

St Petersburg Campus

Vlerick spreads its wings to Russia

Following the integration of the full-time MBA programme of the International School of Management (ISM) in St Petersburg into its portfolio of management education, Vlerick Leuven Gent Management School took the final step in October 2006: Vlerick now has a third campus, and an international one to boot. We talked to Academic Dean Prof. Dirk Buyens about the strategic impact and objectives of the new campus.



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When the School mapped out its internationalisation strategy in 1999, the idea was not just to attract more foreign students and revamp the programmes along international lines. Another objective was to enter into associations and alliances with reputable business schools abroad. This has since been achieved for a number of programmes and research projects. Until recently, however, the integration of an entire campus was nothing short of a dream.

From Leuven to St Petersburg and back

Prof. Dirk Buyens, who as Academic Dean has overall responsibility for the MBA programmes, explains how Vlerick ended up in Russia: "For more than 15 years, the

International School of Management delivered its English-language MBA, a reputable programme in Russia with some 500 alumni, in partnership with K.U.Leuven and the Lovanium International Management Centre. In recent years, however, collaboration with Leuven had tailed off somewhat, and was in fact virtually on its last legs. It was also proving increasingly difficult to find suitable faculty staff and this was reflected in dwindling student numbers. The Flemish government, which co-funded the programme, thought that it was time to make a few changes and got in touch with our School. We regarded it as a great opportunity, one that was fully compatible with our strategy. Peter Rafferty, our Director of International Business

Development, then took a delegation to Russia to discuss the possibility of collaboration and to get a feel for the atmosphere over there."

Weighing up the pros and cons

Vlerick Leuven Gent Management School has three international accreditations, which is a fine record of achievement, but one that does not come without certain obligations. Whatever the School does, it has to assess its decisions in the light of the rigorous standards it had to meet to qualify for these quality labels. The idea of working with a management school in St Petersburg was a very attractive prospect, but enthusiasm had to be tempered by rational judgement. "The integration of ISM as the School's third campus took

place in three phases,” recalls Prof. Buyens. “During the first phase, two years ago, it was important for us to evaluate the quality of ISM. The next step was to take a critical look at the curriculum of its MBA programme. We cannot apply double standards. Our MBA programme is accredited and the programme in Russia had to meet the same stringent requirements. During a subsequent trip to St Petersburg, which also included representatives from several Belgian companies, Vlerick’s General Director Patrick De Greve explored the executive teaching options. Contact was established with businesses in the area, including Belgian companies with active interests there. During the final phase, the possibility of the full integration of ISM as a campus of Vlerick Leuven Gent Management School raised the subject of joint degrees. A final decision was reached in October of this year and the upshot is that students who graduate in Russia this year will receive a Vlerick diploma.”

Positioning in the market

Vlerick is by no means the only business school operating abroad, but it is one of a very small and select group of institutions that have fully integrated a foreign school. Running a campus at a distance is one thing; marketing it to the outside world is quite another. “The Russian market clearly has potential, but we’re not trying to fool ourselves,” explains Prof. Buyens. “We’re far from being the only player in Russia. Besides a few Russian schools,

Scandinavia is also very active. It will take a huge marketing drive to put the new campus on the international map and link Vlerick’s name with St Petersburg. Peter Rafferty, who has a great many international contacts and knows our MBA programme inside out, has taken on this challenge with professionalism. We also have a new Russian colleague, Anastasia Korshunova, a St Petersburg MBA graduate familiar with the local market, who is taking on the task of marketing.”

Education

One of the factors behind Vlerick opting to integrate a foreign campus, rather than build one up itself, was that there was no need to start from scratch. “With ISM’s 500 alumni, we have an excellent reserve of potential candidates for future executive programmes,” points out Prof. Buyens. “The alumni culture in St Petersburg is far less developed than in Belgium, however. We’re going to try to revive those contacts.” For the time being the full-time, and now also the part-time MBA

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programme will remain at the heart of the courses available at the Russian campus. “We’re already looking ahead, in the sense that St Petersburg, which is the country’s second largest city, located at the centre of a very busy region, offers excellent prospects in terms of executive teaching. Although Russia has made great progress in the past few years, as a result of doing business with the West and benefiting from Western investment, the standard of English there is still a tricky problem, though less so in the case of MBA students.”

Research

Besides the transfer of knowledge, Vlerick Leuven Gent Management School also firmly believes in the development of

knowledge. At the moment ISM Director Alexander Yanchevsky is practically the only person on hand to set up research projects in St Petersburg. Prof. Buyens again: “One of our objectives is to increase know-how and develop our own established fields of research, our ‘spearheads’, there too. ‘Doing business in Europe’, for example, will definitely be of interest to Russian companies. Conversely, our presence there will generate new research topics that might also attract the attention of Belgian companies. In the field of research, we shall also be seeking to work in partnership with the Belgian and Russian business communities with a view to developing knowledge that caters to their specific needs.”

Three strong campuses

Vlerick lecturers currently fly back and forth from Belgium to Russia every week. Charlotte De Volder, coordinator of the full-time MBA programme in Leuven, acts as liaison between the two institutions, while Russian colleagues take care of the operational side of things in St Petersburg. “This one-way traffic will have to become two-way,” comments Prof. Buyens, looking ahead. “Recruiting new faculty staff, both Russian and international professors, should eventually enable the campus in St Petersburg to function independently. Exchanges between all three Vlerick campuses will then be an enriching experience for all our students. Last year there was an exchange between full-time MBA students and this year our 200 part-time MBA students will also have the same opportunity. Starting next year, this ‘business trip’ will become an integral part of the curriculum.” ■

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