence to support whether it is soft skills or other skills, but they speculate that these could be the direction. More and more, researchers are realizing that academic performance is very much related to the applicant's personality and the kind of person he or she is; this could include factors such as their perseverance, conscientiousness, achievement orientation, communication, etc (Rothstein, Paunonen, Rush and King, 1994). Though there is not enough hard evidence on this matter, researchers are increasingly placing value on the significance of using qualitative data in predicting success, and in moving beyond the numbers alone. In fact, there are some schools today which are actually considering it unfair to screen out candidates who don't meet the test scores and GPA requirements because they are in fact dismissing significant aspects about the person (Leverett-Main, 2004).

### **Moving Beyond the Numbers**

Universities today are no longer just looking for the good grades and test scores; they are very much interested in the kind of person he or she is. The admissions policy at Harvard University in the United States, for example, includes both GPA and test scores as selection criteria. Most students who are admitted into Harvard are those with 4.0 GPAs and very high test scores. However, this is not unconditional. Students

with the best GPAs as well as test results in the top 1% may still get rejected, and those with less than perfect scores may still get accepted. In its admission policy, Harvard aims to select students who go beyond the quantitative data of good grades and test scores to consider students with distinguishing talent or personalities despite their less than perfect scores; known as a qualitative assessment (retrieved from <http://collegeapps.about.com/od/GPA-SAT-ACT-Graphs/ss/harvard-admission-gpa-sat-act.htm>).

A qualitative assessment takes into account the applicant's personality/soft skills, which are most commonly being measured and assessed through interview feedback, written statements from applicants and reference letters. The literature mainly provides guidelines on how to improve the assessment of soft skills, however, there are not enough studies investigating the predictive validity of these skills on successful performance in graduate programs. In the next section, we discuss how best to make use of these tools.

### *Interviews*

A means in which universities are acquiring qualitative information is through interviewing candidates (Snyder, 2013). Interviewing candidates helps provide an assessment of the individual's personal characteristics and interpersonal skills necessary to pursue a graduate degree. Research has shown that the interview is a commonly used method for selecting applicants, and that it adds a personal touch to the whole application experience, which could be a strong marketing tool as well (Nagpal & Ritchie, 2002).

In Ivy League colleges and other selective institutions, interviewing has become a common approach. At Queens University, for example, all applicants are interviewed in person, and overseas students are interviewed by phone ("Queen's B

School”, 2009). At Penn State University, interviews are relied on to make the final hiring decision. A pilot study run to test the effectiveness of this assessment tool showed that, in 26% of the cases, the interview could have changed an admission decision in either a positive or negative manner (Snyder, 2013). In larger state universities, however, interviews may be rather rare due to the rising numbers of applications from students and the lack of time associated with the interviewing process. According to the National Association of College Admission Counseling, significance of interviews in the admissions process went down to 6% in 2011 from 11% in 2008. Despite that, the Advisory Board in 2009 recommended that interviews be added to the admission process due to their value added (Snyder, 2013).

As with all other selection criteria, there is a challenging view on the matter. Studies involving Counselor Educators from various universities as well as Medical Schools across the US have shown that for interviews to show predictive validity, they need to be in the form of a structured interview. In such forms of interviews, there is agreement on the competencies that applicants should be assessed on, and such competencies are well defined (Nagpal & Ritchie, 2002). Furthermore, structured interviews make use of the same defined questions across all interviews (with all applicants) while using a detailed and consistent rating scale which increases objectivity during the assessment and decision making process (Leverett-Main, 2004).

Finally, for interviews to work, they must include behavior and situation based questions, which require applicants to associate personality characteristics to specific behaviors that could be observed during the interview (Siu & Reiter, 2009). To gain the most value from using interviews, universities are using selection interviews as tools to identify the most qualified applicants rather than means to just keep out applicants with inappropriate traits (Nagpal & Ritchie, 2002).

*Reference Letters*

Though letters of reference remain a common criterion in the candidate screening process, there is little evidence to support their effectiveness (Aamodt, 2012). This is mainly a result of its poor predictive validity, the lack of information it provides and rater bias (Siu & Reiter, 2009). Furthermore, as applicants choose their own referees, very few letters of recommendation actually turn out to be negative; a study by Aamodt (2012), for example, have shown that less than 7% of applicants receive an average or below average evaluation

For reference letters to be considered valid predictors of future performance, universities are asking referees to write them in a structured way targeted to providing specific indicative information of the candidate as opposed to information that is generic and common to all (Siu & Reiter, 2009). To be considered as effective screening tools, universities today are counseling students to get references from people who know them well, and those who can highlight their strengths and weaknesses with real behavioral examples (Aamodt, 2012).

*Personal Statements*

As personal statements are ways for students to open up and express their personalities and sell themselves to the university, universities today are placing a higher weight on them as they are interested in getting to know the applicant in a way beyond numbers and scores (Marcus, 2006). According to a nation-wide survey by the National Association for College Admission Counseling, their significance in the hiring process has increased from 14% in 1993 to 23% in 2005 (Marcus, 2006). From a personal essay which carries with it the applicant's personal touch, universities can get an idea of the applicant's level of ability, motivation and career objectives (Guinness, 2012).

