

Is theology better training in management than an MBA?

By [Steve Hayes](#)

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The recent furor about the [closure of the religious studies department](#) at the University of Stirling in Scotland made me think again about the value of studying theology at university. In response to something a friend posted about this on Facebook, I remarked that it was not for nothing that theology was called “the Queen of the Sciences,” and it probably does a better job of equipping people for management than an MBA.

My justification for this was that when the University of South Africa in the 1990s first felt the need to include black faces among the Afrikaner Broederbonders who dominated the university administration, the only place they could find competent people was from the theology faculty, which they “asset stripped” of some of its best academics to turn them into administrators.

I’m not thinking here so much about the study of religion as a phenomenon (which was what the University of Stirling concentrated on), but rather the study of Christian theology itself.

My evidence for this contention is purely anecdotal, so many may not regard it as worth much, and my experience relates mainly to the University of South Africa, or Unisa, where I worked in the editorial department for 13 years, and the department of missiology (in the faculty of theology) for four years.

The editorial department at the university saw most of the study material sent to students (Unisa is a distance-education university), and thus was, in a sense, the backstop of quality control. The quality of the study material varied tremendously.

In 1994 we had David Langan lead a seminar for the editorial department on good and bad study material. He asked us to collect samples of second-year student assignments from various departments, which he then examined, and chose four of them to comment on—one very good, one very bad, and two mediocre.

The one he singled out as very good was from the missiology department. He analysed it, pointing out the evidence that the student was thinking for himself, and evaluating the study material. The one that was very bad was from the education faculty, which showed evidence of rote learning and failure to understand the material.

We (the editorial department) also arranged a seminar to which the teaching staff were also invited, run by Fred Lockwood, of the Open University in the UK. Some academics appreciated it, while others felt threatened by it—what did mere *taalversorgers* (language caretakers) know about science, which was purely the concern of academics? This attitude was especially to be found among members of the education faculty, which generally produced the worst-quality study material.

One thing that was rather disappointing was that Fred Lockwood chose for his examples the cosmetics industry, which was not among the subjects taught at Unisa. In explaining the reasons for his choice he made some rather disparaging remarks about the humanities, and said he had chosen a subject that was of more practical use. That indicated, to me at least, that Unisa was not the only screwed up university in the world. If that represented the Open University in the UK, it was in just as much trouble as Unisa, for of what real value is the cosmetics industry? It is concerned with frivolous luxuries. If economic usefulness was to be the main criterion, then a topic like food production, or even steel production might be justifiable—but cosmetics? That surely signified twisted values.

And this is where theology and management meet. Theology teaches people to weigh up values, and to make decisions based on those values, to think about all the factors involved when making decisions. And this is the very thing that many MBAs seem unable to do. And it was this that meant that Unisa had to pull in many of its new administrators from the theology faculty. Why not from its economics faculty, which ran its own MBA program? It seems that few or no competent people were to be found there.

There used to be a very good record shop in Pretoria called Look and Listen. It was big and had a very wide selection of music, and staff who were helpful and knew what they were talking about. People went there from all over town, because they knew they could find what they were looking for.

Then it was taken over by a firm that knew nothing about records, but perhaps had MBAs who thought they knew all about management. The shop was too big, so they were paying too much rent. So they moved to a smaller shop. That meant they could not stock as much as the old shop, so they kept only the best-selling lines. And less-knowledgeable staff might cost less and could be conned into accepting the least that the labor laws would allow.

Now people no longer travel to Look and Listen from all over Pretoria, because they can find an identical record shop from another chain in their own local shopping mall, which stocks the identical best-selling stuff and does central ordering. Now the same thing is happening to a chain of bookshops that as similarly been taken over by a firm run by MBAs who know the price of everything and the value of nothing.

And that is why people trained in theology can probably make better management decisions than MBAs.

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