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AACSB International
The Beijing International MBA (BiMBA) Program

Vlerick Business School (prior to September 2012 known as the Vlerick Leuven Gent Management School) of Belgium has been striving to increase the international reach of its programs ever since becoming independent of its two parent institutions, the University of Ghent and the Katholieke Universiteit Leuven, in 1998.¹ One of the most important and successful aspects of the school’s quest to expand globally was to come together in partnership with Peking University, which has long been referred to as “the Harvard of China,”² to deliver the Beijing International MBA (BiMBA) program.

International Origins

According to Vlerick International Dean Bruce Stening, at the same time that Vlerick was beginning its phase of internationalization, World Bank Chief Economist and Senior Vice President Justin Yifu Lin, then a professor at Peking University and founder of its China Center for Economic Research (CCER), was pushing for the introduction of an MBA program at Peking University that would be specifically internationally oriented. Dean Stening, himself previously a visiting professor at Peking University’s Guanghua School of Management, says that because the CCER was a separate academic unit from the Guanghua School, it was prohibited by institutional rules from offering an MBA program that might be seen as competing directly with that of the university’s Chinese business school. As a result, the decision was taken to create a joint program in partnership with a foreign institution, which would agree to be the degree grantor.

Initially, the Graduate School of Business at Fordham University in New York was chosen to be the CCER’s foreign degree-granting partner. The new Beijing International MBA (BiMBA) program was launched in 1998 as the first joint Sino-foreign MBA taught in Beijing with the approval of the Chinese government.³ Fordham University agreed to provide faculty for the courses of the BiMBA program, in concert with an associated consortium of other Jesuit business schools, and to award the MBA degrees upon completion (though BiMBA graduates also receive certificates of completion from Peking University).

After 10 years the CCER, now an academic research unit of the Peking University National School of Development (NSD), began to look for another suitable international partner in the delivery of the BiMBA. Vlerick, by that point one of the few business schools in the world to achieve the so-called “triple crown” of AACSB, EQUIS, and AMBA accreditation, was successful in being selected, and in October 2008 it took on the academic responsibility for the programs from Fordham University.⁴ Three years later, Vlerick Leuven Gent Management School and Peking University reaffirmed their relationship, continuing their commitment to the joint delivery of the BiMBA.⁵
Internationally Focused Curriculum

Since Vlerick became the degree-granting partner for the BiMBA programs, some curricular changes have been instituted that align the BiMBA programs with the MBA programs offered on its campuses in Belgium and St. Petersburg, Russia. According to Dean Stening, faculty of Vlerick Leuven Gent Management School and the NSD contribute jointly to the curricular development of the BiMBA programs, through periodic meetings that take place as part of the process of assessing the programs’ learning outcomes.

The BiMBA is offered on both a full-time and part-time basis, onsite at Peking University. Full-time students complete their studies in three semesters (or approximately 18 months), while part-time students attend for four semesters (or approximately two years). Courses are taught intensively over two to four week periods for the full-time students, and four to five week periods for the part-time students, who attend class on weekends.

The curriculum is largely the same for both modes, consisting of 22 core courses, including the capstone In-Company Consultancy Project (ICP). The ICP consists of an eight-week team-based consultancy project, working for real firms on solutions to real business problems. The ICP was initially developed at Vlerick as a way to allow students to bring together all that they have learned over their course of study, although Dean Stening mentions that one of the changes that came out of the periodic joint faculty meetings was a decision to allow part-time BiMBA students to have the option to substitute four elective courses for the ICP, primarily in recognition of the fact that the part-time students are already working for their employers on solutions to real business problems.

All core courses are conducted in English, though there are a couple of electives focused on Chinese business cases that are conducted in Mandarin. Peking University also offers BiMBA students from outside China a three-week intensive language course that is run in partnership with the Beijing Hutong School. This course takes place prior to the beginning of the first semester, and is recommended (though not required) for non-Chinese students, particularly those interested in careers based in China after graduation.

An option for further study available to BiMBA students is the Master of Science in Global Finance (MSGF) program at Fordham University. The MSGF articulates directly with the BiMBA program, according to Dean Stening. BiMBA students are able to count four of their courses toward the MSGF degree, he says, which allows them to spend an intensive five-week summer period at Fordham in New York, completing the remaining requirements for the degree. This can be done after completing the BiMBA, or even immediately before the final BiMBA semester if the student has already completed the requisite courses by that time.
Internationally Focused Stakeholders

According to Dean Stening, faculty from the NSD participate in the teaching of the BiMBA programs’ core economics courses, while Vlerick faculty fly in to Beijing to teach other core courses. Administratively, the two institutions have similarly cooperative roles. Dean Stening’s own role is to help ensure the academic quality of the BiMBA programs, while his counterparts, China Co-Deans Dayuan Hu and John Yang, handle the operational aspects of the programs. He says that there are a few faculty from Fordham University and its consortium that still fly in to Beijing to teach certain courses from time to time as well. As a result, the BiMBA programs can boast that as many as 80 percent of program faculty are international.9

BiMBA students and alumni also represent a wide range of backgrounds, including as many as 29 different nationalities.10 Indeed, the percentage of non-Chinese students has grown rapidly in recent years.11 Dean Stening notes that since Vlerick became the degree-granting partner for the BiMBA programs, the full-time program has enrolled between 50 to 60 students per cohort, generally averaging over one third of its enrollees from outside China. The part-time program averages a slightly smaller percentage, he says, as it typically enrolls between 110 to 120 students per cohort. Part-time international enrollees are drawn primarily from among the expatriate communities that work for multi-national corporations in Beijing.

Internationally Focused Impact

Dean Stening observes that the BiMBA programs have made substantial progress in developing human capital in China. The quality of the incoming students is very high, he says, due to the extremely competitive ratio of applications to available seats. This development is particularly visible for the part-time students, who are typically learning while remaining employed, and thus are able to put their learning into practice right away.

The research that has come out of the work of BiMBA faculty has also contributed to the development of management education within and about China. BiMBA faculty have been among those making inroads into increasing the receptivity of Chinese firms to being the subject of academic study, according to Dean Stening.12 Additionally, he notes that the teaching model for the program forces professors, particularly those from outside China, to adhere to a steep learning curve, because their contracts to teach in the program must be renewed annually, and both the partners pay careful attention to instructor quality.

Dean Stening has characterized teaching as “a transfer of knowledge, [while] learning is creating knowledge together.”13 He says that BiMBA faculty end up learning nearly as much as the students do, particularly given the opportunity to undertake research and case development based on local business. As a result, the faculty of both partners gain valuable experience and expertise with international cultural perspectives and business practices, improving the portfolios of both Vlerick and the NSD.
Dean Stening says it is also important to keep in mind the context of greater events in China’s development when considering the continuing development of the BiMBA program, which must continue to develop as circumstances demand. He cites the example of a new course in mergers and acquisitions that has been developed within the past two years. When the BiMBA was first established, mergers and acquisitions were not even part of the discussion in Chinese business, but their presence in the curriculum now bespeaks the progress of China’s emergent economic power. As Dean Stening himself has stated, “it’s not a question of getting it right and then it’s done. You need to be constantly aware of what’s going on.”

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End Notes