Similar to letters of reference, however, there has been little research supporting the predictive validity of personal statements, which could be subject to rater bias (Siu & Reiter, 2009). Since personal statements are one aspect of the hiring process that students really have control over, and since there is no correct or incorrect answer, universities started questioning the authenticity of the work; more and more applicants are getting the support and input from others in completing them (Guinness, 2012). Also, because of their subjective nature, non-standardized information, inconsistency in the qualities being looked for by raters and free-form nature, personal statements are rather difficult to compare across applicants (Siu & Reiter, 2009). To turn this tool into one that works, universities are doing the following:

- Including interviewing in their admission process to check the authenticity of those statements (use of interviews discussed above)
- Revising the personal statement to include more specific and measurable suitability criteria as opposed to the subjective qualities which are difficult to define (Siu & Reiter, 2009)
- Implementing objective scoring criteria / guidelines

To help illustrate the latter two points, consider the following study conducted by GlenMaye and Oakes (2002) on 119 applicants for the Masters of Social Work program. The study aimed to test whether new measures of scoring personal statements will improve the effectiveness of this tool in determining candidate suitability. The study was based on assigning two full time faculty members as raters for one statement, and by including specific suitability criteria to be rated. Raters were asked to evaluate applicants on the following attributes on a scale from zero to five:

- Writing proficiency
- Commitment to the field/goals

- Life experience/motivation
- Self awareness

Raters were provided the statements with all identifying information about the applicant removed to eliminate personal preferences, and each personal statement was assessed twice to reduce individual subjectivity. Furthermore, different weights were given to the different rating criteria depending on the characteristics that mattered most in defining who is suitable for the program.

The questions asked to applicants were twofold: to explain why they chose this profession, and to describe key role models and career objectives and goals. The study showed that unreliability of personal statements is very much related to inconsistent scoring guidelines and reliance on favorites. Also, it was concluded that providing training for raters may improve the instrument's reliability (GlenMaye & Oakes, 2002).

### **Other Factors to Consider**

There is not enough evidence on the significance of the following criteria, but they have been shown to be a factor in predicting academic success in graduate programs (Brink, 1999)

- Previous university in which the applicant got their BA
- Adequate preparation in the field of study
- Number of years of work experience: universities including Harvard

Business School, University of Pennsylvania and University of California all ask for previous work experience from their applicants. Although work experience has become a pre requisite in business schools world-wide, there are differing views on the matter: one perspective is that knowledge gained from work experience provides students with a broader view, while the other claims that work experience is not related to success and what mattered were undergraduate GPA and test scores (Sulaiman & Mohezar, 2006)

- Accepting on probation is sometimes the case for doubtful candidates.

These may include students from unaccredited universities, those with poor GPA, etc.

Probation is removed upon satisfactory demonstration of performance (Brink, 1999)

### **Selection Criteria for Graduate Human Resources Students**

In this paper, the focus will be tailored towards the admission process of human resources graduate programs, which are on the rise with the growing trend of developing HR professionals. Based on a comparison of some of the AACSB accredited universities providing graduate HR programs today (the list is not exhaustive), there appears to be a commonality for schools to ask for GPA, test scores, personal statements and reference letters as part of their admission requirements. There is no mention of the interview as part of the admissions criteria, but it could very well be an internal mechanism which is not stated on the universities' websites. There are some universities such as Rutgers School of Management (US), for example, which also requires English scores in addition to the criteria mentioned above. Pace University (US) requires a US bachelor degree. It should be noted here that there is a lack of evidence about what graduate programs in HR do.

### **OSB Masters of Human Resources Management (MHRM) Program**

According to a Mckinsey report (2012), the Labor Market in the Middle East is categorized as follows:

- Young (median Age 27)
- Middle-income
- Secondary level

The report claims there is an estimated shortage of nearly 45 million medium-

skill workers in developing economies; including MENA. Furthermore, with industrialization on the rise, there is an expected rise in demand for people who are professionally trained and specialized; including in HRM.

With this background information, the MHRM program by AUB's OSB was put in place. The MHRM program aims to tap on the largest pool available in the workforce, while targeting the shortage of medium-skilled HR professionals.

### **Vision & Mission**

In addition to accommodating for the rising need for knowledgeable enlightened and well prepared HR practitioners (mentioned above), at the heart of AUB's MHRM program lies the need to fill the gap in reputable and rigorous degrees available in the HR domain and hence fill an important regional educational gap in relation to HR competence development.

In order to promote the effective management of human resources in the Middle East region, this program's mission is to lay the proper HR foundation while providing best practice guidelines for HR practitioners. It also aims to provide the necessary competencies needed to equip HR professionals with the required tools and skills needed for success in their positions.

### **Goals & Objectives**

The MHRM program at AUB provides a deep and comprehensive view on all aspects of human resource management, and provides graduates with the necessary background and tools to effectively practice HRM in the Middle East. In effect, the program highlights the strategic importance of HRM and provides an overview of best practice in different functional areas.

The main objective behind this program is to allow OSB to become a leading institution in the region in the field, and the main goals are the following:

- Provide a solid foundation on core HRM issues and cater for the needs of the region
- Provide graduates with the skills and knowledge to either start a career in HR or further develop it
- Aid in establishing better policies, strategies and functional practices at the organizational level
- Integrate insights from various relevant and related business fields to better understand the HR field
- Promote cooperative and collaborative research endeavors across disciplines and faculties
- Attract a large pool of students from a variety of backgrounds and widen their career and employment opportunities

### **Admission Requirements**

The MHRM program is open to students from within AUB, outside AUB and internationally as well. To be eligible for admission, applicants must meet the following requirements:

- Holder of a Bachelor Degree from a university recognized by AUB
- GPA greater or equal than 75 (University requirements)
- 2 years or more work experience; preferably in HR (as opposed to 1 year HR experience; or 2 years managerial experience for Cohort 1 students)
- Personal Interview (optional and by invitation at the discretion of the OSB Graduate Studies Committee)
- References
- Personal Statement

## CHAPTER III

### RESEARCH OBJECTIVE

The main research objective of this study is to define the specific criteria required for admittance into the MHRM program at AUB. The following objectives shall be investigated:

*Research-based objectives:*

- To benchmark against similar and AACSB accredited programs in the US and UK, in terms of the criteria used in selecting students for their graduate studies
- To analyze existing strategic documents relating to the MHRM program.

