

## Focus

# Let's get down to business studies

In a cut-throat job market where every qualification counts, both young and senior professionals are embarking on MBAs to further their careers. We take a look at Belgium's management schools

BY SABINE CLAPPAERT

Europe is a paradise for those wanting to further their studies well into their career: it counts no less than 27 executive management schools that are among the world's top-ranked facilities\*. With many leading business schools in cities such as London, Barcelona, Lausanne and Paris, why do students choose to pursue executive education in Belgium and which schools do they favour? We asked four recent graduates.

In 2010, four Belgian business schools were ranked among the top 75 in Europe\*\*. Vlerick Leuven Gent Management School (13), Solvay Business School (35), IAG-Louvain School of Management (45) and University of Antwerp School of Management (54).

Nancy Murphy, 48, completed a master's degree in Leadership at Boston University in Brussels this past April. She has since moved to Dubai, where Standard Chartered Bank employs her husband. Prior to their move, the family lived in Belgium for 12 years. While Nancy was employed here as a project management officer at the financial messaging network SWIFT, she undertook an in-house MBA course. "My undergraduate degree is in computer science and finance, which had been augmented by several in-house courses offered by SWIFT. When I decided to take my education a step further to get an external perspective and to find out what the trends were in leadership and communication, I enrolled in the Master of Science of Leadership programme at Boston University. I chose this university for several reasons: in my opinion, the courses are more interesting than those at other institutions; it was one of only a few institutions that offer courses in English in Belgium, and it was conveniently located."

To Nancy the advantages of studying in Brussels are clear: "The classes at Boston University offer a broad mix of people of all ages and nationalities. Aside from

Belgians and Americans, there were students from Turkey, Romania, Norway, Italy, Congo, Greece – the list goes on. The students are mostly aged between their mid-twenties and late forties. Such a diversity of views made the learning experience richer and more applicable in today's international business environment." Nancy goes a step further: "I wish I'd done it much earlier. Studying in Brussels offers a multi-cultural perspective and leads to a good understanding of the EU. Had I started earlier, I would have done many more courses."

Nancy is convinced that completing the Master's in Leadership has enhanced her career options. "Leadership is a buzz word in the current economy. Being able to say that apart from my degree and extensive experience that I also have the latest in leadership training offers significant added value. I am confident that I now have the knowledge to succeed in very senior management roles."

Benjamin Vandorpe, 40, chose Vlerick Management School in Ghent for his executive MBA. "During the screening process I looked at a few other institutions but chose Vlerick quite quickly," he says. "I immediately liked their approach: it was an executive MBA that required participants to have at least five years' work experience and the lecturers were all professionals with extensive experience in their fields. So it wasn't just a theoretical course. I also liked the fact that the students came from all over the world. This brings interesting international perspectives on discussions."

"I definitely believe an MBA still helps to advance one's career prospects," adds Benjamin. "It gave my career a boost – both financially and in terms of the responsibilities I was accorded. I was offered a senior



were constantly making PowerPoint presentations or going online to research topics. I also liked the fact that many case studies we discussed were real-life projects or Harvard case-studies.”

MBA's are notoriously intense courses that place significant 'real-life' demands on students. "A lot of emphasis is placed on project management," says Victoria. "For one of the projects I worked on we were given the option either to create a complete business plan for the development of schools in Turkey or to create a women's television network in a country of choice. Working in teams is crucial. You also need to be able to conduct research and present the end product in front of an audience. The challenge of a full-time MBA definitively lies in being able to combine writing your thesis and still focusing on your day-to-day coursework."

And finally, after months (or years) of hard labour: graduation day. "Since AIBS has campuses in various countries around the world, our graduation ceremony was held in Barcelona, with graduate students from all the campuses gathered together. That is when you really get the feeling that you have studied in an international environment that has prepared you for the real world," she says with a smile.

Victoria believes an MBA alone is not enough to make a difference, though. "The competition to get a job at Nato is very stiff. Everyone has stellar CVs, went to renowned universities and speaks several languages. While I think an MBA helps to be selected on paper, I still believe that the real test is before the interview panel. No degree or MBA can compensate for 'that little extra' that they look for in people."

Driven by an exponential increase in technologies that help to share information, the face of executive education is rapidly changing. Increasingly, business schools are combining face-to-face classes with e-learning tutorials to provide 'blended learning' – a more cost- and time-efficient way of training that limits the travel and accommodation costs of off-site courses. Since the onset of the financial crisis, 'blended learning' programmes are proving increasingly popular. Furthermore, social media such as Twitter, Facebook and Flickr are ever more used to collect and share information efficiently between locations around the world.

Short courses are also gaining increasing popularity over the traditional full-time MBA. As Rotterdam School of Management's Executive Director of Executive Education and Organisational Development Josette de Goede said in a recent interview with expatica.com: "We are getting a lot of programme participants who just a few years ago would have chosen a two-year executive MBA format. Those programmes are great, don't get me wrong, but not every manager has the time, the money, and the sympathies of their boss when it comes to engaging in a full-blown MBA."

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Karen Lindquist, of Management Centre Europe (MCE), which specialises in shorter courses, agrees: "I think more people are taking shorter courses and part-time MBAs than before, especially mid-career managers. They can't take a full year or two off from their jobs. I see some people now having difficulty getting a job even after having graduated from a full-time MBA programme. On the other hand, young people who are having difficulty finding work after doing their undergraduate degree often just go straight on to do a master's degree, hoping that the job situation will have improved by the time they get out."

MCE specialises in short courses, with programmes like the '5-day Mini MBA'. Lindquist adds: "While our 5-Day Mini MBA doesn't replace a full-time or long-term part-time MBA, people attend it because it's a quick way to get an MBA overview and provides functional tools you can put into practice right away. Some people take the Mini MBA to decide whether they want to go for a full MBA later."

"Another trend we are seeing is managers requesting customised industry-specific mini MBAs so they can focus more on the management issues and tools specific to their own industries, for example, pharmaceuticals, medical devices and chemicals. Right now we are also developing one for the banking industry."

The conclusion is clear: while taking time off to do a full-time MBA is a luxury that most professionals cannot yet afford, mixing and matching shorter, flexible courses that broaden their knowledge-base, teach new skills or help build on strengths, ensure that they continue to develop. And that, ultimately, is how one stays ahead of the game in today's fast-paced business world. ■

\* <http://rankings.ft.com/businessschoolrankings/global-mba-rankings-2011>

\*\* <http://rankings.ft.com/businessschoolrankings/european-business-school-rankings-2010>