



# LIFELONG LEARNING IN THE NEW NORMAL

ALEXANDRA SKINNER TALKS TO BERT WOLFS

**Q. How have your students and faculty adapted to the 'new normal', and what does the 'new normal' look like for SBS Swiss Business School?**

Managers need to learn to be vigilant and understand what it means to live in a volatile, uncertain, complex, and ambiguous (VUCA) world. The COVID-19 outbreak has increased all these factors astronomically. Our andragogical model is always aimed

at flexibility and agility, allowing students to switch between face-to-face and hybrid classes, making the new normal far easier to navigate.

My top priorities have always been student safety and adaptive learning models while ensuring teaching continuity. The major lesson from the new normal is that nothing will be as it was. Employers have to learn that their employees are in charge now. First,



they have to motivate people to return to work, especially young mothers, given the inflationary gas prices and lack of childcare. Secondly, skilled workers are scarce. Finding the right person at the right time for the right job was, and will remain, the biggest challenge companies face. So, those who have the skills can certainly benefit. From an educational perspective, we see that students have unlearned the skill of giving

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presentations and that soft skills remain a big issue. As an educational institution, this needs to be our focus.

**Q. A number of your MBA programmes have an on-campus component; to what extent has this changed over the course of the pandemic, and are these likely to be lasting changes?**

Yes, we call these our personalised



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educational programmes. Students can determine which courses they take in a face-to-face setting and which courses they take online. This accommodates different learning styles, social distancing, when necessary, and allows students to expand their personal network, locally as well as globally.

The lasting change is that hybrid and online learning are now fully accepted by the corporate world. Let me give you my own experience. About 10 years ago, we allowed a student to defend their final thesis via Skype due to special circumstances. Faculty members and stakeholders were largely opposed to the idea; it was not the same, and actually not allowed. Today, we sit for hours behind our screens in non-stop online meetings, and this is highly accepted now. Just to let you know how quickly the perception can change. Today, online learning is the new normal.

**Q. With many schools now offering a blend of on-campus and online teaching, for example, SBS Swiss Business School offers a flex-MBA, is this the future of executive education?**

We strongly believe so. This programme is really focused on working professionals; they prefer to work and study at the same time; consequently, they are only on campus three days per month, the rest of the learning takes place online. In addition, the programme is limited to 15 months, which means busy, travelling executives can find the time to learn.

**Q (a). The pandemic has forced many executives to rethink their career paths, skillsets, and readiness. With this in mind, do you foresee increased demand for your MBA programmes and executive education in general next year?**

As is my nature, I am an optimist. One day, the pandemic will be over and the new normal will prevail. Lifelong or career-long learning will always be needed, as will skilling, upskilling, and reskilling of the workforce to remain competitive. So, the need is there. Besides this, we make learning fun, and as long as students enjoy the process, laugh, and learn, the world will become a much better place.

**Q (b). Will online MBA programmes continue to dominate in terms of application volumes?**

The classic answer is: it depends. Remember, MBA admissions are counter-cyclical. When the economy is booming, application rates fall. Conversely, when the economy is in recession, or the entire world is sent to the home office, people have time to

think about the future and update their skills and competencies.

**Q (c). Will we see increasingly younger candidates applying for the MBA?**

Yes, we are. The average age of our MBA candidates is 37. Now, we see more and more candidates applying who are in their late twenties. They have climbed the career ladder and need new skills, different attitudes, and need to enlarge their professional network. Remember, in life, they ask you three questions: what degree do you have, which language do you speak, and whom do you know. These candidates want to extend their global network, and our educational offering meets that need.

**Q. In terms of professional experience, a number of schools have relaxed their admission requirements over the course of the pandemic. Is this something SBS Swiss Business School will be considering?**

My clear answer: no. Why? There are different kinds of MBA programmes. You can enroll in a more academic MBA, a specialised MBA, or a practically-driven MBA. We offer the last category, which comes with simulations, cases, role-plays, and real-life projects. In order to enter these programmes, we require a minimum of two years of professional experience, and that has not changed. We need the candidate to have that experience to make the learning outcomes more meaningful.

**Q. The MBA has become increasingly attractive to employers; what's driving this interest?**

The MBA was, is, and will remain attractive to employers; however, business schools need to continue to adapt to the changing environment. We review our curriculum every two years and adapt courses and content to ensure our graduates find gainful employment. Let me give you an example: we all think about sustainability and green skills, but very few people realise that a company's C-suite needs to understand how sustainable development goals impact the company's future. So, it is not only skilled workers or engineers who need these skills but, more importantly, management. Green employment is a growing element of the overall employment landscape, but skilled managers are in short supply, so we are developing them. We go beyond global climate discussions in our classes and let students play simulation games where they model polluting and non-polluting countries. They learn to better understand the corporate world and the difficulties of governmental policymaking.

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**Q. What can potential students expect from SBS and the executive education market over the next 12 to 18 months?**

Positive results; let me explain. We live in a VUCA world where lifelong upskilling is now a must. The big question executives are asking these days is: Should I take another master’s programme, or can I take several modules and upskill via micro-credits? We offer the latter via our executive education programmes.

You learn the concepts, the skills, and you can network with peers. The executive education programme starts with a hybrid component, then the participants meet on the SBS campus, and the final element is a hybrid-coaching session. From decentralised finance and sustainability through to digital transformation; we cover it all. Given that companies are desperately seeking these skills, the outlook is highly positive for these subject areas.

**BIOGRAPHY**

Bert Wolfs is the Dean of SBS Swiss Business School.