

William Blair International Small Cap Growth Fund Fund Manager Commentary

Market Review

Global equities declined (-1.11%) in the third quarter as volatility picked up in September, erasing gains in July and August. Developed Markets were flat (-0.19%) but outperformed Emerging Markets (-7.39%) primarily due to weakness within China. From a global sector perspective, Consumer Discretionary (-5.13%) and Materials (-4.45%) lagged. Conversely, Energy continued to outperform (+2.87% for the quarter and +34.26% year-to-date) as rising demand and supply constraints drove stronger crude oil prices.

US equities were flat (-0.06%) for the quarter as economic data remained healthy, albeit past the peak rate of growth, and solid corporate earnings helped offset volatility induced by the rise of new Delta variant cases. At the much-anticipated Jackson Hole symposium, Federal Reserve Chairman Jerome Powell noted that the economy has made “substantial further progress” on inflation, while the labor market has also made “clear progress”. The Fed also announced that the tapering of quantitative easing could start this year and finish in mid-2022.

Japanese equities were flat in July and August but advanced strongly in September to close out a solid third quarter (+4.35%). Strength within Japan was primarily due to the announcement that Prime Minister Suga would not be running for re-election in November. Despite a very short time in office (less than a year), Suga’s approval ratings were very low following the administration’s handling of the coronavirus pandemic.

Emerging Markets sharply declined (-7.39%) primarily due to weakness within China (-17.99%). In late July, the Chinese government announced new regulatory moves which negatively impacted companies in the technology and private education sectors. Hampered investor sentiment was further compounded in late September on concerns over the collapse of Evergrande, one of China’s largest real estate developers, and the potential impact on China’s financial system. Conversely, India continued to advance (+12.64%) amid a slowdown in the country’s new COVID-19 cases and a significant liquidity boost from the country’s central bank and foreign inflows.

Fund Performance

Third quarter outperformance by the William Blair International Small Cap Growth Fund (Class N shares) versus the MSCI ACWI ex US Small Cap (net) was primarily driven by positive stock selection across most sectors. The Industrials and Health Care were the most notable sources of relative return. Industrials sector performance was bolstered by Japanese professional services company Benefit One. Benefit One is a provider of HR-related services, in the form of outsourced fringe benefits. A structural tightening of the

Top 10 Holdings¹ as of 9/30/2021

<i>Company</i>	<i>% of Fund</i>
Benefit One Inc.	2.4
InMode Ltd.	2.4
MIPS AB	2.2
Beijer Ref AB	2.1
Softcat plc	1.9
BayCurrent Consulting	1.9
RAKUS Co., Ltd.	1.9
Vitrolife AB	1.8
Safestore Holdings PLC	1.8
TechnoPro Holdings	1.8
Total Top 10	20.2

Japanese labor market has increased the need for employers to attract hires using the types of services offered by Benefit One. Future regulatory changes should also drive increased demand. As the business has a fixed cost base and low variable costs, operating leverage is high, supporting a rate of profit growth at the top end of the peer group.

Within Health Care, Israeli-based InMode was the top contributor. InMode is an Israeli-based leading medical device company specializing in aesthetic surgery. The company has developed proprietary minimally invasive and non-invasive technologies for various aesthetic applications including fat reduction, skin tightening and muscle toning. While the company is currently focusing on the large TAM for the medical aesthetics market, the products are applicable in a wide array of indications such as women’s health, ENT (Ear, Nose & Throat) and ophthalmology which could significantly expand the targeted market going forward.

Partially offsetting these effects was an overweight allocation to the Latin American region, coupled with below average stock selection within the Consumer Discretionary sector. Weakness within Consumer Discretionary was primarily due to Westwing. Westwing is an ecommerce company that provides an inspirational, curated “shoppable magazine” to eleven European

¹Listed holdings are presented to illustrate examples of the securities that the Fund has bought and do not represent all of the Fund’s holdings or future investments. Information about the Fund’s holdings should not be considered investment advice. There is no guarantee that the Fund will continue to hold any one particular security or stay invested in any one particular sector. Holdings are subject to change at any time and are as of the date shown above. Top ten holdings are shown as a percentage of total net assets.

markets. This is designed to encourage browsing and emotional engagement rather than just targeted purchasing. Westwing is disrupting the traditional home and living industry, aiming to shift customers increasingly online by leveraging its very strong customer relationships. The share price declined amid concern over increased shipment costs may potentially have a short-term impact on contribution margins.

