

# Making A Smart **MBA** Move

By Jeremy Walden-Schertz

Students might pursue an MBA for any number of reasons – to stay on the fast track, to build their resume or because of parental pressure. As valid as any of these may be, sound business sense would dictate that an MBA education is only worth what it delivers in terms of career advancement.

There are a growing number of jobs where an MBA is considered the minimum qualification. As such, there are an increasing number of candidates holding MBA degrees. “Companies use the MBA in a number of ways. One way is as a screening criteria to make it easier for businesses [for hiring purposes] without testing for specific skills. However with so many MBAs out there, the quality of the MBA is becoming more and more important,” said Dr. Ian Fenwick, a faculty member of the Sasin Graduate Institute of Business Administration of Chulalongkorn University.

Sasin Business School is one of the oldest MBA programs in Thailand and one of the most well regarded. Founded in response to the shortage of skilled business managers in the early 1980’s, Sasin is a cooperative effort between Chulalongkorn University, the U.S.-based, Kellogg School of Management of Northwestern University and the Wharton School of the University of Pennsylvania, two U.S. based business schools that have traded places as the world’s number one ranked MBA program for the past 12 years. Students and professors come from all over the world and the curriculum is taught in English.

Dr. Pongsak Hoontrakul graduated from Sasin with an MBA specializing in international marketing in 1987.

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He is now the Independent Director and Audit Committee member of UOB Radanasin Bank as well as a Research Fellow at Sasin. While he said that many of his peers from Sasin have moved on to high ranking positions in business and government, not all realized the success that would be expected. “Opportunity set is the key. If you are highly qualified and you are put in the wrong place, what can you do? A lot of students were unfortunate to be stuck in an old paradigm with a new idea,” Dr. Pongsak said. With this in mind, people considering an MBA should not only scrutinize the available programs before enrolling, but their own personal circumstances especially in terms of their post-graduation objectives.

There are some professional and educational backgrounds that can benefit more than others from an MBA education. Students fresh from an undergraduate business school with a degree in accounting, finance or marketing will find quite a bit of overlap in many MBA programs and they may lack the practical experience to really take

advantage of the expanded educational qualifications. In fact, Sasin’s Executive MBA program is restricted to professionals who have seven or more years of experience.

Speaking from his own experience, Dr. Pongsak said that students who have already been in the workforce for a time may be in a better position to utilize the full value of an MBA: “You already know your deficiency, you know what you need and you can study your heart out.” Following his graduation from San Jose State University with a B.S. in Industrial and System Engineering, Dr. Pongsak started working at a foundry and machine shop. He soon decided to further his education. “The basic rationale is that a lot of people are good at their profession; like engineers, medical doctors, etc., but they are lousy as managers. When they start their own businesses or reach a certain level they have to manage a lot of people.” The concept of proficient workers needing new skill sets to effectively fulfill management positions has been well documented. This was the basic premise that drove the MBA revolution.

As important as the certificate can be in the modern working environment, it is the learning experience that comes out of an MBA that should be the primary impetus for pursuing one, a



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wick, who himself started as a visiting professor. "Our teachers are all from relatively big-name schools and have their own reasons for keeping their curriculum up to date where they come from, so we ride on that. For example, we have new courses developed at Kellogg just two years ago, being taught here already — we piggy back on the latest innovations from other universities because teachers bring them here."

The trade-off, according to Dr. Fenwick, is that accommodating temporary staff makes for an intensive learning environment for students, with courses structured on five-week modules. Next year, the school plans to introduce 10-week modules for classes taught by permanent staff. Currently the school year is divided into six modules and each student typically takes two courses in each module (some choose to do three or four).

For the potential MBA applicant, all that a program offers must be weighed against the time that must be

invested and the financial costs involved. While Sasin's program is a full-time two-year endeavor taught in English, others available in Thailand include part-time and three year programs. Tuition is charged per credit, on a yearly basis or for the entire program (see insert box). Regardless of the program and the background of the applicant, the time combined with the money involved represents a substantial investment of one's resources.

