

# Taking A Long-Term Approach To Business

Alexandra Skinner speaks to Ralf Schellhase »

“Our mission is to develop competent and responsible business leaders who are capable of meeting the challenges of today’s business environment.”

## The University of Darmstadt Value Proposition

**Q** The University of Darmstadt (h\_da) is celebrating its 40th Anniversary in 2012. What would you say have been the university’s biggest contributions to the business landscape, both locally and internationally, over the last 40 years?

I think, speaking as a business school, it would be the development of our part-time studies, and this is what we are famed for. We have had part-time studies for more than 10 years, across every level; a Bachelors in International Business Administration, we will start our Master’s in International Administration next year, and we have our MBA programme which has been running for five years.

**Q** Please can you outline your MBA value proposition, in terms of student profile and course format?

Our mission is to develop competent and responsible business leaders who are capable of meeting the challenges of today’s business environment. We focus on competence, of course, but also responsibility, ethics and CSR, which are very important in our programme. Our MBA focuses on a long-term perspective,

and I think that this differentiates us from many other MBA programmes.

We have small classes of between ten and 18 students, and that’s very important to us. Our student body is very international. Some already live in Germany but are from other parts of the world, and they come to us because our programme is one of the few in Germany that is taught in English. However, we are also getting more and more students who are coming to Germany specifically for our programme. The fact that it is offered in English, combined with being good value for money, means that we have students who have come from Africa, China, Thailand, Russia and India, to name a few.

We only have core modules on the programme; we want to offer a very classical general management MBA. We don’t focus too much on finance, although of course we have a finance module, but instead we centre the programme around strategy, marketing and general management. There seem to be new MBA programmes coming out each week, particularly in Germany. Many of these are specialised. In my opinion these are not real MBAs. Our approach was to develop a real MBA which, for me, is a general management MBA. This differentiates us from many other programmes in the area.

At h\_da, one of the key distinctions of your MBA is your internationally-orientated educational approach.

**Q** (a). How do you bring an international perspective into the classroom?

Our programme attracts students from all over the world whom have international backgrounds; approximately 50 per cent of our students are non-Germans. The students bring an international perspective into the class. We want to build this up by actively recruiting students from all over the world over the next two years.

Secondly, all of the teachers on the programme are working or doing research in an international field, and conducting consulting projects with international firms. This gives us a rich international perspective. 50 per cent of the teaching staff at the university are professors, and 50 per cent are managers working for international firms.

In addition, we hold business trips with our students; in March 2013 we are taking them to China for 11 days, and we have been to the US and Brazil too.

**Q** (b). Please can you tell our readers more about your pedagogical approach?

We use a mixture of case-studies and lecturing. Most lessons will be a short lecture followed by a case-study, discussion or group work.

The programme takes place on Thursday and Friday evenings and all day on Saturdays. Our programme is a part-time programme, but we do have students who aren’t working. This means that, for those students coming from abroad, there is an option to undertake an internship alongside the programme, and we offer a special service package for students who are interested in this. Darmstadt is located in the Rhein-Main area, which is the economic powerhouse of Germany; it is a financial centre and a major business centre for producing industry. There are many big firms in the area, and we have close partnerships with them.

This means that we are able to support those students in finding them internships. We also have a language centre at our university, so students can take the opportunity to learn business English or German.

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HUNDERTWASSER HOUSE (THE FOREST SPIRAL) IN DARMSTADT

### Shaping the MBA Landscape

**Q** With the MBA market becoming increasingly competitive, how do you continue to differentiate your programme offerings to stay one step ahead of the competition?

We focus on a long-term perspective, on strategy and management. We have what I think we can refer to as a 'German approach'. German companies are very long-term oriented compared to others; they don't think in terms of three month periods, but in 20 years periods. There are many SMEs and family owned companies, and though this is not what we focus on, this is our background and our way of thinking.

“ We are located in the Rhine-Main Area, where many national and international companies have their headquarters. ”

We have small classes, so everybody knows each other and there is a very friendly atmosphere. I know all of my students, they know me, there is very close contact, and many students have my mobile number so that they can call me at any time.

We are a university of applied sciences; this means that our professors must have completed a PhD and have five years work experience. This differentiates us from many other universities where you sometimes have professors who have never worked in real life. Our professors really understand business.

I think that we offer very good value for money. Our programme costs €16000, including course materials.

**Q** In trying to produce effective managers and the business leaders of the future, ethical, social and environmental concerns have been high on the list of many business schools. To what extent has h\_da integrated the aforesaid points into its MBA offering and how important is the triple bottom line – people, planet and profit – to today's high potential managers?