These include the program's vision, mission, goals and objectives

- To conduct a "role analysis" in order to identify the criteria necessary for performing on the MHRM program from the perspective of multiple stakeholders.

*Consulting-based Objectives:*

- To conduct focus groups with students from the MHRM program (previous Cohort 1 and the new Cohort 2) in order to explore the skills, abilities and areas of knowledge needed to succeed in the program

- To hold interviews with full time faculty members who are teaching and are part of the MHRM Selection Committee to explore the most important beneficiaries of the program

## CHAPTER IV

### METHODOLOGY

#### **Participants**

Thirty AUB students, Director of EMBA program and six full time professors were contacted by email to inquire whether they are willing to participate in the study. The study involved the six professors, Director of EMBA and twelve students out of the thirty. As it is an American university, the language of communication was English.

#### **Procedure**

Triangulation, a strong technique that gathers data from over two sources and thus increases the credibility and validity of the results (Jonsen & Jehn, 2009), was used on the following three sources:

- Review of literature and existing documentation
- One to one interviews with professors who are currently teaching in the

MHRM program and those who are part of the Selection Committee. Selection Committee includes full time faculty members involved in the design of the MHRM program

- Focus group with the MHRM students from Cohort 1 and Cohort 2

#### **Focus Groups**

Focus groups were conducted with students from the MHRM program Cohort 1 and Cohort 2 in order to explore their views on the skills, abilities and areas of knowledge needed to succeed in the program. The focus group sessions were resorted to as they help create a dynamic interaction directly involving the students, and allow the

students to share ideas openly and build on others thoughts as well (Morgan, 1996). Refer to Appendix I for Focus Group Protocol and Questions.

### **Interviews**

Interviews were held with the six full time faculty members teaching the program; some of whom are also a part of the MHRM Selection Committee. The interview took the form of a semi-structured interview and aimed to explore the professors' views on the most important beneficiaries of the program, and to gauge their opinion about relevant and fair selection criteria. Professors were asked in an organized approach, followed by probing designed to extract further details and elaborate on responses (Qu & Dumay, 2011).

Professors were briefed on the project and assured that all the information they provide will remain anonymous and confidential. Refer to Appendix II for Interview Protocol and Questions. A different interview was conducted with the Director of the Executive MBA program at AUB in order to benefit from his expertise on the currently existing and well-established selection process of students into the EMBA program. Refer to Appendix III for details.

## CHAPTER V

### DATA ANALYSIS AND RESULTS

#### Method of Data Analysis

A common difficulty with qualitative research and data collection through interviews and focus groups is the analysis of the large quantity of rich data.

For that purpose, Nigel King's work on 'Template Analysis' was applied to the data found in this study. Template analysis, a recent development in organizational research, involves coding a large volume of text so that segments about an identified topic (known as the codes) can be assembled in one (Waring & Wainwright, 2008). This approach helped organise data in a meaningful and useful manner.

#### Results

All data derived from interviews and focus groups was transcribed and analyzed as per the following; and considered from the standpoint of professors, students, MHRM goals and/or literature review.

- Target Audience
- Competencies needed to succeed
- Selection Process

#### Target Audience

The target audience from the **professors'** perspectives was an outcome of the various data obtained from the interviews. As for students, one of the questions asked in the focus group was related to what mattered most from their past to help them succeed in the program. Their answers show that having an HR experiential background is most

significant:

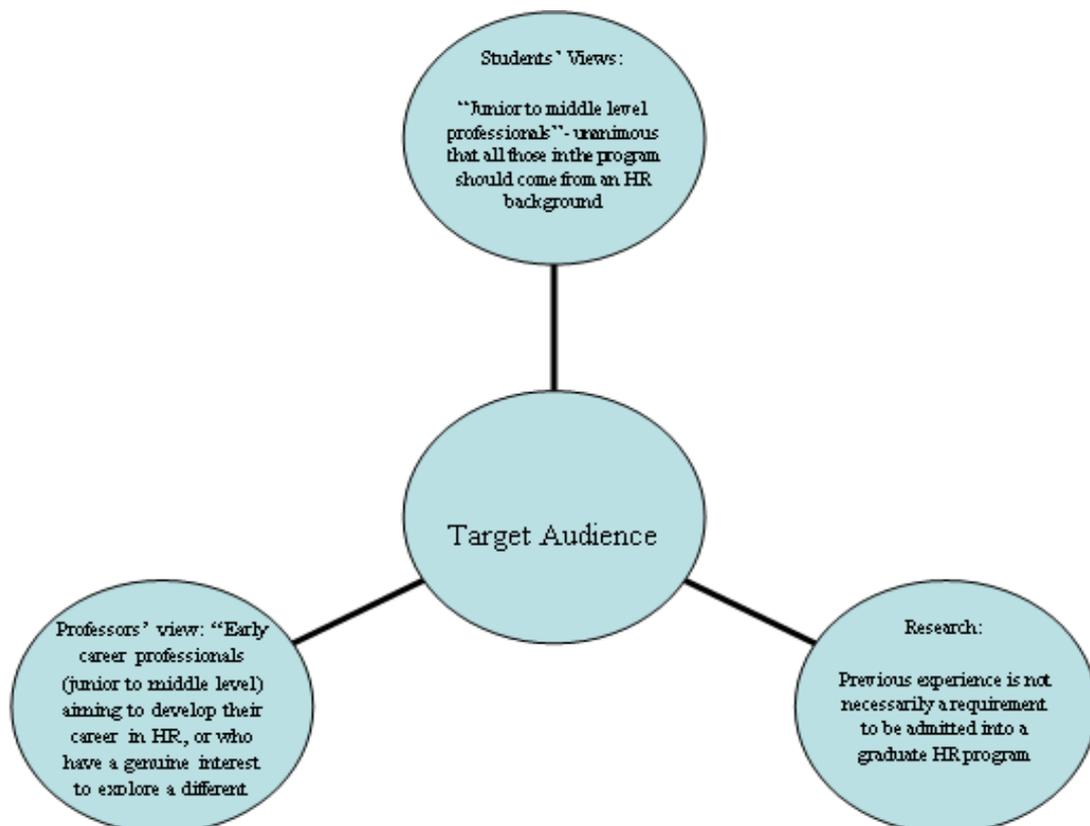
- 50% of students chose the nature / scope of their previous work as the most important criteria