Because of its relationships overseas and its position in international MBA rankings, Sasin is arguably the most renowned MBA school in Thailand, but there are a number of programs available. A critical advantage that Thai schools have in the global perspective is that tuition fees are substantially lower than many other countries. Referring specifically to Sasin, Dr. Fenwick said it offers the "same quality of education at roughly half the price." Conversely, MBA graduates entering the workforce in Thailand can expect on average to earn substantially less than their counterparts in developed nations. The breakdown of the source of MBA tuition funding for Sasin students is 10% contributed by employers (30% for the Executive MBA), 10% scholarships and 80% self funding.

As important as an MBA can be as a career

step, it can also be a preliminary step. "Actually, what I think will happen, what is starting to emerge, is a post-MBA degree or diploma being offered, that is more specialized. The idea is to get your MBA, go out and work for five to eight years, before deciding you want to go back to school. Perhaps you want to move into a new area of business and, for instance, do an elective course in finance. We already see that in North America and we will see it here," Dr. Fenwick said. It is an important realization for prospective students as well, some of whom might expect to be on easy street after they graduate. The truth is that career development never really stops and the MBA is just one step in the process. It can, however, be a step that opens many doors.



### MBA Program Tuition Costs

Asian University of Science and Technology
Cost Bt200,000 per year full-time; Bt150,000 per year part time.
Sasin Graduate Institute of Business Administration
Cost: Bt366,000 per year.
Shinawatra University
Cost: Bt460,000 per year.
The National Institute of Development Administration (NIDA), Graduate School of Business Administrations
Cost: Bt120,000 per year.
Bangkok University
Cost: 33 credits required at Bt4,000 per credit.
Ramkhamhaeng University
Cost: Bt600,000 per year.
Asian Institute of Technology (AIT) School of Management
Cost: Bt670,000 per year.

Source: The Nation, January 2003



point that is especially true for many students in Thailand who plan to return to a family business post-graduation. At Sasin, students study the core concepts of finance, marketing, production, strategy, organization and accounting for the first year and the second year is allotted to electives. "The field of manufacturing is important in Thailand; we have supply chain management, operations management, production oriented courses," Dr. Fenwick said. While the general subjects are obviously still the core of the degree, MBA curriculums have broadly shifted from specializing in one subject, marketing for instance, to covering specific industries.

Dr. Fenwick added that networking and forming relationships are also crucial components of an MBA experience, especially in the Asian business culture. The most important skills a graduate should leave with are "the ability to think creatively and present ideas persuasively. We don't want people to simply apply the textbook; but instead look at the problem in a new way and be innovative," Dr. Fenwick said.

After graduating with his MBA at Sasin, Dr. Pongsak completed a Doctoral Business Administration degree in

Finance, in a joint program between Chulalongkorn University, Thammasat University and NIDA (the National Institute of Dramatic Arts). He credited his decision to pursue his DBA in large part to being exposed to the professors at Sasin who were considering and generating exciting new ideas. For example, Dr. Pongsak said that Agency Theory, which is now used to structure business relationships in a milieu of frameworks like corporate governance, franchise agreements and managerial strategy, was discussed at Sasin far ahead of its time. Currently Dr. Pongsak's research focuses on the "new economy," or the intersection between business practices and information technology, a current business reality that he believes should be reflected in current MBA programs.

For any MBA program, the ability to stay ahead of the curve, especially as MBA programs proliferate, is a litmus test for the relevance of the education to the working world. The strategy that Sasin has had in place since its inception draws on the resources of its two American affiliates. Complementing its permanent staff, Sasin hosts visiting professors from other universities to teach about half of the curriculum. "Because we get the chance to cherry pick from around the world, we have more good teachers than any other business school. Not to say that every single person in front of the students is the best, but the average is much higher," said Dr. Fen-



Sasin Business School is a joint initiative between Chulalongkorn University and two of the world's most reputable MBA institutions; Kellogg and Wharton.



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