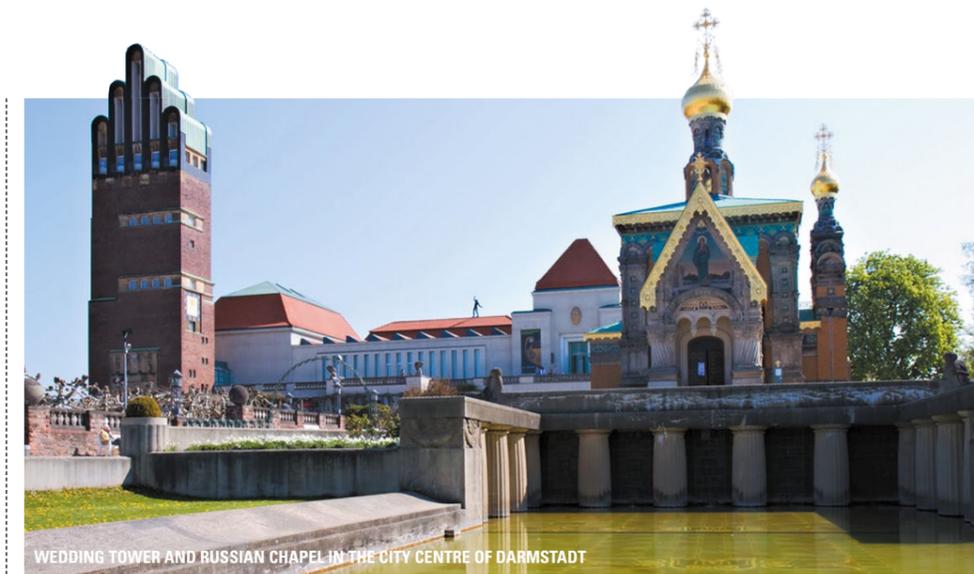
Our programme was reaccredited last year, and we took that opportunity to develop and new module called business law and ethics. Combining the issues of ethics and CSR with business law makes sense; you have to take the law into account when making business decisions, but you also have ethical elements to consider. We like to come back on these topics and link them into each module. For example, in developing a marketing strategy for another country you have to follow the particular laws of that country, but you also have to think about ethical standards. It's good to get your

students to think about circumstances in which they may find themselves being challenged to make ethical decisions.

**Q** In this issue we are focussing on MBA innovations. How do you feel that business schools can continue to add value within, and outside of, their MBA offerings?

I think it's very important to have an applied perspective and real and practical applications, which can be taught as case studies, but which primarily are brought in by the faculty. This is something that we have as a university of applied sciences; in addition to our professors we have lecturers who come from middle and higher management and bring this experience into the classroom. In addition to this, I feel that with an MBA it is important to have small classes. This is why we will never have more than 20 students. We feel that classroom discussion is very important.

Business schools need to move away from a short-term perspective to middle and long-term perspectives. The focus, and this is something that we have learnt over the last few years, shouldn't be too much on finance, but should be on strategy, management and marketing.



WEDDING TOWER AND RUSSIAN CHAPEL IN THE CITY CENTRE OF DARMSTADT

### Application and Programme Selection

**Q** What are the basic pre-requisites for application to the h\_da MBA?

Applicants should have the TOEFL, an above average GPA and, ideally, some prior knowledge of economics. For those without prior knowledge of economics, we have six preparatory courses which they can take alongside their studies. We ask for a minimum of three years' experience, but there are some special cases that we will consider.

**Q** h\_da holds open house days each semester. What can potential applicants expect from these events?

During open house days interested individuals will receive detailed information about the programme and they are able to meet current students. We feel this is an important element for potential students, as there are always questions that we cannot answer that students will be best placed to do so; questions about workload, managing studying alongside work and family life and so on. We also offer them the opportunity to take part in lectures.

**Q** Application processes vary from school to school. Please can you give an overview of the h\_da application process?

Students apply to the department of advanced education, and then our admissions board would have a look at the documents and take

a decision from there. Applicants have to complete a form, the TOEFL and supply a CV detailing their experience.

**Q** Location is often a part of the decision making process for those considering an MBA, particularly in the case of international students. What can potential students expect to enjoy from living and/or studying in Darmstadt?

I think that the main points for students who come from abroad are the strong infrastructure and the close connections to Frankfurt airport, which is just 20 minutes away. Darmstadt is also a good business environment. We are located in the Rhine-Main Area, where many national and international companies have their headquarters. The area is very green, offering plenty of activities for students to enjoy in their free time. We are also close to cities such as Heidelberg which are attractive locations to visit.

Students at h\_da can use all of the public transport in the area for free, they can also visit the theatre for free, we have a lot of sporting activities that they can take part in, and there is the h\_da language school nearby.

### H\_da and the Future

**Q** What can we expect to see from h\_da over the next 12 to 18 months?

We recently further developed the programme, just over a year ago, so the current MBA is a 'new' programme. We will be moving the classes to a new building, the 'sky scraper' from next semester. We also want to promote our programme internationally, which is something that we haven't done, particularly in China, Russia, India and Eastern Europe, and we will take part in some MBA tours and fairs and recruit locally in these countries. We have lots of partner schools in these countries, and we use these partnerships to arrange student excursions. We will continue to work on that. □

### BIOGRAPHY

★ Prof. Dr. Ralf Schellhase is the Academic Director of the MBA Programme and Professor of Marketing at The University of Darmstadt, Germany.