



Ambition of future managers

The depression, caused by the energy crisis, is driving students to the MBA campuses for better careers, in the bargain, changing the face of the B-school market

Whilst familiar with the more common collective nouns to describe a group - Prides of Lions, Colonies of Penguins - the English language runs riot for other beasts, birds, people or things. A Shrewdness of Apes and a Murder of Crows leave little doubt about the characteristics of the group being described. So, how best can we characterise a group of MBA students, newly arrived this week at business school?

From Manhattan to Manchester, campuses are springing to life after the summer, and schools get confirmations of their applicant yield as admitted applicants transform into students.

As an article in *Business Week* explained recently, the orientation process at many MBA programmes has become an education in itself. Crash courses in accounting and second languages vie with career orientation and team-building, whilst social events break the ice for students and their spouses.

At the Vlerick Leuven Gent Management School, this week was the chance for their Class of 2009 to meet face to face. Students from over 30 countries were welcomed by Philippe Haspeslagh, the school's new dean, and recent months of social networking on Facebook gave way to personal introductions and programme orientation.

Internationally diverse group

Amphitheatres filled with eager faces, asking themselves 'How they match up to the rest of the class? and 'What kind of network will I be building in the next 12 months?' And as students pair off, with three minutes to interview and then present their recently introduced neighbour, the MBA promise of an internationally diverse group of talent quickly asserts itself.

From Moldovian entrepreneurship and Canadian investment banking to non-profit work on CO₂ emissions and a national karate team, the Vlerick class has serious credentials. And the fun-loving side of the group is soon in evidence as they enjoy the InBev sponsored school lounge before discovering the thriving social scene amidst the backdrop of one of Europe's oldest universities.

Welcoming the group and setting out the MBA programme that lies ahead, professor David Venter adds his own unique experience to the classroom mix. A psychologist by training, Venter headed the South African Communication Service, ultimately working side by side with Nelson

Mandela to achieve a negotiated and peaceful end to the apartheid era. He has worked with multinationals and trade unions, police services and governments and his insights into human behaviour, leadership, communication and negotiation are the stuff of business education dreams.

Much anticipated at any school is the input from the head of career services. What does the MBA job market look like, and have we all invested in our professional futures just as the markets are heading south? Mary Roll paints a positive picture for the general management MBA in Europe. Companies are thinking about succession planning, the IT

and biotech cluster around Brussels is bullish, the class that has just graduated is reporting a healthy increase in salary and benefits.

As the volatility of the financial markets demonstrates, the best investment we can make is in ourselves. So, what are new students expecting, and what is the school doing to welcome the incoming class?

We've been here before, of course, and might spare a thought for the MBA Class of 2002. These were the guys who headed to business school a year or two before, when stock markets were at exuberant levels, and bank and consultancy firms were fighting it out with sign-on bonuses for MBA graduates. Two years later, the Internet bubble had burst, business had dried up for consultancy firms and banks, and graduates coming out of business school were faced with the toughest job market in a decade.

So, how different will the job market be for the credit-squeezed Class of 2008? What have career services learned from the last downturn, and how are they preparing their MBA graduates for the current job market? And what role can the alumni play to help the latest round of MBA graduates from their business school? ♦



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