

VaLUENTIS-ISHCM 'Talking Head' series 2012 No 1

The International School of the International School of Human Capital Management has recently announced the release of the new groundbreaking online course programmes including the Master of Science in HCM and the introduction of the innovative and revolutionary CMAS® technology.

The following is a transcript of an interview with the Dean, Nicholas J Higgins, regarding the school's new programmes and philosophy, background on the new continuing management assessment system (CMAS®) technology and why it just might revolutionise management/HR learning. The interview was conducted by Heidi Sinclair, Associate editor of Journal of Applied HCM.

16th July 2012

SINCLAIR: Good morning Dean. Perhaps you could start by telling us a little more on the new School programmes?

HIGGINS: Hi. Sure. The school has recently announced that it is now offering a number of its management courses online, including its Masters Compact and MSc in Human Capital Management. They are due to start in 2013 and enrolment will begin very shortly. Though online is nothing new, some of the course delivery and features are. For managers and HR practitioners the value proposition really is a fusion of high quality and low cost¹ together with far-reaching accessibility.

SINCLAIR: Could you elaborate a little more for the audience?

HIGGINS: Sure - first of all, to do that, I need to go back a step. Ever since the School started just over 6 years ago, we've been constantly looking at course design and delivery going back to first principles, being aware of the legacy in management learning. Before I go on, I'd just like to be clear when I talk about managers we are talking of those who have direct responsibility for people. To continue, a recent survey by CMI² showed that only 40% of managers are qualified³ which is significantly below that of other professions. CMI go on to state that they expect longer term this will be no more than 20%...

SINCLAIR: So you're pointing out the apparent contradiction with management as a profession?

HIGGINS: Yes - this debate has raged for some time. Qualifications by themselves don't necessarily tell you that the other 60% managers can't people manage/lead (or indeed the 40% who have them) but the benefits of being qualified have been well documented⁴. For instance, when it comes to employee engagement, we know that the ability of the line manager/supervisor to 'people manage' is a major factor - thus there's

¹ Cost of M. Sc. HCM Compact is £975; M. Sc. HCM is £1950 (over 2 years); Dip HCM = £795; Cert HCM = £595. Membership of HCMI is free through qualification.

² The Value of Management Qualifications, Wilton P, Woodman & Essex R, Chartered Management Institute 2007

³ To level 4 or above, i.e. certificate/diploma level, http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/National_Qualifications_Framework

⁴ See, for example, The Business Benefits of Management and Leadership Development, Chartered Management Institute 2012. Also, Management Development Works: The Evidence, Mabey C, Chartered Management Institute 2005

a direct link. I don't wish to get into a dialogue over management as a profession today as it's not the main focus of this discussion – just the point about the people management capabilities of line managers and the 'expertness' of HR advisory....

SINCLAIR: Many may find these findings somewhat surprising given the plethora of leadership/management education that's been on offer whether that's been a 1-hr webinar/coaching session or a 5-year distance learning Masters degree and everything else in between.....

HIGGINS: Yes. I agree. A significant number of commentators would tend to point the finger of blame (if there is one) at organisations, accusing them of, at best, ambivalence in presiding over a culture that seemingly doesn't attach significant importance to a 'License to manage/lead'. Also, there is the accusation that a sizeable percentage of managers themselves are not interested either, and whether this may or may not be as a result of this same culture. Though one can't discount these observations, evidence from various surveys and from the field, however, would suggest that this argument is overly-simplistic.

SINCLAIR: How do you mean?

HIGGINS: Organisations' base motivation is to survive no matter what sector they operate in. Ignoring the people factor to such an extent would appear to be rather counter-intuitive and counter-productive. Thus, there may be other reasons. I would propose that in order to delve deeper for any clues we should, in fact, change perspective and look at the supply-side aspect in industry terms, as, seldom, does this question get asked with regard to the overall argument.

SINCLAIR: Could you expand?

HIGGINS: I've mentioned that we went back to first principles and that meant we looked at common management learning methods when related to management/HR qualifications. And again, before I go on, just to clarify, I'll use the term 'L&M' to denote leader/manager to acknowledge both sides of the coin from a learning perspective and avoid misunderstanding/confusion here.

SINCLAIR: Thanks for that!

HIGGINS: Well - it still causes some issues in the industry. To continue, we engaged in a thought-experiment and asked if an organisation wanted to 'sheep-dip', for argument's sake, all of its managers to become 'Licensed to manage/lead' - what would get in the way (all things being equal)? Given the current standard industry models, three core issues were identified: Cost, Time, and what we term Access. The three are related. I'll start with Access.