- 25% believed it was their educational background
- 25% chose their number of years of experience

Refer to Appendix IV for Benchmarking Template which supports research that previous experience is not always a must.

Figure 1

*Target Audience*



When asked why this audience is best suitable for the program, answers were mainly related to two factors:

- *Context the Program Takes Place In (i.e. AUB / Lebanon)*

Lebanon, today, is very much characterized by the predominance of small to medium size family run owned businesses. In turn, this factor has impacted on an organizational level why HR has either been mostly purely personnel, seen as a side department or non-existent within the organization. With this view on HR in the Lebanese market, a knowledge gap has been created between what HR professionals know now (best practices) and what they really should be implementing in organizations.

- *Nature/Positioning of the Program*

The way the MHRM program is positioned can better be understood from the program goals, and the way in which professors and students described it.

As mentioned in Section II Part D of this study, one of the aims of the **MHRM program** is to provide graduates with the skills and knowledge to either start a career in HR or further develop it. This program thus aims to tap the largest pool available in the workforce, while targeting the shortage of medium-skilled HR professionals. Table 3 illustrates the professors and students views which further support the way the program is positioned.

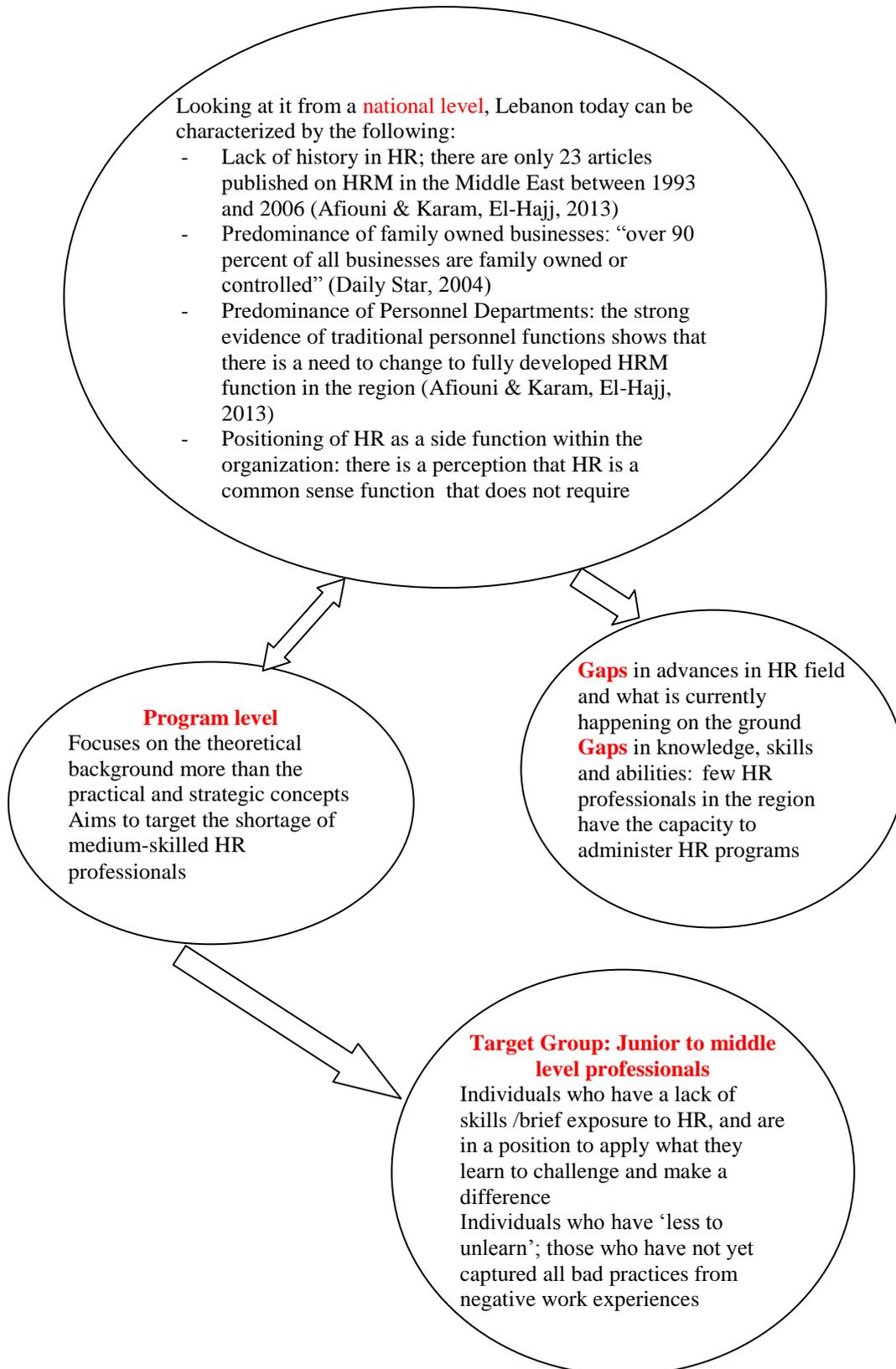
Table 3

*Professors and Students Views*

<b>Professors Views</b>	<b>Students Views</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The program is not designed to prepare specialists but rather provide an understanding of everything that falls within the HR function as generalists</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• A very senior person has very high expectations of the class, and will not likely recommend it to others</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The value out of the program will be less for experienced HR professionals than that of someone briefly exposed to HR</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Someone with a limited exposure will benefit more and be able to go back and challenge their work</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• If the program is targeting more senior/higher levels, the curriculum will have to change and become more practical</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The program will help fill this gap by preparing juniors and allowing them to grow and challenge HR, and help raise it from personnel</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The program is not best-suited for those with more than 10 years experience because these people are at a more strategic level and the way the program is set today, there is not much covered on that</li> </ul>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Juniors are not yet exposed to all the necessary skills. So, if they have new things to show/develop from the program it will most likely be adopted by the business</li> </ul>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Those with 2 years experience are usually 'fresh' and not contaminated by negative work experiences/baggage, are not fed up or unhappy with their accomplishments</li> </ul>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Junior levels are the entry level people who, if trained well in the program, can get the proper skills to reach middle level people. The program also provides theoretical background to help them and ultimately develop their profession</li> </ul>	

The following visual diagram will help give a clearer picture of why the above-mentioned two factors has resulted in targeting junior to middle level applicants.

Figure 2

*Target Junior to Middle Level Applicants*

### Important Competencies Needed to Succeed

When asked about the competencies needed to succeed in the program, the following were the ones mentioned by professors and students. Based on their descriptions of the terms, and examples provided, definitions were put in place as per the below. Refer to Table 4.

Table 4

#### *Important Competencies Needed to Succeed*

	<b>Knowledge, skills, abilities and others</b>	<b>Definition</b>
<b>Skills and Abilities</b>	Analytical Skills	Using logic and reasoning to break down information and make sense of it. Ability to link various course materials, and result in one's own way of thinking
