

## Getting Down to Business— Recruiting International MBA Students

IKE MANY STUDENTS, Reem Nassar's first job after college graduation taught her about working with others and dealing with projects in the real world...and that her chosen major just wasn't a great match for the career she wanted.

The really desirable programs offer some kind of education abroad, either entirely or in part, along with real-world experience and business visits for students who want to study intently so they can earn their degrees in an expedient manner.

Nassar worked in electrical engineering for just seven months after earning her bachelor's in the field in her native Jordan, realizing along the way that what she really wanted to do was help fledgling Asian and Middle Eastern companies establish themselves as international businesses. That's pretty hard to do as a young engineer, and she started looking to get her MBA.

She knew off the bat that earning her graduate degree from an international institution would give her hands-on experience that would help her land her dream job after graduation, and going to a program put on by Thunderbird School of Global Management, Phoenix, Arizona, helped her decide where to study.

"They talked about their scholarship program," says the 26-year-old, now in her second term at the school. "I liked what they said and applied, and they picked me."

So far, she says, the school is "amazing. What's really great about Thunderbird for me is that you experience what they're teaching." A recent project paired her with five fellow students, she says, all of whom were from different countries.

"We're all from different places and we're working on a project together," she says. "That helps us use what we're learning in an actual experience." She hopes to work in the United States for a time after her graduate in May 2011, and then head back across the ocean to work in Asia or the Middle East.

Nassar isn't that unusual—around the world, representatives of MBA and other postgraduate business schools say that earning one's degree entirely or in part from a university in another country is a hot trend that started about a decade ago and gives no

signs of letting up. That, they say, can be traced to an increasingly global economy, where even small companies are doing at least some business overseas, either in their own foreign facilities or in those of international companies they partner with.

Another trend those schools are seeing is students who are younger, many fresh out of undergrad colleges and universities, and less experienced in the business world. On the flip side of that are students who have years of experience in professional jobs but are looking to change careers or have been laid off, forcing them to hone their skills. Unlike previous generations, these more established students are also often attending MBA programs on their own dimes and not with the assistance of employers. And that means they want to finish up as quickly and efficiently as possible so they can get back to their job searches with a little more heft added to their resumes.

All of these trends among students mean that international MBA programs have had to keep one step ahead to compete. The really desirable programs offer some kind of education abroad, either entirely or in part, along with real-world experience and business visits for students who want to study intently so they can earn their degrees in an expedient manner. And even that's not enough—those who offer all of that have to work and work to get the word out about their programs and head out into the world to recruit students, many of whom are extraordinarily choosy about where their education dollars will go.

Schools are adapting. Some say it's all a natural progression of what they've been doing for years anyway, and that they set their own example for good

business practices. Others say it hasn't been quite that simple, but that they're making changes to keep their international programs competitive. Those changes, they say, will be long term, and the industry hasn't stopped changing yet.

## Recruiting Students

Thunderbird School of Global Management has been offering graduate degrees since 1966; there are no undergrad programs at the school. Its international MBA program started up in the late 1990s and now brings in about 325 students per year from all over the world.

"We see shifts and changes every year," says Jay Bryant, director of admissions and recruiting. "Right now, about 52 percent of our students are international. The largest representation of students in that group is from India, which makes sense when you consider its size and the importance they place on education. That's followed by students from Taiwan, China, and other countries from around the world."

Those students don't come to Thunderbird by magic. Bryant says he and his staff spend a good bit of time traveling the world to find and recruit qualified students to the program and explain to them why their school is best.

"Last year we visited more than 35 countries and attended more than 100 different types of events—fairs, expos, and attending smaller meetings," he says. "In fact, just between Labor Day and Thanksgiving, we did more than 100 of those."

Others tell a similar story. Liz Riley-Har Grove, associate dean of admissions, Duke University's Fuqua School of Business, says they're working harder than ever to attract students as well despite Duke's strong reputation for academic excellence.

"I always say there are 15 schools that consider themselves to be top 10," she says with a laugh. "The competition for the best students increases every single year among those schools, and that doesn't make my job any easier. We see some amazing people applying to our program."

She says that the biggest recruiting change she's seen in recent years has been an increased emphasis on nonacademic benefits.

"The trend that I've seen in the time I've been here is that it's not just about the academic credentials anymore," she says. "Students are looking for networking opportunities and the chance to build networking relationships. And it's a very personal decision. For students from other countries, coming to an environment like this means stepping outside of their comfort zones."

Many of those students, she says, are already outside of their normal routines even before they start looking for their MBA degrees. That's a result of the global downturn, she says, and contributes even more to the competitive nature of the education business.

"In our daytime programs, the majority of students are interested in making some kind of career shift," she says. "They're not looking for corporate sponsorship or tu-

ition help from their current employers. The majority of the students coming into the program are self-funded."

Bryant tells a similar story. "We've been affected by the recession," he says. "Anyone who says they haven't is missing something. But one of the big differences between us and other schools is that we're very much a destination school—only five percent of our student body comes from Arizona."

