

Teaching Leaders TO BECOME AGENTS OF CHANGE



Alexandra Skinner speaks to SBS Swiss Business School's Bert Wolfs and Kloten-Zurich

SBS Swiss Business School is a practically-driven business school with a focus on Work-Applied Learning.

How does this benefit the students of your programmes?

We are a student-centered business school which applies andragogical principles. Collaboration among the different participants, such as industry partners, instructors and, of course, the students, is key to our success, and we also emphasise more equality between the lecturer and the learner. If we refer to a recent Gartner study, *Watchlist: Continuing Changes in the Nature of Work, 2010-2020*, the world of work in 2020 will be increasingly chaotic, profoundly virtual, and hyper-connected. We are preparing our students for such a volatile world with practical, relevant and goal-oriented education. If they can link the academic materials to their workplace, that will provide the greatest benefit to them and their employers. At the end of the day, we want more efficient and effective leaders within an organisation, in which they will not only work hard, but also smart.

Does this challenge your faculty to regularly update their knowledge?

This is indeed a constant and significant challenge! We encourage our faculty to undertake consulting as well as scholarly work. Our full-time faculty also mentor at least one student thesis per year in their field of specialisation, although of course, most mentor many more. This allows them to update their knowledge. In addition, we send our faculty to participate in seminars and improve their knowledge and skills. Lastly, if applied research is their cup of tea, we support their research and publication. All of these activities help them to be competitive in a business and academic environment. The consulting work of our faculty also allows them to identify the latest trends and bring that information to the classroom.

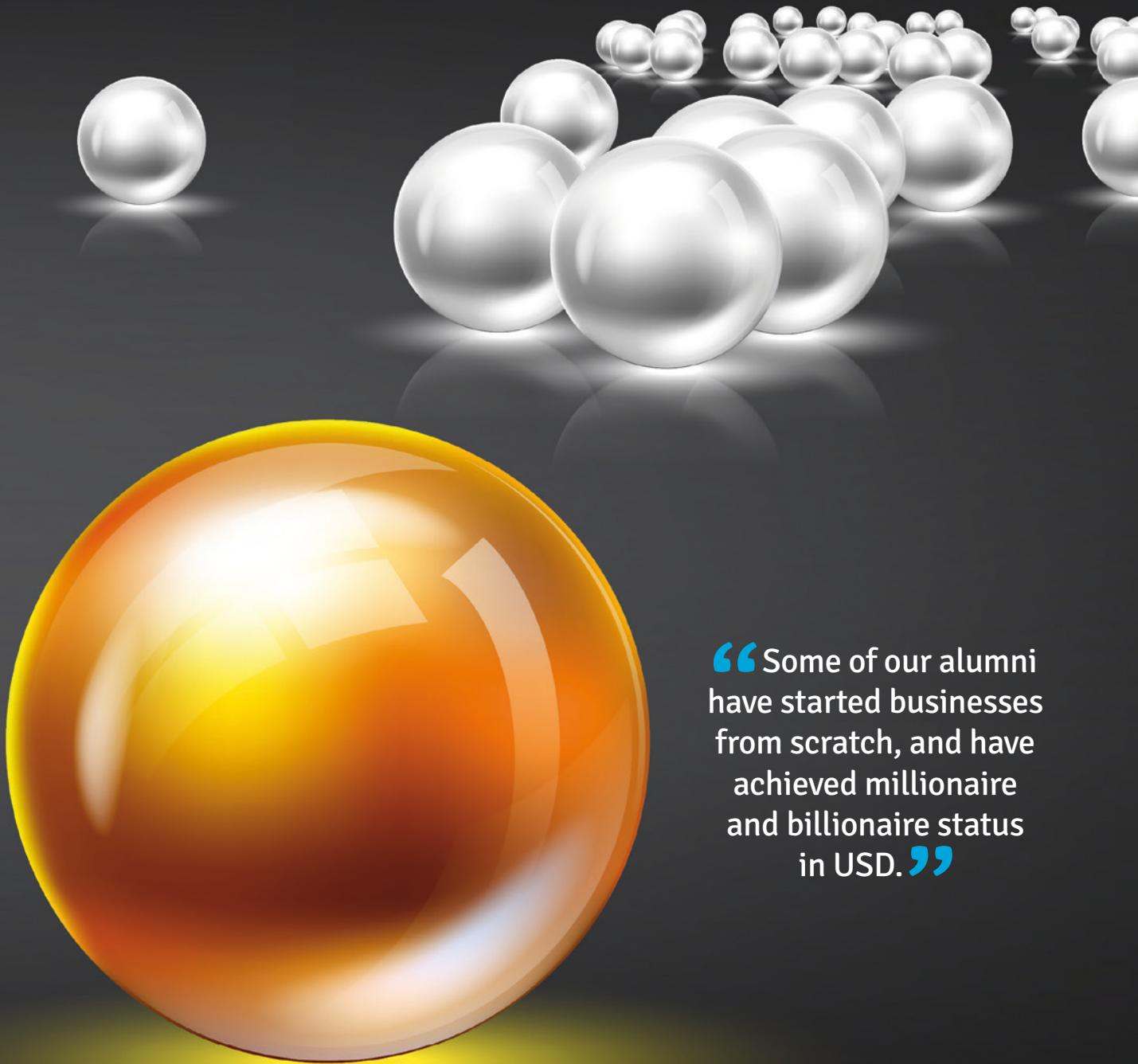
SBS Swiss Business School's MBA portfolio includes an MBA in Entrepreneurship. Some argue that 'entrepreneurship' cannot be taught. How would you counter this?

