

EXECUTIVE AMBITION:

CALLING ON THE LEADERS OF TOMORROW

According to its managing director Chris Shern, the Henley Business School's Executive MBA program will change who you are, both personally and professionally

By Soma Biró

You've probably walked past it a million times, but didn't realise that the Danish headquarters of one of the best business schools in Europe resides right by the heart of the Nørreport beehive.

The big old doors of Fiolstræde 44 and the sleek Scandinavian business interior, dominated by the colour white, immediately confirm you've come to the right place – that is, if you're looking for the Henley Business School in Denmark.

GREAT CHOICE FOR EXPATS

Its managing director, Chris Shern, an American executive and long-time expat, talked to me about their triple accredited Executive MBA program.

He outlined why it is a great choice for expats looking to advance to the next level of leadership as well as rooting themselves socially and professionally in Denmark.

How did Henley Business School and the executive MBA come about

It was established as an independent business school over 75 years ago in the UK after World War II, when leaders realised they had to rebuild Europe. Part of that was rebuilding business and creating jobs and, in order to do that, you had to build more leaders. One of the three foundations of Henley is that, in order to build leaders, you have to build human beings. So Henley's always had a great deal of focus on personal development. Another important foundation was to make it international. Finally, the third cornerstone of Henley is that learning doesn't necessarily occur from content delivery – from some expert performing a one way communication – but that learning also occurs via your peers. These three fundamentals are just as relevant today as they were before, especially with technology, digitalisation and the disruption of education. Today Henley is in the top 1 percent of business schools in the world.

As for the Henley Executive MBA in Denmark, it started a little over 25 years ago: at Aarhus Business College. They realised that they couldn't offer the skills necessary for executive leaders to be able to compete in a globalised world. So they created the IME foundation [of which

Chris is also managing director] and IME went into co-operation with Henley Business School and started offering the executive MBA in Denmark. Since then, we've graduated almost 2,000 executive MBAs in Denmark.

How did you join the Henley team?

I myself am a Henley MBA from 2002. At that time I was pretty junior in my corporate career in the airline industry and was an expat here in Denmark coming to the end of my 30s. I knew that an executive MBA could be a good foundation to be able to progress in my career. There are many MBA providers in the market and, as an expat, I needed to know that no matter where I went in the world, this degree would be recognised and have credibility. Also creating a network and learning from my peers – in 2018, the Economist ranked Henley as number 1 on the list of best business schools regarding the potential to network. And after I left my corporate career in 2014 – I was managing director of Scandinavian Airlines in Milan for South Europe – I returned to Denmark and was asked to join IME as managing director.

How is this program unique – what do you offer that's different?

Firstly, the mentioned focus we have on personal

development talking about the challenges we're faced with today, you can see how technology continues to fill more and more of the agenda: big data, robotics, augmented reality, artificial intelligence and so on and so forth. They continue to fill more and more of society and the workplace, so the essence of being human is going to be more important than ever. Thus, the focus on personal development and a human centric aspect of business and leadership are vital.

A lot of programs might go: 'Okay, it's the new buzzword so we do personal development', but Henley has been focusing on personal development for over 70 years. So it's very integrated into every module – into how we work and how we lead.

I would also highlight our teaching method: what we call the syndicate method – learning from your peers, who are all executives with years of experience under their belts. But you're also learning from your own situation, meaning all of the assignments are based on your own organisation. In that way, you almost become an internal consultant in your own organisation.

If you look at us purely in the context of the Danish market, this is the only truly international MBA that you can get here in Denmark. And you get the best of several worlds: you're taking a British International MBA in Denmark and have workshops in South Africa, Asia, the US and the UK. During the local workshops you can build up a strong local network, while at the same time you have the possibility to build an international network with all the global cohorts.

Can you tell me more about the personal development aspect of the program?

Being a leader is about empathy and about understanding people's situations and what motivates them and about what their values are. You truly have to see people. But in order to do that, you also have to have a deep understanding of yourself. It's not about hiding behind things like "This guy is an asshole" or "this guy seems arrogant." Usually, when people are like that, there's something else behind it – that they're uncertain or have an inferiority complex, for example. So it's about understanding how you are as an individual and a human being. And when you are authentic and in touch with your values, it's much easier to come into contact with people, to motivate and to lead them.