	Teamwork	Working collaboratively with a group of people from different backgrounds to achieve a desired goal
	Achievement Orientation	Being self driven and enthusiastic, and having the commitment and interest to learn. Passionate about education and research
	Positive Attitude	Displaying a pleasant and genuine attitude which is helpful to others and non - judgmental. Not complaining, being open to feedback and being proactive. Showing humility versus a 'know-it-all'
	Conscientious	Following through on commitments and taking responsibility for actions. Serious, responsible and mature
	Communication	Ability to listen to others, and get the message across / express ideas confidently, meaningfully and clearly
	Time Management	Managing ones time and commitments by setting priorities, goals and timelines; even in the presence of stress
	Emotional Intelligence	Developing constructive and effective relationships with others. Knowing how to say what and when, and dealing with others in a respectable manner
	Aptitude (professors only)	Ability to be taught concepts
	Numerical Ability (professors only)	Ability to use mathematics to solve problems
<b>Knowledge</b>	Strong Command of English	Having knowledge of the structure and content of the English language including meaning, composition and grammar
	Knowledge of Workplace (professors only)	Understanding the various functions/departments within an organization, and knowing how they contribute to one another in achieving the business vision. Exposure to professional interaction
<b>Others</b>	Interest in HR	Having the passion and enthusiasm for HR. Setting clear career objectives versus being in it for the degree or because there is nothing else to do

The competencies placed most as top 3 among professors were, in order of importance:

- Analytical Skills (5 times)
- Achievement Orientation (3 times)
- Knowledge of the workplace (2 times)

As for students, they were:

- Teamwork (9 times)
- Analytical Skills (+) Communication (7 times each)
- Time Management (6 times)

**Research** studies made by the Council on Social Work Education found that personal qualities are very much an indication of applicant suitability. Such qualities included maturity, commitment, motivation and emotional stability (GlenMaye & Oakes, 2002); all included in the list of competencies which resulted from our findings with professors and students and which are needed to succeed in the MHRM program. As for the common competency rated as top 3 by both professors and students, it was analytical skills, and this can be further supported by research. According to Ohio State University, HR professionals need to have the ability to gather data, interpret it and make sense out of it if they wish to make an impact in their organizations. The university came to this conclusion while developing a new curriculum for its Masters in Labor and Human Resources program (MLHR); senior Level HR Executives from top multinationals were joined together and asked to give their input on what they believe are the skills required for HR graduates (Heneman, 1999).

### **Selection Process**

In the interview, professors were asked their views on the current selection process of the MHRM students. It was unanimous that the current measures and tools

being used were not enough. Their answers showed there is an over emphasis on GPA and academic background, and that other ways of assessing students should be integrated in the admission process. These included introducing the use of:

- Interviewing
- Case Study
- Leaderless Group Discussions (LGD)
- GRE or other similarized test to ensure consistency among all applicants
- English test such as TOEFL or an in-house written sample

Such suggested tools are very much supported by research; as demonstrated in Section II of this study.

Professors seemed to have differing views, however, regarding a few issues such as interviewing. In the past, interviews were done only for borderline applicants, while now some professors are suggesting that all shortlisted applicants be invited for an interview for relationship purposes, and for getting to know the applicant. Also, while all professors agreed on the use of reference letters and personal statements in the admission process, there were suggestions made by some to rate them differently. Finally, though it is a university requirement to meet a certain GPA level, there are some professors who believe that the process should not be rigid, and instead give applicants who do not meet the required score a chance if their nature and years of experience are significant enough.

