

THINKING LOCAL

Programmes with sparkle

Courses that are tailored to a local niche market offer a great deal for communities and students alike, says **Peter Brown**

From oil and gas to champagne and fashion, more and more business schools are tailoring their MBA and Masters courses to local resources or areas of expertise. As well as the basics – marketing, accounting and strategy – they offer specialist elective courses highly geared to a local speciality.

In a way, such schools are being faithful to their roots. Though the trend now is towards internationalism, business education began in order to supply local training. When Reims Management School in northern France, for example, was founded 80 years ago it offered two career paths, in the wine and textile industries. Today, the school trains 3,500 students a year in the science of management but also offers a specialist “Champagne” MBA.

Business schools based in universities with business parks or with software clusters nearby, such as the Saïd school in Oxford and the Judge in Cambridge, are leveraging their position by liaising with other departments to support start-ups. Access to such local expertise can be a powerful attraction for overseas students.

At the Tanaka school at Imperial College London, MBA students are encouraged to get involved in the “biomed” projects for which the college is renowned. On the other side of London, Cass Business School trumpets its proximity to the City. “Most American investment banks have their European headquarters in London, and 54 per cent of financial and commercial activity in the EU takes place in London,” says Susan Roth, director of MSc programmes at Cass.

Greek’s shipping industry has been given a new lease of life by Asia’s need to transport its goods, so the timing makes sense for the MBA in shipping recently launched by Alba Graduate Business School.

The school is based in Vouliagmeni, a residential suburb of Athens about 30 minutes by car from Piraeus, Europe’s largest port.

“Greece is still the hub of international shipping,” says Ted Lelekas, the school’s chief marketing officer says, “and there are new markets opening up all the time. We work very closely with the shipping companies.”

Taught in English, the MBA at Alba is designed both for shipping industry managers who want to broaden their knowledge, and for those looking for a way into the business. Like the school’s MBA in banking, its curriculum is three-fifths general and two-fifths specialist.

There is, of course, a long history of education in Athens. As the school’s publicity puts it: “A good manager is not one who is knowledgeable in a narrow technical sense (although this is very important) but one who is also phronimos – Aristotle’s word for having practical wisdom.”

The Alba course has been recently accredited by the London-based Association of MBAs (AMBA), which three years ago also endorsed the International MBA at the Athens University of Economics and Business (AUEB). But where AUEB is part of a university, Alba is privately funded, though operating on a not-for-profit basis.

“We think we’re very good value,” says

Lelekas, pointing to tuition fees of €18,500 (£14,800) for a full-time MBA and €15,000 (£11,900) for the full-time MSc in Finance. Both are accredited one-year courses. This certainly compares well with other European MBAs, though the AUEB course costs less at €12,000 (£9,500).

Stefios Haji-Ioannou, the EasyGroup founder and chairman, and a great believer in business education, is among Alba’s guest speakers. All MBA students have to present a business plan to a panel of financiers before graduating and Alba teams have won the European Business Plan of the Year Competition twice in the last five years, a remarkable record for a relatively small school.

With its proximity to the North Sea

oilfields and the world’s second busiest heliport, it is no surprise to find Aberdeen Business School, part of Robert Gordon University, offering new MBAs in oil and gas management and (starting this year) transport strategy and management. It already offers specialist MBAs in agribusiness and food business management.

“We’re in a privileged position to bring in a number of experts from industry to give master classes and to have industrial site visits on our door step,” says Allan Scott, the course leader. He interviewed 50 key players in oil and gas before setting up the course, which is aimed both at existing energy professionals and those wishing to enter the sector.

The MBA has six electives, all geared to the industry, and is offered full-time (for €13,450) as well as part-time or online. An alternative for those looking east is the executive MBA in oil and gas run by Stockholm School of Economics in Russia.

Italy’s top business school, SDA Bocconi in Milan, has a new masters (taught entirely in English) in fine food and beverage, starting this year, which will allow students access to the University of Gastronomic Sciences and to Alma, the leading training centre for Italian cuisine, based in the heart of the “food valley” near Parma. Students will get regular dinners prepared by international chefs. Bocconi already runs a masters in fashion and design Management and in small and medium-sized enterprises, on which, it says, Italy’s economy is based.

At the luxury end of the market, the International University of Monaco offers four luxury MBA electives and a new masters degree in luxury goods management. France’s Essec Business School has a similar course.



Working lunch: Milan has a new Masters in food and drink GETTY IMAGES

'I have made contacts with major industry player'

Tahir Raji, 39, comes from Nigeria. He is taking the one-year MBA in oil and gas management at Aberdeen Business School.

In Nigeria I was working in the banking sector but attached to the national oil company. There is a general decline in oil supply, but Nigeria is the world's sixth biggest producer and much of the field remains unexplored. There's a lot of potential for me there but I would like to think I can work anywhere in the world. It's a global industry.

At Aberdeen there's a collaboration between industry and academia, and that's been one of the highlights of the MBA. I have made contacts



with major industry players from BP, Total and Shell.

I'm doing electives in petroleum economics and asset management, oil and gas contract law, managing

change and leadership, which is critical. It's been very enjoyable. I've come to love the town and I'm satisfied with what I'm learning from the MBA.