

The 'Triple-A' MBA

Alexandra Skinner speaks to Bert Wolfs and Markus Roth »

Swiss Business School – The Journey Continues

Q Swiss Business School (SBS) offers a full MBA value proposition consisting of a Distance MBA, Full-time MBA, Executive MBA and Flex MBA. Please can you expand upon these in more detail for our readers?

BW: If one comes from the finance industry, one is familiar with the rating of financial products, and we consider our programme to have a 'triple-A' rating. In reality we are what we would call a boutique business school - relatively small, where the individual is very important.

Triple-A means, firstly, that the programme is applicable. This is very important. We have a teaching philosophy and pedagogy that stands for experience-based learning. Many business schools offer student-based learning, but we look at people who have experience, and we take that and try to develop it further. What we really want to do is transform our students, and we use the applicable teaching approach to do so.

Secondly, we are accredited by the IACBE (CHEA recognised), and this is very important for our students.

Thirdly, despite the strong Swiss Franc, we are still not the most expensive programme, and so we consider ourselves to be affordable, where value for money is very important. So, the 'triple-A' stands for applicable, accredited and affordable.

Q As discussed when we last met, the Swiss MBA market is incredibly competitive. What innovations have you made to your offering over the last 12 months to keep one step ahead of the competition?

BW: The main thing is social media. Despite the fact that everyone talks about it, in my personal opinion, it is a different form of communication. Before, it was face-to-face and story-telling, today it is 'social media-telling', but at the end of the day it is the same thing, and all falls under communication.

In Europe there are a series of leadership crisis, which indicates that people who intend to take an MBA still need to improve their leadership skills. With a leadership approach, usually you look for deficiencies and try to turn them around. However, we start with what is called strength-based leadership. We look at the individual's strengths and based on that we further try to improve them. At the same time we discover the individual's weaknesses and incorporate them together to advance them.

I always tell people who come to the MBA programme that we change their personality. People laugh, because they are 34 and so wonder how that's possible, but by the time they complete the program, we see that people really are transformed and have become holistic thinkers. This is a good outcome of our MBA.

We are forced to innovate, because the Swiss Franc is very strong. So we are constantly reviewing and updating the curriculum. We now incorporate digital marketing, social media, leadership sessions and career coaching in our MBA.

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Programme Structure

Q To what extent do you liaise with local and national businesses, and what impact does this have on the structure of your offering?

MR: SBS has two advisory boards; one is an academic advisory board that gives us inputs from the research world and other academic institutions, and the other is a business advisory board made up of people from different industries. The business advisory board have a different perception. For them, it is very important to know how their managers can profit from a continued education. They have a strong impact on our curriculum. If they feel that we need to concentrate more on communication, leadership skills or cross-cultural issues, for example, we will listen to them, look at how we can introduce these elements into the programme, and then we can adapt the curriculum.

At the last meeting that we had at the end of 2011, the input was less curriculum based and more about how we offer the programme. The board identifies that as most of the people joining our EMBA are from Switzerland, are expats who live in Switzerland, or are individuals from our neighbouring countries, all of whom work as managers, they don't want to also give up their weekends, as it is a balance to their work.

BW: This has resulted in a change in how the programme is organised. Before, it was held every Saturday over 15 months. Now it has changed so that once a month they have classes on Saturday, Sunday and Monday, on a Tuesday afternoon they have a leadership speaker, and then Wednesday Thursday and Friday they resume classes. This means that they have what we call a 'block period', and there are eight of these across the programme. The advantage is that they can immediately apply what they learn in class to their companies, so it gives a blended

learning. The other advantage is that we can attract students from further afield, and so we have widened our market reach.

SBS and the Emerging Markets

SBS continues to focus on CIVETS countries (Colombia, Indonesia, Vietnam, Egypt, Turkey and South Africa) as the new emerging markets, and you will be hosting the second CIVETS Conference in April.

Q (a) What made you decide to focus on CIVETS over the BRIC nations?

BW: The CIVETS are new emerging markets and we focus on them as we don't feel that the BRIC countries can be considered as purely emerging markets. There are criteria that have been established by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), and one of them is GDP per capita of no more than 800 USD. Some countries in the BRIC exceed that. Another very important factor is that they all have a relatively young population. These young people are striving to go forward and they need to be taught the necessary skills in order to be able to do so.



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Q (b) What would you say are the key things to consider when doing business in this market?

BW: I can phrase this in one sentence: diversity is our beauty. Each of the CIVET countries is very diverse, even within one country there is diversity. A good example is Istanbul and Ankara in Turkey; you wouldn't know that these two cities are in the same country. There is a similar situation with Indonesia, where each of the islands has different customs, regulations and culture. It's very important to be aware of this diversity. It isn't as easy as doing business in established markets. It's tougher there, things take longer, logistics aren't as well developed, and so you have to be ready for these pitfalls.

Innovation and Entrepreneurship

Q Innovation and entrepreneurship are words commonly used in a school's MBA marketing material. What do these dynamics mean at SBS?

BW: We have an entrepreneurial culture. If you look at the students who apply for the programme, all of them have the intention to start their own business or to move forward with an idea. Many of these will use the internet as a business platform, and we encourage students to take their own initiative. Alongside creating business plans, they also complete an Action Learning Project (ALP) in real companies where they work as consultants and make recommendations. These are the types of case studies that students really remember. Let's be honest, one sometimes forgets theoretical concepts, whereas one will remember a concrete project.