Everything can be taught in life, but I cannot force someone into entrepreneurship. The desire

to start a business and take risks is influenced by several factors. It is a process we cannot influence, but we can give entrepreneurs tools which will make them more knowledgeable and more successful. We can also advise them on their business plans and help them through the start-up process. Some of our alumni have started businesses from scratch, and have achieved millionaire and billionaire status in USD. That means that we are doing something good for the society and that makes me very proud of SBS.

In your opinion, what are some of the key steps that business schools need to take in order to cultivate a culture of entrepreneurs?

In Latin they say "Per aspera ad astra". A rough translation would be "Through hardships to the stars" – if you work hard, you will achieve something. This is the culture that we try to convey to our students. Entrepreneurship is about seeking opportunities and taking risks, and we incorporate this mentality into our curriculum. However, external activities are as important as learning in the classroom; they can foster the individual's leadership skills, teach them how to motivate team



“Some of our alumni have started businesses from scratch, and have achieved millionaire and billionaire status in USD.”

members and allow them to learn from others by seeing and doing. The main aim is to create a mindset change. You aren't an entrepreneur from Monday 8 a.m. until Friday 5 p.m. – you are an entrepreneur on a daily basis, 365 days per year. If we can achieve this, in addition to an appetite for innovation and thinking outside the box, I think our students will be prepared for real-life.

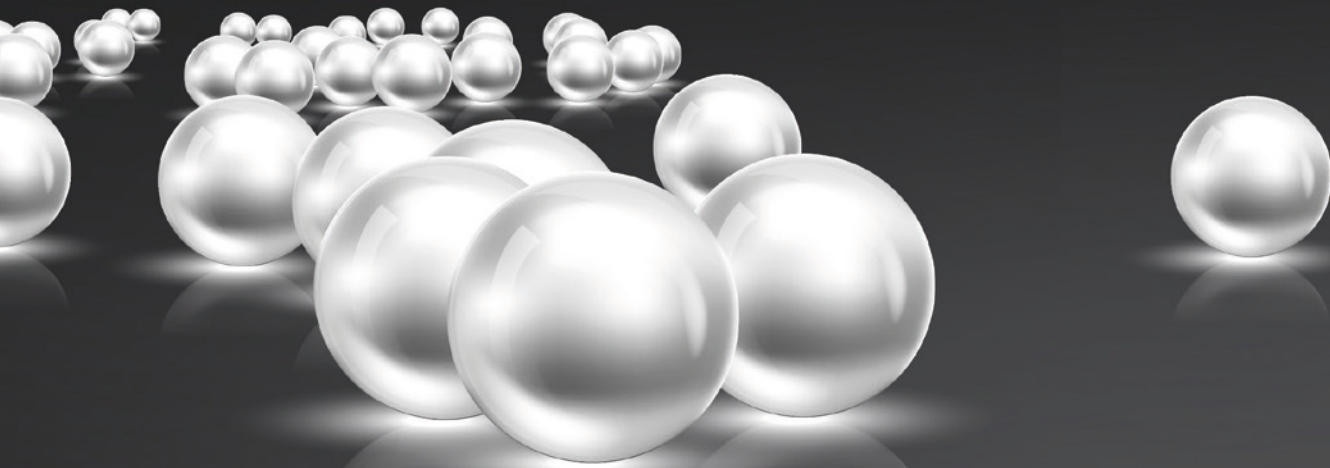
Start-up rates in Switzerland are growing and technology-based industries have also seen a surge in entrepreneurs. Do you feel that this is a result of a greater focus on entrepreneurship from business schools within the local market?