Positioning

During the third quarter, Financials exposure was increased through the purchase of Indian Energy Exchange. Information Technology exposure was also increased. This was offset by a reduction to Industrials exposure through the liquidations of Vat Group and Airtac International Group. From a geographic perspective, notable adjustments were increases to the UK and Japan, offset by a decrease to Emerging Asia. The portfolio's weighting in Emerging Markets approximated +21.33% at the end of the period, down from +24.18% at the beginning of the period.

Outlook

Corporate performance has been strong as the global economies continue to resume normalized activity. We have seen strength in the cyclical areas of the economy, while at the same time companies with leading business models and practices have continued to press their structural competitive advantage. This has driven positive momentum for the market this year, and companies with strong returns and differentiated positioning like those we seek to invest in have generally enjoyed even stronger corporate and stock market performance on balance. While we do not expect the backdrop to change materially, we do point out two primary areas of intermediate-term focus for global equity investors: China policy and regulation risk, and the inflation outlook.

China

We view the China investment opportunities and risks within the framework of what has, and what hasn't changed. In turn we reference our investability model to determine exploitability and accessibility for returns in Chinese equities.

Favorable elements of what hasn't changed include China's commitment to economic growth, accelerated corporate innovation across many industries, and liberalization of capital markets to compete on a global stage. At the same time, the nature of the autocratic regime and state-planned economy has facilitated the execution of the China Communist Party's (CCP) objectives through policies and regulations directing resources into innovative sectors and facilitating the emergence of new industries and global champions.

The absolute power of the state to enact and enforce policy and regulation is another constant characteristic of China. The current regulatory crackdown on industries that have benefited from policy support (or at least the government's laissez-faire approach), while seemingly unexpected, is, when analyzed closely, consistent with the government's priorities and past attitudes and actions toward other industries.

Chinese leadership's reprioritization of its objectives to rebalance growth versus social issues is one example. Given China's current stage of development, its focus is on Common Prosperity and more balanced growth as opposed to its prior target of fast growth.

Under the surface, China's economic achievements have seemingly caused growing tensions between the country's socialist political and ideological goals and growing capitalist (profit-led) economy.

Increased inequality, changes in demographics, and the emergence of new sectors and dominant private corporations have become a significant part of the economy, posing new and critical challenges to the Chinese authorities.

In particular, the digital economy industries and companies have reaped the benefits of an extremely supportive regulatory backdrop, favorable taxation, and access to foreign capital. While many of these companies have benefited society at large by providing availability of goods, cheaper prices, life-enhancing digital services (ecommerce, payments, access to capital, etc.), Chinese leadership is now concerned about the potentially negative impact on inequality and social values that some of these industries have had. It also appears Chinese leadership is concerned about the threat that has arisen from the amount of power accumulated by some platform companies, the influence that foreign investors exert on them, and the potential systemic risks that exist with these new data-heavy business models.

With this, the Chinese authorities have indicated their intention to address perceived excesses and shortcomings that have arisen from the previous policy period, while doubling the size of China's economy by 2035. Beijing's priorities are focused on three core issues: social stability, national security, and sustainable domestic growth.

The fact that these objectives may at first sight seem difficult to reconcile, coupled with the ample room for interpretation of the government's intentions and apparent lack of rules (given the principle-based nature of Chinese regulations), has created much angst and many hurdles for companies as they operate their businesses.

The drastic enforcement of this new wave of regulations in the new economy is, as expected, painful, messy, and a source of angst for companies and investors alike. It has led to irreparable damage and loss in certain industries, such as after-school tutoring (AST). The lack of coordination among different regulators and institutions, conflicting priorities, battles for power, and personal attitudes (a la Jack Ma) have driven regulatory scrutiny in fits and starts, sending ambiguous messages to investors. We believe this is likely to continue.

Also playing a role in the regulatory crackdown is a deepening rivalry between the United States and China, in our view. While China's transformative growth trajectory has posed domestic challenges, it has also raised concerns for the rest of the world and particularly the United States. As China became a strategic competitor to the United States, tensions arose on trade and economic issues, then expanded to technological, geopolitical,

ideological, and financial fronts. As a result, China's regulatory crackdown has focused on industries with stronger foreign connections, especially those in highly sensitive sectors.

In particular, Beijing's desire to bring home some of its largest and most attractive companies that are listed overseas coincided with increased scrutiny from the United States on Chinese American depository receipts (ADRs). This occurred with the passing of the Holding Foreign Companies Accountable (HFCA) Act, which sets a timeline for the forced delisting of these companies. This has called into question the legality and enforcement of the important variable interest entity (VIE) structure, as well foreign governments' willingness to allow investment in Chinese companies.