Access here is the physical requirement of being in a particular location at a particular time. In the UK we have it relatively easy distance-wise, though arguably not transport-wise, whereas, pretty much everywhere else in the world distance is a far greater problem. The associated cost and loss of time just to get to a designated location is easily overlooked.

Secondly, cost is still prohibitively expensive for many organisations with part of the problem being, of course, attendance at the physical location requirement. And the cost is still no guarantee of quality of learning.

Thirdly, time, or more accurately time-constraints are the perennial issue for many recipients of learning, though we need to be aware of the convenient cover excuse for any line manager who is resistant to any form of educating.

The big issue for the organisation, of course, is the potential disruption to 'Business as Usual' and something that HR comes up against all of the time. Thus, given the time, cost and potential disruption issues, it's not unusual to see organisations defaulting to only a certain cadre of managers being selected. It's a pragmatic but sub-optimal solution at best.

SINCLAIR: I see. So what you're saying is the industry model from the supply side needs to change?

HIGGINS: Amongst other things - yes - is the short answer. If the model can be changed to make access, cost and use of time more viable then we can really identify those organisations and managers who aren't interested because we would have largely negated these three big obstacles; and, in particular, if the quality of said programmes is taken as a given.

Also, I think it's important to note here our analysis of the L&M development industry exposed to what we described, as 'run on vested interests' from a supplier perspective. We believe that there's a 'disruptive convergence' occurring, spurred on by web technology, though that's not the whole reason. As my team will testify I don't often get excited with supposed new developments but with this one I did/do.

SINCLAIR: Could you explain a little more?

HIGGINS: Well - the more and more we looked at the industry and how it was set-up the more and more we felt what was mainly on offer didn't excite people enough, certainly managers. Quality management learning of this nature tends to be viewed as a long grinding road filled with words like 'sacrifice', 'pain' and 'anguish'. There are big upsides but not until you've completed. It's kind of the wrong way round. As somebody who has experienced all types of postgraduate learning to Masters level - I can testify in part to that.

Let's just take one example which is particularly related to the time issue - assignment essays. Now for undergraduate and graduate courses they may be an essential part of the process with a legacy stretching back in time. However, with regard to in-situ people managers/HR practitioners, learning to be applied at this level has to be time-effective and essays based on wordcount seem to be increasingly inefficient.

Given alternatives, which I will come on to in a moment, the use of essays appears long-winded and inappropriate. On top of this are the constant issues of plagiarism, the quality of subjective assessment, non-instantaneous feedback and the huge logistical issue of marking itself - all adding to the cost equation. For the student, I can think of

no bigger stress-induced process and the too common problem of deadlines and late submissions which often over-rides the learning itself.

SINCLAIR: So you're not a big fan of assignment essays?

HIGGINS: Not for postgraduate learning where people have day jobs in management. Essays have their use – just not in this practitioner space in my opinion. Life's too short. By the way, we are not advocating less study time in terms of credits but the way in which an individual's time and effort is spent. The focus is on the most cost-effective means of learning and application. Essays have a high opportunity cost in this context.

SINCLAIR: So if it's not essays, how do you assess individual comprehension and learning?

HIGGINS: As you already know our courses are case-based (the detailed 'Harvard' types) and form a central plank of our learning through critical evaluation and absorption - we have our own unique learning methodology when it comes to case-based insight. Having taken the decision that assignment essays were not the way forward we faced a pretty challenging conundrum. It is here that we encountered our light-bulb moment.

I've always been an admirer of the GMAT system and this led us to inventing our own unique CMAS® (that is Continuous Management Assessment System) technology. Very briefly - this involved customary structural design of assessment questions relating to cases and course material in a unique manner. Web technology allows for us to monitor all online class contributions/assessments by individual – something that you can't do easily in physical class rooms.

By using CMAS® – the focus centres on related set synchronous⁵ learning in a pro-active manner. For students, there is no such thing as late assignments. Time is spent on learning knowledge for application and being assessed on that in a smart manner. No time is wasted on either worrying about or writing set wordcounts which do not necessarily translate into learning. This was a big moment as far as we were concerned. It seemed to tick all of the boxes of a creative solution.

SINCLAIR: This sounds fascinating?

HIGGINS: It is. We've spent the last 3 years constructing and validating the CMAS® on Harvard and ECCH case studies for the online programmes. There's been quite a bit of recent comment on disruptive technology in higher education⁶ as well as comment on Masters programmes and business schools⁷. One would argue that CMAS® is a true example when applied in the L&MD space and we wouldn't be surprised if our idea permeates academia over time in this context.