So, guided by an instructor and together with peers, you look at particular professional situations and examine what happened, how you felt and how others perceived you. Opening up and being vulnerable with other business leaders is extremely powerful.

What are some of the main things one gains from this program?

It gives you a toolbox – you get the foundations of business, be it marketing, strategy, process, finance, managing people and so forth. It also gives a much deeper understanding of what you're doing as an executive because it is in many ways a generalist education – you're getting a broad and deep insight into the main drivers of business. So what it gave me personally is a much better understanding of operating a business. I was in a corporate environment, so I could apply the things I learned at a corporate level, but it would've been easy to apply those things to the particular organisation that I was working on as well. Because it is a generalist education, it also gave me the ability to essentially go into any type of business environment and have an understanding of what's going on.

So it's about having more skills, but with that comes also more confidence. It's how you look at yourself as a leader and as a businessperson, while the title alone – having an MBA – also changes how the outside world looks at you. To be able to put MBA on my own CV gave me a big boost.

As for the network, some of the people I've studied with are contacts I'm still very close with today. There was a study that came out a couple of weeks ago that said Denmark is one of the most difficult places in the world to make friends. Coming here as a foreigner and being able to complete this MBA journey with Danes gave me a solid personal and professional network for life.

So you didn't have any issues socialising in Denmark?

Absolutely not. Twenty years later there are people from this Executive MBA who are important parts of my professional network. You kind of become part of an exclusive club.

Who is this program aimed at?

It's an executive MBA – it's not for junior leaders or supervisors. You need at least three years of leadership experience. The average age is 38 with seven years of leadership experience. We usually have senior managers and CEOs of smaller companies as well as senior management teams. Because it is a generalist education, we do also have a lot of specialists enrolling who have advanced degrees – people who studied finance, engineering, law, or science. Maybe their carriers have taken them in a more commercial direction and they find that they don't have those skills at all. In such cases this program is an excellent addition.

You are quite taken by Nordic leadership (you wrote the book 'Return of the Vikings; Nordic

Leadership in Times of Extreme Change' on the topic) and heavily draw inspiration from it. Is this being implemented in Henley?

Henley does incorporate aspects of different places in the world into their learning experience. And, in December, Henley held a global workshop with almost 50 executive MBAs who came to Denmark from all over the world for a workshop. We incorporated elements of Nordic leadership into the curriculum this way. That is, things that the Nordics are starting to be known for: e.g sustainability, sustainable capitalism, design thinking, Nordic food movement and hygge, and the human connection. It was called the Managing People workshop in the Henley executive MBA.

I'm also in discussions with Henley about designing an elective around Nordic leadership – a trust based collaborative approach to leading.

Why should expats consider this program?

I understand the frustrations, the difficulties and the challenges of being an outsider, an expat, in Denmark. I myself had the typical immigrant mindset that you always have to be better – you can't just be like everybody else. You're different so you have to be better.

At Henley, you get into a group of peers and when you're sitting with them and not just dancing on the outside of Danish society, but really sitting around a table with Danes, discussing, arguing something in depth, you realise: 'Wow, I'm just as good as these guys' or 'I'm even better' or 'I have something to bring to the table' – this most definitely minimises that aspect of feeling like you are less as a foreigner.

Also, consider the uncertainty of being a foreigner here: 'What if I lose my job?' With a Henley MBA you'll know: 'Okay, I'll be quite marketable here – or anywhere else.'

How does the structure of the Henley Executive MBA look like?

The entire program takes 21 months to complete. And you can take up to seven years of breaks. Life gets in the way sometimes and it's hard trying to balance a private life, career and your studies. You can take a break and restart again – even in other places in the world if needed.

Another special aspect of the Henley Executive MBA is that it's split up into stages. If you start it and complete the first stage, but want to stop there for some reason, you receive a certificate in management without having to complete the entire program. Or, you can continue to stage two and get a diploma in management. And, naturally, you can continue to complete stage three and the entire program and earn the executive MBA.