## CHAPTER VI

### INTERPRETATIONS

#### **Hard Skills versus Soft Skills**

Though our practice has been focused on assessing hard skills in determining candidate suitability for the program, it shows from our interviews with professors and focus groups with students that so much emphasis is actually given to soft skills and personalities.

During the interview, professors were asked to give concrete and real classroom examples drawing from their experience with Cohort 1 and 2 students that indicated good student-program fit. Their examples are listed in Table 5.

Table 5

*Concrete and Real Classroom Examples*

<b>Interviewee</b>	<b>Examples</b>
Professor 1	Doesn't complain about assignments, takes initiative, generates ideas, is engaged, follows up on things, asks relevant questions and actively listens
Professor 2	Brings into class his/her own personal and past experiences from work, and is able to combine their experiences with what's being learnt in class
Professor 3	Works together smoothly with others as a group; team was innovative, creative, clear and straightforward
Professor 4	Shows passion, commitment, enthusiasm and strong communication skills
Professor 5	Sees value in learning process and is willing to go the extra mile, looks for knowledge in unfamiliar places; takes responsibility in their own learning, self driven
Professor 6	Pleasant, non-judgmental, helpful, serious and open to feedback and proactive

Examples of students who were not a good fit to the program are listed in Table 6 (they are once again based on real behaviors from the class).

Table 6

*Examples of Students Who Do Not Fit the Program*

<b>Interviewee</b>	<b>Examples</b>
Professor 1	Sees the process of getting degree as a means; is just in it for degree. Doesn't participate in class. Doesn't take the courses seriously/ no sense of ownership (doesn't plan ahead) and has the "give me everything" and 'know-it-all' attitude
Professor 2	Doesn't have motivation to learn and diverges into irrelevant conversation during class time. Shows a lack of emotional intelligence and is not socially aware, no proper class dynamics
Professor 3	Has excellent grades, however, the questions asked and interaction with others showed are inappropriate and immature
Professor 4	Physically present yet not mentally engaged, moaning all the time, not collaborating and negative
Professor 5	No planning, no interpersonal skills, lack of maturity, always discussing irrelevant topics in class
Professor 6	Has a submissive personality, no say in anything, no character and seems to be disconnected from others

The descriptions provided by professors illustrate that the focus is mostly related to how the candidates are as people, how committed they are to learn, how responsible and mature they are, how well they can work with others, how much they can provide a positive vibe in the class, etc all leading us to conclude that soft skills are at the heart of performance on this level.

The same exercise was run on students, who were asked to describe the ideal MHRM student (based on their own experiences in the program). Results in Table 7.

Table 7

*Examples to Describe the Ideal MHRM Student*

<b>Student</b>	<b>Description</b>
1	4 to 5 years of experience in business with strong <b>time management</b> and research skills
2	4 to 5 years of experience in business or 2 to 3 years of experience in HR with a <b>good motivation, purpose and interest in HR</b> . Minimum educational background from a tier 1 university
3	4 years of experience in business with minimum 1 year in HR or 3 years in HR with <b>eagerness to learn</b> . Business or psychology background
4	4 years of any experience with some courses in business. Good academic standing and <b>good motivation</b>
5	5 to 7 years of experience in business or 2 to 3 years of HR experience. BA in business, psychology or English literature or social science with exposure to HR
6	2 to 5 years of experience in HR role with the <b>ambition and drive to grow</b> and become a change agent in redefining HR in ME
7	4 to 5 years of experience in business. Has <b>good people skills, passion for education</b> and research, can combine arts with HR and person who decided to shift careers from one domain to the other.
8	2 years experience in HR or 4 years business background. Background business or psychology. Has <b>genuine interest in HR, self motivated</b> , change agent
9	2 to 4 years experience in HR or related field. Background in HR, business or related field. <b>Interest in HR</b>
10	3 to 5 years experience in HR or Business. Fluent in English. <b>Responsible, serious and mature</b>
11	Exposed to HR practices and wants to either advance in his field or shift to HR. should <b>enjoy teamwork</b> and public speaking and <b>take initiative to learn and develop</b>
12	This student should be at least a BA holder who is a graduate of a reputable university that has an approved curriculum and that is in alignment with the American system. This student should <b>have all his/her heart in the program</b> and come with the <b>mindset that he wants to share his information and experience and gain from others</b> . This student should be <b>serious</b> and should be a <b>team player</b> and should be <b>after the knowledge</b> and not the degree as a degree only

As can be interpreted from the above descriptions, there is once again a focus towards soft skills. In each of the statements mentioned by the students, there is a

mention of a personality-based issue which leads us to conclude once again that at the heart of academic success is a qualitative assessment which takes into account the applicant's personality/soft skills.

The question to be asked at this point is how to best assess these soft skills, and what is the best model to be adopted for an admission policy. As previously mentioned, professors believe there is not enough being done in terms of assessing soft skills at the time being.

### **Selection Principles**

Before going any further in addressing the above issues, and putting together a suggested admission procedure for the MHRM program, it is important to define certain selection principles to make sure we are in line with recruitment best practices. These include:

- Selecting based on integrity, impartiality, fairness, reliability and ethical conduct
- Selecting through a transparent process where the criteria for judging suitability of candidates can be directly related to a set of well defined required qualifications, attributes and skills
- Commitment to equality of opportunity i.e. treating candidates fairly and consistently
- Being open and active in communicating on the process

### **Suggested Selection Process**

The purpose of the selection process to be designed should be twofold. It should be able to assess whether or not applicants:

- Will be able to follow the set program
- Are able to make an impact when they go back to their organizations and hence excel in their careers.