⁵ Synchronous learning is where online classes require students and instructors to be online at the same time

⁶ See, for example, *The Innovative University*, Christensen C M & Eyring H J, HBS 2011; *Disrupting College: How Disruptive Innovation Can Deliver Quality and Affordability to Postsecondary Education*, Christensen C M, Horn M B, Caldera L & Soares L, Innosight Institute/ Center for American Progress 2011; *Rethinking Higher Education Business Models: Steps Toward a Disruptive Innovation to Understanding and Improving Higher Education Outcomes*, Sheets R, Crawford S & Soares L, Center for American Progress 2012; *New Business Models for Higher Education*, Collis D J, in *The Future of the City of Intellect: The Changing American University*, pp 181-202. Stanford University Press, 2002;

⁷ See for example, *Rethinking the MBA*, Datar S, Garvin D & Cullen P, Harvard Business Press 2010; *The Business School and the Bottom Line*, Starkey K & Tiratsoo N, Cambridge University Press 2007.

Over the past few years developments in web technology have made online learning far more reliable and with increasing functionality. I would anticipate a 'gold-rush' in this space over the next few years. It could get quite bloody for some incumbents, if they're slow to react.

SINCLAIR: Do you believe, then, we're at an industry-change moment?

HIGGINS: Yes to some degree. To be fair - online learning has been around for some time but current thinking and developments are I believe fundamentally challenging certain traditional learning delivery models - though I stress not all. Cloud technology has certainly provided the means. Does the technology and thinking like ours have the capacity to change traditional business models in the L&MD space? Sure. That makes it disruptive. Suppliers have to embrace it rather than tinker at the edges with it.

For example, I'm surprised that a number of incumbent organisations have not made more use of the technology to redesign their offerings. It may be down to their respective business models in the probable cannibalisation of their current revenue streams. Disruptive technology however has no respect for revenue models.

SINCLAIR: OK. Can you tell me a little more about the new ISHCM programmes?

HIGGINS: Our **Leader/Manager/HR-Firstclass** programmes provide clear, straightforward and high quality certifications up to Masters level for practitioners.

The Masters course content contains strategy, business economics, organisation performance, governance, ethics, employment law, leadership and change, and all main elements of human capital management - what others may refer to as 'organisation behaviour' but with more in-depth study, particularly around employee engagement.

Our course architecture starts with our full Masters in Science in HCM which was reverse engineered to the Masters Compact preceding it and then down to the smaller certificate/diploma type modular courses. Further courses were designed on related subject matter that didn't feature in the core syllabus. It's a very streamlined and clean approach - something that you can't always say for other providers.

The Masters in Science 'Compact' can be completed in 12 months. This can then be converted into a full Masters in Science with another 12 months study. All qualifications are accredited through the Human Capital Management Institute. All the other courses are designed for completion in up to 12 months. The required CPD is another departure from an industry standpoint.

I think it's important to stress here that any 'HCMier' will have received exactly the same deep-focused content making it a truly standardised qualification which is not the same you can say of other offerings. As far as we know, we are the first UK business school to offer people management learning fully online. We also have a different academic year.

SINCLAIR: The academic year being...?

HIGGINS: Our academic year runs from January to December. Feedback from our students has been very positive regarding this subtle calendar change. Our rule is if you study successfully for up to 12 months you walk away with a qualification. We think it's

important motivationally. We do have some flexibility for special case deferments but these are treated very much as exceptions. We are not advocates of 'flexible distance-learning' despite its popularity – we prefer associates to commit to a specific time period because of the advantages it bestows.

SINCLAIR: What are the disadvantages of 'flexible distance-learning' in your opinion?

HIGGINS: Well let me first acknowledge the idea, it has been very successful numbers-wise. However, the disadvantages I see are: (i) they're very inefficient in as much as the student requires considerable learning 'reboot-time' every time the learning is put on hold; (ii) Distance learning is 'asynchronous' leaving the student somewhat isolated and with perhaps too much freewill when it comes to work-based study; (iii) allied to the first two points the motivation to complete is tested considerably and this plays a part in the potential drop-out numbers.

SINCLAIR: I was interested on your take of continuing professional development (CPD)....?

HIGGINS: Our view on CPD is again different to the norm. All qualification holders undertake a short refresher course with the school annually to satisfy CPD requirements. Again it's time-, cost- and access-efficient. 'HCMiers' are encouraged to undertake whatever CPD they wish to take above this, but that's optional. We are not big advocates CPD of being an industry itself. It's, after all, a means to an end - let's not over-elaborate. We believe our CPD system to be the most effective and least time-consuming means of doing what it says on the tin.

SINCLAIR: Just to clarify, will all of the School courses be online?

