

Empowering executives to transform their industries

Eighteen “learning partners” graduated from City University’s College of Business DBA programme this year. The members of this group work in a wide range of economic sectors and all hold senior positions in their organisations.

The theses they researched and wrote during their studies span a similarly wide array of topics. Their supervisors and College of Business faculty members worked with them to help ensure these topics were broad enough to be relevant beyond their company or individual area of responsibility, while still being focused enough to be useful.

One DBA graduate is Haywood Cheung, president of the 104-year-old Chinese Gold and Silver Exchange Society. His DBA thesis looks at how the internationalisation of the RMB will affect the gold market and how the gold market can in turn support the internationalisation of the RMB.

“Initially, my thesis was looking at gold as a safe haven, but my supervisor said thousands have talked about this already,” Cheung says. Instead, he took his knowledge of the gold market and applied it to what has become a preoccupation of bankers and financiers worldwide.

“I think how China opens up and globalises the yuan is a hot topic. But you need a mechanism to allow the RMB to be traded, invested and speculated on by international players – and gold is the commodity that can help. The inflow of gold into China means an outflow of RMB.

“Based on my records from the exchange, three years ago, China imported 300 tonnes of gold per year. Last year, it was 560 tonnes and this year it is up to over 1,000 tonnes.”

Cheung explains that the exchange rate fluctuation band for the RMB has increased from 1 per cent to 2 per cent and is expected to open up to 3 or 4 per cent. “This will allow international players to come in to arbitrage between the yuan and the US dollar and their interest rates difference by means of gold trading,” he says.

“I have been in the gold and silver industry for over 30 years and I have had experiences on how gold can be used to arbitrage the US dollar and other currencies. My study has equipped me with solid data and theory support and thus strengthened my confidence as I speak publicly on the subject.”

Cheung credits his DBA thesis for giving him the knowledge and theoretical underpinning to convince mainland officials that the Chinese Gold and Silver Exchange Society should be the first offshore exchange to operate there.

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HAYWOOD CHEUNG, PRESIDENT, CHINESE GOLD AND SILVER EXCHANGE SOCIETY

Wilson Cheung, another graduate, is the general manager in Shanghai for international insurance brokerage firm Lockton. His DBA research topic turns the spotlight on one aspect of another “hot” mainland issue.

“My thesis is about the development of pollution liability insurance in China,” he says. “This is completely new in China and relatively new in Western countries as well, where it has only been available in the past five to 10 years.”

Given the pollution problems on the mainland, this form of insurance is an effective way to manage these risks, he points out.

He adds that the DBA programme “absolutely” lived up to his expectations, and the investment he made in it has already paid off in career terms. “Because of my work in this area, I have been invited to join the Chinese Ministry of Environmental

Protection’s team of experts and participate in their trial schemes.”

He picks out the opportunity to network with other business leaders as another valuable benefit of enrolling. “One other guy [on the programme] is an expert on big data and we are working together to see how big data can be applied to the insurance industry as a whole in China and Hong Kong,” he says.

Patrick Lee, general manager of supply chain management solutions at Nippon Express in Hong Kong, took a problem that had troubled him in his work as his DBA topic.

“My thesis studies the process of applying the theory of constraints to managing the flow in the upstream supply chain. There are bottlenecks and constraints that block the flow in supply chain operations. If we can identify and manage the bottlenecks, this flow will be enhanced,” he says.

Lee adds that during the course of his work on his DBA, he found that, while managing the bottlenecks was not such a huge issue when the business was growing, the challenges came when the market became soft.

“We need to establish an alerting mechanism for business downturns that will trigger a slowdown in production within an adequate lead time,” he says. “Normally, it takes three months to realign the production layout and the inventory depletion at the upstream process manufacturing set-up.”

While Lee is grateful to the professors and the administrative team at the College of Business for their help, he reserves a special mention for three other people. “Last but not least, I thank my wife and two daughters for their continuous support during my six years of study.”

Louis Poon, director and principal consultant at G-Star Services, took longer to complete his DBA thesis, but there were several very good reasons – both professional and personal – why he did not graduate sooner.

“Completing the programme took so long because, during the first

semester, I found out [my wife and I] were going to have a baby,” he explains. “And three years later, we had another. In between, I have changed jobs several times.”

Poon has worked in asset management for 15 years and his DBA thesis looks at six critical factors that determine whether businesses can survive in Hong Kong’s retail fund market.

However, he says his studies have given him skills he can apply much more generally. “The DBA programme has taught me a lot about critical thinking, in-depth analysis and the consolidation of evidence. There is so much information available these days that you have to scan. But how do you scan? And, after you’ve scanned, how do you judge? Then how do you draw your conclusions and decide on your future action?”

One action he is sure about is his need to show his appreciation for the support he received at home. “Thank you very much to my wife for her support in my DBA journey,” he says.

Jim Yeung is chief financial officer at electronics firm Ngai Lik. In July this year, he also took on the role of chief

executive at Opes Asia Development, a listed company in Hong Kong. “[The DBA] programme has helped broaden my scope,” he says.

Yeung’s thesis looks at what influence the cultural backgrounds of the members of companies’ boards has on corporate governance and the performance of their businesses. He believes this can be very useful to those looking to improve the way companies are run.

“It is a complex relationship,” Yeung says. “Beyond a certain number, increasing the board size leads to diminishing returns. And if you increase the number of Western directors on the board, that can weaken the positive effects of the board size.”

Yeung adds that the fact that most Hong Kong firms are family businesses makes implementing the rules about such things as the separation of the roles of chairman and CEO more complicated.

Despite his busy schedule, Yeung graduated within four years. “I think the CityU programme is more flexible than others and all the courses you have to take are related to your thesis.”