Well, this is related to several factors and a good education is just one of them. So let us be humble and say that we have made a modest contribution. Other factors such as location, tax laws, workforce

skills, and risk appetite play a more important role. Switzerland has a relatively low unemployment figure, but young people and the older generation are looking for career alternatives. A start-up business is a good route as Switzerland is among the leaders in innovation in the world. Technology determines more and more how a vision and mission can be carried out for a start-up business. It is also relatively easy to start a business in Switzerland and that helps to explain some of the success factors of young entrepreneurs. We don't lack financial means in this country, and this is always helpful for new start-ups.

Nurturing strong, ethically minded-leaders remains the focus for many MBA programmes. At SBS Swiss Business School you take a strength-based leadership approach. How does this work?

Leadership is about trust and compassion. From my personal experience, I have learned that focusing on weaknesses makes people doubtful. If we tackle the leadership question with a positive mindset, we can achieve more with the participants and extend their personal borders, which is always a big surprise to them. Due to the ageing of the work population in advanced economies, different values are brought into the workforce and that makes it more complex. We can expect a workforce implosion if baby boomers, Gen X, Gen Y and Millennials or Gen D (from Digital Natives) cannot work together in the future. The gap between those who know and those who don't will continue to increase in the coming years and we need to prepare our future business leaders for that. If you know where your strengths and weaknesses are, you have a much better starting point to lead others from. >



Your online MBA programme is supported by SBS Swiss Business School's Learning Management System (LMS). How does the system create a supportive learning environment that maintains the student's motivation and engagement?

Our online educational programmes and MBA have known incredible growth figures in the past years and will continue to positively surprise us. The life-work balance has changed over the years, and people understand that they need to upgrade their qualifications, but not in a traditional way. We have built a system called: 'SBS-i-learn' which is our platform to provide the course materials and interaction with our students. For example, we have a discussion platform to make sure that each member of the class participates, and we integrate live-sessions with the lecturer, so that issues can be discussed. We still struggle a bit with the time factor, as we have online students from different time zones across the world, but most other online learning programmes experience the same obstacles. One thing I have seen, however, is that where there is a will, there is a way.

Business schools continue to be challenged to innovate in order to meet the demands of an increasingly discerning student population.

What do you feel are some of the main challenges that business schools are currently facing?

Business schools have plenty of challenges in these turbulent times. Technology is changing and we need to adapt. Are 'tenured' professors still a viable business model? How do we cope with a rapidly changing workforce looking for new employability skills and attitudes? In my view, leaders will have to deal more and more with unpredictability and fast-changing events all over the world. In the past a manager was expected to have an answer for each of the employee's questions – this will no longer be the case in the future. Leadership will be about adaptability, innovative thinking and challenging the workforce for meaningful

value contribution to the overall success of the company and its stakeholders. Leaders need to be change agents who have the skills to make speedy decisions. Leaders need to be able to balance their entrepreneurial thinking with technical learning.

How will SBS Swiss Business School position itself to face these challenges over the coming 12 months?

Twelve months is a short time, but we do have goals which we have to achieve to please our different stakeholders. We will continue to improve the interaction in our Online MBA programme and to promote our Doctor of Business Administration (DBA) programme. Lifelong learning and being responsible for your own career development are the new signs of loyalty towards your employer. Today employees

are often personally responsible for this as, in this cost-driven economic environment, companies are not always willing to carry the costs. Another issue is that we want to capture more from the ageing population. The DBA is the right educational programme for this, as it helps students to shape the listening and coaching skills of experienced workers and executives – skills which we lack in the current workforce. If we achieve these goals this year, I will remain a happy Academic Dean!

Biography

➤ **Bert Wolfs, Ph.D., MDP, (Harvard GSE)** is Academic Dean of SBS Swiss Business School, Zurich, Switzerland.