As per our findings, the competencies required for students to succeed in the program are the ones applicants should be assessed on.

The suggested process is as follows:

- Based on the research regarding the importance of undergraduate GPA scores, all applicants should first be screened according to GPA and years of experience. This is also both an AUB regulation and legislation requirement (AACSB accreditation)
- Those who meet the requirements for GPA and years of experience are to be invited to OSB to take part in an Assessment Center.

Assessment centers include various assessment tools and exercises to help evaluate several competencies. Observers get the chance to directly observe the applicants' behaviors and see how he or she interacts in social situations, and to measure it against specific and well defined competencies. Research has shown that assessment centers have a high evidence of validity and applicants usually react positively to it (Arthur, Day, McNelly & Edens, 2003).

The assessment center will involve multiple assessors and the following four selection tools. It is expected to last around three hours. Refer to Table 8.

- Personal statements of all those shortlisted should be rated according to a pre- set grading sheet with all applicant identity information removed (reasons already discussed). It is preferable that personal statements are scored prior to the assessment center
- Letters of recommendations should be referred to

Table 8

*Various Assessment Tools and Exercises*

Measurement Description Tool		Competency Tested
Interview	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Meet with a member of the Selection Committee who will first set expectations for the applicants and give them an overview of the program</li> <li>• The structured interview will follow. It will involve specific and pre-defined questions related to one competency at a time, and the applicant is expected to provide real life examples for each area being tackled. The same questions will be asked to all candidates; hence the interview will allow for a fair and equal basis comparison, and as per the program requirements; thus avoiding discrepancy. Applicants will be rated on a specific interview form</li> <li>• As opposed to what was being done before, interviews are to be conducted for all shortlisted applicants and not just the borderline ones or doubtful ones (for the reasons previously mentioned in this research paper)</li> </ul>	Knowledge of the Workplace, Command of English, Time Management, Achievement Orientation, Positive Attitude, Interest in HR
Case Study	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• A form of an aptitude test to assess applicants' basic quantitative skills and that they know the basic Math</li> </ul>	Analytical Skills, Aptitude, Numerical Ability
English Language Proficiency Test	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• An in-house written sample that will help assess if applicants can comprehend what is being discussed in class, and that they can contribute to discussions confidently</li> </ul>	Strong Command of English
Leaderless Group Discussions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Applicants will be asked to sit together and interact with one another on a given issue that requires discussion and decision-making. This will help assess the applicant's overall personality as well as basic traits and interaction skills.</li> <li>• Students from previous MHRM Cohorts will be asked to rate the applicants</li> </ul>	Communication, Teamwork, Emotional Intelligence

- In the assessment center, applicants will be asked to complete all 4 tests/assignments and a final grade will be given accordingly. The result of each test will be multiplied by the weight of the test and then added into a general equation to achieve the end result of each candidate (weights assigned to the different tools depends on the tests' evidence for validity, strength of the tool as well as the number of competencies being tested). Those applicants who score above the set cutoff point will be admitted to the program; taking into account the set quota which will be put to restrict the number of applicants applying from the same institution

*The tests themselves (the case study, interview questions, LGD topic and English test) will be developed and validated with the input of the MHRM Selection Committee*

## CHAPTER VII

### CONCLUSIONS AND LIMITATIONS

Our research showed that universities today are taking an active role in their selection process; aiming to admit those who are a good match to the program and those most likely to succeed.

In identifying those candidates, it has been found that undergraduate GPA and test scores are the two most relied on data. It was also found, however, that such quantitative data on its own is no longer sufficient in making a final hiring decision. Universities today are more and interested in moving beyond the numbers, and getting to know the applicant as a person. They are relying on a qualitative assessment which takes into account the applicant's personality / soft skills, which are most commonly being measured and assessed through interview feedback, written statements from applicants and reference letters.

To come up with our own selection process for the MHRM program, interviews were conducted with the full time professors and focus groups were held with the students. Based on the findings from both research procedures, it was found that an MHRM student should possess a certain number and type of competencies to be admitted to the program. A design model was put in place to help test the competencies; referred to as an assessment center.

Our study faces certain limitations. First, the sample size was quite small. The MHRM is a relatively new program, so the number of students involved in the research was only 30 and professors were only 6. Second, the literature review available on HR is minimal, so we had to resort to studies conducted on other disciplines such as

pharmaceutical studies, psychology, social work, counseling education and business administration. Third, interviewing and focus group methods generate data which is only qualitative in nature. Providing quantitative data on the use of the Critical Incident Technique in questionnaire design would have been interesting to support our objectives and conclusions.

To monitor the use of the assessment center proposed in selecting students, data on the program's students will be collected and monitored for a period of three years. Future directions will revolve around validating this assessment center, and measuring the success of this program through future students

## APPENDIX I

### FOCUS GROUP PROTOCOL AND QUESTIONS

- Two separate sessions were held; one for Cohort 1 students and one for Cohort 2
- All students were invited to participate in the focus group; this included a total of 14 students from Cohort 1 and 16 students from Cohort 2. The actual number of participants was:
  - ✓ 7 participants from Cohort 1
  - ✓ 5 students from Cohort 2

Participants were briefed on the project and given a written consent form to sign. They were also provided with the following ground rules:

- ✓ There is no right or wrong answer; everyone's experience and opinions are important
- ✓ They may be interrupted at times
- ✓ Everyone is asked to participate
- ✓ Session will be audio taped
- ✓ I will be taking notes
- ✓ All the information they provide will remain anonymous and confidential

Both sessions lasted approximately one hour; questions being:

1. Based on your experience in the MHRM program, what skills did you need to succeed in the program?
2. Take a minute to reflect on the competencies that you believe you made use of throughout this program. Please go ahead and write them down. Once finished, please choose your top 3 and discuss them out loud.
  - 1) What are the skills that gave you an edge over others, and what are the personal characteristics/traits that pulled you back?
  - 2) If you were to think about the Lebanese market / environment, and based on what you were exposed to in the program, who do you think are the people that should be targeted for this program?
    - a. Who will benefit /gain value the most?
    - b. Who will most likely apply what they have learnt and make a difference in their own businesses?
  - 3) Which part of your previous education or experience did you feel helped prepare you the most when it came to completing assignments and preparing deliveries?
    - a. In order of importance, please rate the following from 1 to 3; with 1 being the most important:
      - a) The number of years of professional experience you have .....

- b) The nature/scope of your work .....
  - c) Your educational background in university .....
- 4) Based on the program content and work assignments, I would like to know if you feel you belonged and were a 'good-fit' to the program?
- ✓ In a few words only, please write down a description of the ideal MHRM student. This should include his/her educational and professional background as well as skills
- 5) What were the major challenges and/or obstacles faced? Why?
- ✓ Did you face a specific incident with a professor or colleague in which you felt you were unable to properly handle yourself?
  - ✓ Was there any assignment that made you feel hesitant and incapable? What was required from you for this assignment?
  - ✓ Were you a part of a team in which you found yourself unproductive or demotivated or irritated?

## APPENDIX II

### INTERVIEW PROTOCOL AND QUESTIONS

Professors were thanked for their time to take part in the interview

Aim of the interview was explained as follows:

- ✓ Hear your views on who you believe the most important beneficiaries of the program should be
- ✓ Gauge your opinion about relevant and fair selection criteria;
- ✓ both aimed towards improving the program selection process
- ✓ This will last a maximum of 45 minutes.
- ✓ The interview is based on three general questions followed by a critical incident questions
- ✓ Please feel free to add anything that you believe is relevant
- ✓ I will be taking notes
- ✓ All the information provided will remain anonymous and confidential

Each interview lasted approximately 45 minutes, the questions being:

1. Based on your knowledge of the market and market needs, who are the most important beneficiaries of the MHRM program?
  - a. Why do think these are the most important to target?
2. What do you believe are the most important criteria that these people should possess in order to benefit the most from the program?
  - a. Can you think of any other criteria (hard or soft)?
  - b. In your opinion, what are the three most important ones?
3. What do you think about the current selection criteria? In specific, what do you believe are its strong points? And its weak point?

Critical Incident Questions:

Now we move to the CIQ, where I will ask you to describe incidents regarding MHRM students that you have taught, however, please keep their names confidential as the person per se is not relevant, rather, it is the behavior that they exhibit.

- a. Reflecting on your experience with cohort 1 and 2, please think about a student that in your opinion wasn't ready to be part of the MHRM program.
  - 1) Could you please explain what lead you to you think so?
  - 2) Can you please describe an incident that illustrates how the student's lack of readiness interfered with his or her progress?

- b. Reflecting on your experience with cohort 1 and 2, please think about a student that in your opinion was a strong fit with the MHRM program.
  - 1) Could you please explain what lead you to you think so?
  - 2) Can you please describe an incident that illustrates how the student's readiness allowed him to succeed?

## APPENDIX III

### INTERVIEW WITH DIRECTOR OF EMBA PROGRAM QUESTIONS

The meeting lasted approximately 30 minutes, questions being:

1. How do you decide who the most important beneficiaries of the EMBA program are?
  - a. Do you consider the market and the market needs?
  - b. Do you think of the level of content covered in class?
  - c. Why?
2. What are the criteria you look for while selecting your students? What were the battles you had to fight, and how did you do that?
  - a. Do you focus on GPA and years of experience? How do you handle an applicant who has significant and relevant years of experience yet does not meet the GPA requirement? Is he/she ruled out, or are there other means to assess?
  - b. Are the applicants' soft skills assessed? What skills do you look for most in your students, and how do you assess for them? Is it through interviews?
3. Can you provide me with a description of your selection process i.e. what are the steps entailed (short listing, entrance exams, cases, interviews, etc)
  - a. What are the methods of assessment you rely on? Do interviews have preset questions?

## APPENDIX IV

## BENCHMARKING TEMPLATE

Region	Country	University	Name of Program	Admission Requirements	
				Education	experience
Europe	France	Dauphine University Paris	MBA Dauphine in HRM	Bachelor's degree	4 years
Europe	France	Grenoble	Master in Strategic HRM	any discipline	preferable
Europe	France	Paris 1 Pantheon Sorbonne	Master in HR and CSR	Business, law, social sciences, economics, political science, engineering	3 years + 26 years old at least
Europe	France	University Toulouse 1 Capitol	Master in HRM	BBA. Other disciplines might be accepted upon examination of application	none
Europe	UK	LSE	MSc in Human Resource Management	First or upper second class (2:1) in any discipline +English	none
Europe	UK	University of Sheffield	MSc in Human Resource Management	2:1 or higher + English	none
Europe	UK	University of Westminster	MA Human Resource Management	2:2 or higher	extensive experience if no degree
Europe	UK	Cardiff University	MSc in Human Resource Management	good honours degree in business, social sciences, humanities, law or other relevant subjects.	None
Europe	UK	University of Portsmouth	MSc in Human Resource Management	Good honours degree	HR experience if no degree + CIPD certificate
Europe	UK	Greenwich School of Management + University of Wales	MSc in Human Resource Management	2:2 or higher	none

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