HIGGINS: No – the School still offers some workshop-based programmes, normally client-based as we provide a customised L&M development service to organisations who wish to make use of their onsite facilities and non-open course design.

We expect much of our L&M development to take place alongside employee engagement projects or indeed just paralleling employee engagement initiatives/focus.

SINCLAIR: I was intrigued by your phrase 'deep-focused content' earlier. Could you explain why you used that phrase?

HIGGINS: Sure. In answering, I need to go back one step (again) with regard to research. We estimated recently that it would currently take somebody about 2,000 years⁸ to read every piece of research published on managing people. It's a fact, that previous seminal knowledge published is lost to learning, in some way, in many courses today. This may in some part be down to the ridiculous costs of accessing published material which is under plans to radically change. However, I wouldn't say that this was a valid reason when designing course material. One could argue that today's management teaching is in danger of producing 'learned ignorance' as much as 'learning' itself. There's also a strong element of 'reinvention of wheels' when it comes to more recent research in the field which I regard, too often, as superfluous.

⁸ Estimation based on a human being reading/evaluating a book or 10 research papers a day, 365 days per year.

SINCLAIR: Could you expand?

HIGGINS: Well – for example, there’s a fabulous wealth of material that seems to have been systematically ignored whilst the industry has grappled with the concept of employee engagement. Worse, some have postulated new ‘research findings’ which turns out to be just a rehash of previous ‘stuff’ from a different source. So, for me the issue isn’t about publishing more research per se but more on evaluating applied organisation practice itself which is where we’re at, having evaluated/synthesised previous research.

SINCLAIR: Why do you think this is?

HIGGINS: It would seem to stem from the way in which the industry is rewarded. Most ‘brownie points’ seem to be earned for publishing ‘new’ research, and certainly when compared to the act of teaching, sadly. I can understand why new research is being done in physics, for example, as they’re still trying to come up with a standard model (or two) of the universe. But, as I said, with 2,000 years worth of management research reading already published – do we not have enough answers already?

Having researched around ten thousand papers myself, you perhaps can understand my reticence at ‘more of the same’. I’m not advocating that new research shouldn’t be undertaken in our field – just that it has to be pretty ‘new-new’ to be worth it. I would prefer more time being spent on digesting/synthesising previously published research, certainly from a teaching standpoint. In fact, we call it ‘integrated research’. We think it’s a practice that is sparingly used in much management learning.

Our goal is to provide deep insight into the voluminous empirical research that has been undertaken in human capital management so that our students⁹ can apply their learning where necessary in the work place. We have been concerned that major published work too often (if it’s mentioned at all) ends up with just a few cursory lines’ reference in some text books. Quite often these are presented without appropriate reference to criticisms or controversies which is extremely important for balance and insight.

SINCLAIR: You feel strongly on this?

HIGGINS: Yes - I do as a professional, shouldn’t everybody? I trust those reading this understand what I’m saying here. You can’t half-learn human capital management. I would argue that too much of that goes on now as evidenced in confusing or misunderstood HR related terminology, faddish consultancy, and, unfortunately, practitioner ignorance. It’s not hard to see why organisations have an easy excuse not to do something in HCM. It’s also an issue for HR practitioners in general.

SINCLAIR: Following on from this, why do you consider ISHCM to be unique?

HIGGINS: Several reasons: (i) Our speciality is human capital management; (ii) We provide top quality content and case study material (e.g. such as Harvard); (iii) We have a truly unique assessment system that shifts the focus of learning to deep understanding and application from more time-consuming and more inefficient methods; (iv) Continuing professional development that is much more definitive and standardised, and

⁹ Known as Associate HCMiers

(v) On the cost, time and access axes - an unbeatable proposition: far cheaper, considerably more time-friendly and the fact that a student can attend synchronous lectures from their desk, or a dedicated computer at home or work, with all of the support one would expect from a business school.

SINCLAIR: And, finally, what do you consider the school's aims to be?

HIGGINS: Our courses are aimed at a global audience of any in-situ people manager and HR practitioners. We are committed to raising standards of people management in organisations around the world in the most effective way and in a way that positively affects organisation performance – let's not forget that very important axiom.

The working population of the world is estimated to be around 3.2 billion¹⁰. Given a rough calculation, that means there is probably around 160 million people-managers with about another 320 million in a supervisory capacity. Anybody who is serious about people management and employee engagement would wish to see all of those half a billion suitably qualified. It's a tough ask but somebody's got to do it.....

SINCLAIR: Thank you.

HIGGINS: My pleasure.

Interview concluded.

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¹⁰ <http://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SL.EMP.TOTL.SP.ZS>