'Della has absolutely no equal in the press world in terms of knowledge and understanding of management education'

ERIC CORNUEL, DIRECTOR GENERAL AND CEO EFMD

Higher Pass

Della Bradshaw, a key player on the management education stage for 20 years, has retired but tells **George Bickerstaffe** she still loves the business

> *The best thing about my job at the* FT *was working with people in business schools. They're great people, delightful people, who are very clever and thoughtful. That was the bit I enjoyed most*

Unless you have been living on Mars for the past six months you will be aware that Della Bradshaw has retired from the *Financial Times*. The doyen of the *FT* rankings (and also the editor of its weekly management education page) says that the parting was amicable if a little emotional.

She is expected to attend the EFMD Annual Conference in Rome in June where she will become (along with Professor Charles Handy) an Honorary EFMD Member.

Inevitably, the key question has been what will she do next?

Ms Bradshaw says that she has "genuinely, genuinely" not yet decided what she wants do – apart from a longish holiday in France with her husband – though she has had some approaches. Almost certainly, though, she says it will be something still closely involved with business education.

Why?

Because, she says, "the best thing about my job at the *FT* was working with people in business schools. They're great people, delightful people, who are very clever and thoughtful. That was the bit I enjoyed most – talking to and interviewing these people."

Following graduation from the University of Ulster in Northern Ireland in the mid-1970s (at the height of the sectarian "troubles"), she taught English in Sicily, Turkey and Japan, returning to Britain to write for *Electronics Weekly*, a trade newspaper, and then joining the *Financial Times* as a technology writer. After her maternity leave she returned to the *FT* to launch its business education page in 1995.

She herself does not have an MBA or other management or business qualification and laughs when people say she has been among the most important people in management education – "that's a joke; it really is" – but she is a fulsome supporter of business education. And she saw, and still sees, rankings as a way to promote business education.

"I think generally the *FT* rankings and others have been positive because they have highlighted the fact that there are some very effective business schools out there and the rankings have promoted the cause of business education."

The whole philosophy behind the *FT* ranking, Ms Bradshaw says, has always been to list business schools around the world that excel at producing global managers for the 21st century based on three main criteria: the career progression of graduates; the international focus of a programme; and the research capabilities of a business school.

The gestation of the *FT* ranking was complicated. The then editor, Richard Lambert, was a keen supporter of the idea, believing it would enhance the newspaper.

Leading business schools in Europe were also enthusiastic backers, believing that existing rankings (particularly in North America and especially in *Business Week* magazine), which at that time concentrated almost exclusively on US schools, did not give them enough exposure.

So, says Ms Bradshaw, the *FT* ranking was initially driven by the newspaper feeling that this was something it could do well and European schools wanting something that put them on a global stage.

However, not all senior staff at the *FT* were in favour of a ranking, leading to some tension and leaving at that time the relatively junior Ms Bradshaw as "muggins in the middle", as she characteristically puts it.

Eventually, though, the first ranking was launched in 1999 and ranked 50 business schools on the basis of their full-time MBA programmes.

An initial ranking had taken place the year before but was not fully used because Ms Bradshaw

> *Della has bestrode the world of management education like a Colossus. She belongs to the hall of leading influencers of business schools' youthful but impactful history'*
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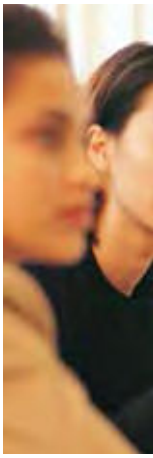
> *SANTIAGO IÑIGUEZ DE ONZOÑO, PRESIDENT, IE UNIVERSITY DEAN, IE BUSINESS SCHOOL*



was not totally happy with all the methodology and, in particular, an attempt to include the views of MBA recruiters in Europe, which in some countries had not been completely successful.

In a previous interview with *Global Focus*, Ms Bradshaw likened rankings to restaurant reviews – we tend to stick with our favourites reviewers – but she also revealed some of the internal issues involved in compiling rankings.

For example, the fact that rankings measure very small differences between business schools and programmes is inevitable given that most schools operate in largely similar educational systems.

And while each school or programme is given an individual place in a ranking, in fact the ranking is made up of several clusters of very similar scores but with relatively large gaps between the clusters, especially at the top.

So, in 20 years in business education, what have been the best bits?

"As I said earlier, meeting people, talking to them, the straightforward journalistic bits. I've always been amazed at how open business schools are and how people there are so available. There's no corporate culture of secrecy at all."

And the worst?

"People shouting at me! No, not really. It's just having to stand up to people, especially if you suspect there's some cheating going on. It can be quite pressurised. You have to stand up for your team as well, especially the statisticians. You have to back them all the way."

In her position, Ms Bradshaw has been well-placed to observe the multifarious changes in the business and management education market. The past two decades have been among the most turbulent and significant they have seen.

Most obvious, she says, has been the relative decline of the US management education market

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> *'Nobody but Della has had more influence on how business schools have evolved over the last decade'*
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> *DOMINIQUE TURPIN, PRESIDENT OF IMD AND NESTLÉ PROFESSOR OF MARKETING, IMD*

as it has faced real challenges from the growing numbers and quality of business schools and programmes in regions such as Europe and Asia.

Added to this, she says, has been the growing diversity of academic programmes offered by business schools, particularly the rise of specialised masters programmes in areas such as finance and pre-experience masters in management programmes.

Under Ms Bradshaw the *FT* has cleverly used this diversity of programmes to create a valuable cohort of separate but related rankings.

There are currently seven in all: Online MBAs, Global MBAs, European Business Schools, Executive MBAs, Masters in Management, both post-experience and pre-experience Masters in Finance and Executive Education (custom and open enrolment).

This also allows the *FT* to point out that its range of rankings is carefully constructed to only compare similar programmes.

Ms Bradshaw expects this diversity to continue, with an increasing emphasis on part-time and online programmes, largely because she believes that fewer and fewer students will be prepared to leave their employment to take on full-time study and also because technology is increasingly available to ease party-time study.

And this leads her on to make an interesting and surprising observation.

She suggests that now might well be the right time to go back nearly 20 years to re-visit one of the most high-profile and experimental ventures in the design of MBA programmes - the original MBA programme at Cambridge's Judge Business School in the UK (at the time known as the Judge Institute of Management Studies).

The programme, introduced in 1993, was regarded at the time as radical to the point almost of eccentricity when compared with other contemporary programmes, including a particularly British emphasis on action learning and the close involvement of employers. (Coincidentally, Professor Handy's thinking was quite influential in its design.)

Briefly, the programme had an extremely "thick sandwich" modular structure with two programme options: a two-year version that involved one term at Cambridge then a year back at work followed by two more terms at the school. The three-year version involved an extra year of work between the second and third school terms.

Unfortunately, the design proved to be too radical for many students and it was fairly quickly replaced with a traditional UK-style 12-month full-time MBA.

However, says Ms Bradshaw, looking at it now this was a highly innovative programme that was "probably ahead of its time".

Ms Bradshaw has devoted around a third of her life so far to business education and business schools. It is a remarkable achievement and looks set to carry on in some way in the future.

So, after all that time, has it all been worth it?

"Yes it has been worth it," she says, pausing. "But it was very hard to let it go, actually."

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