MBA Application

Q Many MBA applicants come up against the dilemma of whether to take an MBA, part-time MBA or a distance/online MBA. What are the main things that professionals should take into consideration when evaluating this decision?

BW: There are three very important things to consider before making a decision. First of all, you have to look at your personal life and analyse where you are currently standing, and where you want to go. Secondly, you have to see whether the MBA fits in with your current job and whether you can manage the additional workload. Thirdly, you should consider whether you can manage it alongside your family. Each of these three components will suffer a little bit; you will have a little less time for your family, you will no longer have time to run 20 km every day, and your employer might also suffer a little. So this is very important.

Following this, you must then ask yourself whether you can afford to take off a year to pursue a full-time MBA. Usually an MBA

programme is anti-cyclical, so the harder the recession, the more people want to study. In 2008 and 2009 there were a lot of people who decided that this was a good time for them to take a year off to study in the hope that after a year the recession would be over or at least there would be a better sense of direction.

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important again. A part-time programme could be in the evening two to three days a week or it could have a modular structure, meaning a block of 10 days during a month.

If you decide to undertake a distance or online MBA, I think that the most important thing is to be a self-motivator. With a distance MBA, the candidates decide on their pace of study. So you must be disciplined and a self-starter. If you think you can manage, then this is a good option. Our distance MBA continues to be popular and I think that this is the case internationally too. Internet functionality continues to improve; I remember before when I would upload a PowerPoint slide and people would call me saying that it was taking 15 minutes to download! Now, it is a matter of seconds.

Q Application processes vary from school to school. Please can you give an overview of the SBS application process?

BW: Firstly, interested individuals fill out the application form and include their CV, copies of their degree and transcripts, and two letters of recommendation. The major purpose of the letter of recommendation is for the referee to estimate the candidate's potential for leadership and growth. The candidate will then be invited to SBS. If they are a graduate from an American university they must take the GMAT, for which we request a minimum of 550. If the student is a graduate from a UK, Australian or Swiss university, they take the SBS entrance test. This focuses on critical reasoning, mathematical skills and their English.

Those who are successful will be invited for an interview, either over the phone or in person, and then the admissions committee will make a decision about their acceptance status. During the process, we provide applicants with alumni contacts and invite them to sit in a class so that they can experience what it's like. We are an open and transparent organisation.

We accept 25 to 30 people per programme and receive an average of three applications for each space. It's important to note that we look for the gender differences, the cultural background, and the industry background of each applicant, because an important aspect of our MBA programmes is peer-to-peer learning. This is particularly important when working in groups, as our students learn also from each other's experience.

BIOGRAPHIES

★ **Bert Wolfs, Ph.D., MBA**, (Harvard GSE) is Professor of Entrepreneurship and the Academic Dean of SBS Swiss Business School, Switzerland.

★ **Markus Roth** is Chief Accreditation Officer at SBS Swiss Business School, Switzerland.

SBS and the Future

Q What can our readers expect from SBS over the next 12 to 18 months and beyond?

BW: I think that we will reinforce our branding and our accreditation. We will make sure that we have some innovative ideas, but we want to keep those close to our chest, for now! □

SBS Swiss Business School alumni



Yaroslav Chesnokov

I greatly enjoyed the year and a half that I spent studying the EMBA at SBS. My enthusiasm was so high that I made every effort to attend each session and somehow managed not to miss a single Saturday!

Among many other undeniable benefits of good MBA education, I would mark out learning to work in groups. For me, it was amazing to discover how in the early stages of the course, after years of employment spent, in many cases, in leading positions and with distinguished entities, the students, including myself, almost lacked the ability to work efficiently on an assignment in groups of three or four, and therefore had to develop, or rather restore this ability almost from scratch.

At work, we often find it easier to apply more personal effort to complete the task rather than willingly invite co-workers to bring in opinions or simply assist, and such approach turns into customary practice with the lapse of time. On the contrary, the professors at SBS would ensure, and even insist upon, the equal involvement of each student in preparing a group's assignment, until one comes to realise the luxuries of being able to share the workload and benefit from the diversity of opinions and cultures. This breakthrough is easier to achieve in an MBA environment where one has to deal with strict deadlines, but nonetheless remains unbound by job-related stress.

Yaroslav Chesnokov completed the Executive MBA at SBS Swiss Business School in 2009. Yaroslav is Head of Unit, Rusal Marketing GmbH, a trading arm of United Company Rusal based in Zug, Switzerland.



Jorge Mongay

My experience of the DBA at SBS was rigorous, serious and unique. I chose SBS because of its realistic and practical orientation, and because it offers the Doctor of Business Administration degree (applied research) instead of the classic and very well-known Ph.D. (theoretical research). The School was flexible and fully integrated with all kinds of new technologies (which is critical for busy executives like myself), and is oriented towards the difficult and complex development of managerial competences. At the same time the programme was very demanding, with deadlines, papers and assignments.

At the end of the programme I was able to answer some crucial questions related to the real core of business research. For example, will corporations benefit from the research done and its findings? The research thesis really offers significant market value and contributes to solve real problems in these companies.

The SBS DBA really accelerated my career and opened my mind. After graduation I was able to publish research articles in relevant academic journals related to my thesis work, and I received job offers for adjunct faculty from some first class business schools in Europe and in the US, as well as new consulting opportunities.

Jorge Mongay completed the DBA at SBS Swiss Business School in 2009. Jorge is a Lecturer of International Business at Autonomous University of Barcelona (UAB) and Executive Director at the European Centre for South East Asian Studies (ECSEAS).