The recession—and particularly the real estate market—took its toll. "With real estate upheavals, people had to ask themselves if they were comfortable picking up and moving to Arizona," he says. "The economy was on its way down last year, and people didn't feel comfortable that they'd have a job when two years came around. This year, early application trends are showing that we're back to prerecession numbers. There's a sense of optimism among students that they'll find a job when they graduate."

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## Working Harder

Gail Gershon, QS World MBA Tour, says Bryant's experience isn't unusual.

"It's been a bit of a struggle in recent years," she says of recruiting international students. "We see more schools worldwide who are traveling. They want to recruit U.S. students into their networks."

She says the global economic downturn has changed the way many schools think about the students coming into their

programs. "Some of them have seen an increase, but they still have to struggle harder for their candidates," she says. And since more incoming students than ever are unemployed, competing for their education dollars is fierce.

"They are looking very carefully at the programs, at their benefits, and their placement," says Gershon.

One way universities are dealing with this is by establishing partnerships with schools

in other countries, to enable their students to study abroad for a time without committing to a full year or two away from home.

The London Business School has established several such partnerships, enabling its students to travel, network, and learn in a number of different countries. Associate Dean Sabine Vinck says they've been quite successful.

"We have an executive MBA that's split between London and Dubai," she says. "The core courses are offered in Dubai, and then the students come to London for their electives. This is bringing the London Business School experience to Dubai." The school just finished up recruiting its fifth class for the program; each class has 50 to 75 students.

Before launching the London-Dubai program, The London Business School had established partnerships with schools in New York and Hong Kong. "Going to Dubai gave us a presence in the fourth biggest financial center in the world," says Vinck. Currently, the school's enrollment is largely diverse; only 9 percent of its students come from the United Kingdom.

"We have people from all over the world and we get really different perspectives because of that," says Vinck. "Our students learn different ways of doing business, and we have this special initiative. The nature of the school is to be global."

The New York partnership, with Columbia University, offers students the chance to travel across the Atlantic on a regular basis to get a feel for business in both countries. "Those students alternate between London and New York," says Vinck. "They do one month here and one month there, and studies must be done in both locations. But that's a great thing. They get access to portfolios from both countries and get this great network of students."

She says the setup is proving popular around the world.

"If you look at the rankings of graduate schools from the *Financial Times*, a lot of the top programs are collaborations between different schools," she says. "This is a realization that business is global. By and large, full-time MBA program applications go up

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when the economy goes down. People aren't working and they come to do an MBA."

That's even true of programs that have traditionally been designed for working students, she says. "Our Executive MBA is designed to let students study while they're working," she says. "Those applications tend to go down as the economy goes down, but even on our Executive MBA programs, enrollment is very strong. More students are self-sending to those programs as well."

Duke University has seen an upswing in popularity for its international programs as well. "We are embedded in five regions of the world—London, Dubai, St. Petersburg (Russia), and Shanghai [in addition to the U.S.]," says Riley-Hargrove. "We actually have staff on the ground in all of those places. Our reach is very extensive, and we have people on-staff who are very familiar with those countries and their cultures, and who are very familiar with the economies in those regions of the world. It helps us expand our global reach."

Students are looking for all of that when they consider MBA programs. Juliane Iannarelli, director of global research, AACSB International, says they know that the best way to move their careers forward is by gaining hands-on knowledge of other areas of the world early on.

"Business today is global," she says. "There is increasing economic integration based on international financial networks and supply chains, and increased connectivity that enables communications between colleagues who are geographically dispersed."

"Companies are looking for graduates who have a knowledge of the world beyond where they've lived their lives," she says. "They want people who have an understanding of the different perspectives of the ways [of] the world."

Riley-Hargrove agrees. "The world's economies are so interconnected now, and U.S. business schools have done a great job of integrating some of the world's biggest issues into their classrooms," she says. "Students understand that their educational experiences won't be from one particular lens. Forty percent of the students enrolled in our full-time MBA program are from

international backgrounds, and they know there are many ways to internationalize their MBA experiences."

Marketing that, she says, is key to attracting the best students. Gaining international experience is vital to them, she says, and telling them about a school's offerings can help them choose which program might be right for them.

"We offer 28 exchange programs in 20 different countries," she says. "They can spend a semester studying in another part of the world, either with our staff or with another business school in another part of the world. Our international courses have an overseas experience as part of those classes. They might take a course and study a particular part of the world and then spend up to two weeks in that part of the world, meeting government leaders and visiting companies to see for themselves how business is being done."

Bryant says similar programs at Thunderbird help attract students as well. "Our students might do a portion of their studies in Monterrey, Mexico, or Prague or Beijing," he says. "Our professors go with them and they do these short programs. It's probably 25 different locations every year—South Africa, Costa Rica, London, Hong Kong, India—and the topics change each year. Almost every student does at least one."

He says it's a trend that only shows signs of growing stronger.

"Globalization is happening in every industry, and education is no different than anyone else," he says. "We might have been the best at making cars in the early 1990s, and that might not be the case now. The same is true of education. Students are realizing the benefits of studying around the world, and it's really important for schools to realize that they need to partner with other schools to realize those great benefits. We can't rest on our laurels." **IE**

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