

Going Global For An MBA

More B-school students are studying abroad, creating an international class of grads

Soon the new MBA students at RSM Erasmus University in Rotterdam would be hunched over textbooks for their finance and marketing courses, but first it was time to pound on a goatskin stretched across a hollow piece of wood. That's part of the orientation for RSM's 96 incoming international MBA students, most from outside the Netherlands, to help them get used to crossing cultural barriers and working together as teams. Their goal: learn the art of Sewa-style African drumming -- in a day. Under the tutelage of instructors from **SEWA BEATS**, a Swiss company that specializes in corporate drumming sessions, the students became passable tribal drummers by nightfall, performing complicated Mandinka rhythms in groups and, in the judgment of one observer, rocking the house.

Across Europe these days, B-schools are using team-building exercises like this to deal with student bodies that have undergone radical changes. Once populated almost entirely by locals, many B-schools now draw from dozens of countries, and no one nationality dominates. Properly mastered, this diversity gives students an edge in the job market, especially with multinational companies that prize students able to operate comfortably in unfamiliar cultures. For those contemplating B-school, this means Kellogg, Wharton, and other top U.S. schools aren't the only choice. What's more, they may not be the best choice.

MULTICULTURAL KICK

That's one reason why a small but growing number of North American MBA students are choosing European schools -- to give their résumés that multicultural kick. "It gives you an opportunity to experience a diverse student body you can't find at U.S. business schools," says Marc Comer, a 28-year-old Californian studying for his MBA at IMD in Lausanne, Switzerland. Adds Clancy Childs, a 27-year-old New York native in his first year at London Business School (LBS): "This is especially important as business becomes more global. [It's] a dry run for being relocated to another country."

U.S. students are also flocking to the Continent because the programs are a bargain. A typical one-year European course of study -- including tuition, living expenses, and lost wages -- costs roughly half what a two-year U.S. program does. But as with all bargains, this one comes at a cost. Owing to job market differences, graduates of top European programs average \$103,000 at graduation, versus \$135,000 for U.S. grads.

So far, the number of U.S. students applying to MBA programs abroad is small -- less than 2% of the total U.S. applicant pool. But since 2000 the number applying to European schools has soared, as they build their reputations and word gets out that the top programs are conducted in English. In 2005, some 1,578 potential students from the U.S. had their test scores sent to British business schools, almost double the 883 who did so in 2000, according to the Graduate Management Admission Council, which administers the GMAT, the most widely used MBA admissions test. In France the number of U.S. applicants rose from 582 to 844. Spain, with several English-language programs, including the ESADE and IESE business schools in Barcelona, saw an increase from 162 in 2000 to 442 last year.

What can these students expect if they enroll? Most schools offer a wide variety of services designed to make students feel at home in their new surroundings -- from the basics, such as assistance obtaining visas, to the oddly personal. When Brenna Jansen, a 20-year-old undergraduate business student at the University of Ottawa, arrived in Germany in January for a semester at the European Business School in the Rhine River burg of Oestrich-Winkel, a staff member picked her up at the Frankfurt airport at 7 a.m. on a Saturday. The EBS person then took Jansen grocery shopping before dropping her at a furnished apartment that the

school had helped her find. "They were so helpful," says Jansen, who spoke only rudimentary German. "I would have been lost." IMD and ESADE, among others, hire outside agencies to help students find apartments and deal with lease formalities. "You have to do a lot of legwork, and students don't have time," says Betsey Tufano, associate director of admissions at ESADE.

Helping students' families adjust may be just as important, since stress in a relationship can seriously hurt a student's academic performance. IMD offers a kindergarten for students' children, while ESADE lets partners take part in a two-week intensive Spanish program that precedes the beginning of regular study.

For students seeking a true international experience, bonding with classmates outside their national cliques is all-important. To facilitate this, the savviest schools are getting scientific about integrating student diversity into the curriculum. IMD and France's INSEAD use special software to assign students to study groups. The aim is to create teams not only from diverse nations but also from diverse work backgrounds. At IMD, where study groups also engage in outdoor training, students are pushed to analyze team dynamics to learn leadership. They also are urged to look closely at themselves, even to undergo psychotherapy if they choose. It's included in tuition.

Ultimately, much of the burden of breaking down boundaries falls on the students themselves. LBS has dozens of clubs, organized along national lines and according to interests such as marketing or consulting. Nikhil Kejriwal, a 26-year-old from Calcutta majoring in finance and marketing, fondly recalls eating turkey and playing board games at a Thanksgiving Day event sponsored by the American Club. Stephanie DiChiara, a 30-year-old New Jersey native who is studying entrepreneurship at LBS, enjoyed an orientation week game in which students used skits to poke fun at their own national stereotypes. DiChiara, who lived for a decade in California, took part in a Valley Girl skit. "It is a little daunting when you first come over and don't know anyone or the city, but the school does connect you with people," she says.

Because so much depends on the students themselves, the best candidates for international MBA programs tend to be well traveled already. Nat Chaturaphat is from Thailand but attended boarding school in Britain and got her undergraduate degree from the University of Oregon before enrolling at RSM. "I didn't have culture shock," she says. INSEAD accepts only students who speak one language fluently in addition to English and requires them to learn a third language before they graduate. That tends to weed out the provincials. INSEAD is one of several schools that operate on the philosophy that too much student hand-holding can be a bad thing. After all, as globe-trotting executives the students will have to fend for themselves. "We try to help. But we believe this is part of your training," says INSEAD Dean Gabriel Hawawini.

If all goes well, an interesting thing happens to international MBA students: They drift from their national cliques. "Once they start working in groups, their natural affiliations are with people who have the same world outlook," says Jack Denfeld Wood, a former U.S. Air Force pilot in charge of IMD's leadership program. With business ever more global, mastering the art of cross-cultural management may be worth the price of tuition alone.

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