Where from here?

One thing is clear: Not all industries and companies are equal on these fronts, and a thorough evaluation of their alignment with Beijing's key objectives and priorities should help determine the extent of the impact and viability of entire industries.

For foreign investors, the new paradigm also calls into question the investability of China. To assess this, we have a framework that seeks to identify the exploitability and accessibility of future corporate growth and returns.

"Exploitability" moves beyond the typical definition of a company's ability to innovate, create products and services, and grow profitably; in this case it also assesses the degree of alignment between the corporation's activities and the government's objectives. Here, we assess the potential outcome and variability in a conventional financial model. Industries that we believe may have elevated risk include media, online retailing, education, gaming, and healthcare, specifically pharmaceuticals. We are actively researching the variability and distribution of future outcomes of revenues and profits for our portfolio holdings in these industries and adjusting our estimates accordingly.

"Accessibility" refers to foreign investors' ability to access economic value creation. Here, we assess the Chinese government's intention of allowing foreign capital into certain industries, including threats to the VIE structure as well as the risk to ADR listings.

Assuming foreign investors are not banned, but the degree of accessibility is in question, we discount the potential future earnings in the form of an increased equity risk premium (ERP), and ultimately weighted average cost of capital (WACC) or discount rate.

We believe the market may have become too sanguine regarding China's country risk, with the ERP as low as that of many developed markets late last year. With the recent market correction, it has risen back to its long-term average.

The assumption that the Chinese government intends to ban foreign capital is radically opposed to the consistent efforts from Beijing to open its capital markets, giving access to foreign investors and developing the internationalization of the renminbi. Still, selective strategic industries may be affected by bans amid increased protectionism in the name of higher public interest. This was the case with the AST (after school tutoring) industry.

Needless to say, while we continue to find China's long-term growth and corporate performance opportunities attractive, our investability framework has identified greater uncertainty and thus risk. In many of our investment strategies, we have cut our China weightings materially, by many cases in half from prior high levels. We feel this is the prudent response to many of the industries and companies that may remain at risk of being in the crosshairs of more government regulatory scrutiny. At the same time we have rotated our Chinese investments into those companies whose growth opportunities are aligned with government objectives.

We do recognize that the real and perceived interpretation of these risks could change, in particular with more transparency of intention from the government. We have spent a great deal of collective research time on these important issues, and that will likely be the case well into and beyond 2022.

Inflation

As our economies gradually reopen and people are allowed to move more freely, the 2020 experience should reverse. We believe the challenges with goods production and longer delivery times will get resolved within months, not years, and goods price inflation will likely return to the pre-COVID muted annual rate of sub-2%. Services prices will likely move sharply higher as restaurants, theatres, and travel reopen. We may even see pockets of quite large price increases, as supply will not be able to adjust instantly to all the pent-up demand, in leisure travel for example.

These pockets of much stronger price gains generate headlines, but we believe the argument that such isolated, temporary pockets of price pressures will translate into sustained, higher annual inflation in the medium term is weak because it does not consider supply adjustment.

We expect the supply responses to play out in the coming quarters to meet demand levels. First, in our view there is no reason to believe the current logistical bottlenecks will prove to be structural, rather they are recovering from the complexity of a shutdown that we haven't experienced in decades. On the other hand, the two biggest risks of persistent inflation arise from labor and energy prices. In the US alone, we have seen an employment gap of close to 10 million workers. The vast majority of those workers in our estimation are only temporarily sidelined due to COVID-related issues, ranging from childcare and safety concerns, to paycheck relief benefits outweighing wages. We are already beginning to see the gradual resumption of those workers back into the workforce and expect that to play out through next year.

As for energy prices, we do not believe there is a structural lack of supply owing to the energy transition from fossil fuels to renewables. Instead, we believe much of the move in oil and gas prices is attributable to the geopolitical complications from the Nord Stream 2 pipeline that has yet to come on-line. While complicated, we believe the political incentives are largely aligned, and this will be resolved in the coming months providing important relief to energy prices.

In the medium term, stronger economic growth of around 3% can translate into a sustainable annual inflation rate of 2%-3%. Every policymaker and consumer would be pleased with that

outcome. The central banks would welcome this with open arms instead of worrying about inflation being too low as a result of weak growth. We believe this is the most likely probability for the next several years.

Recently the risk of stagflation has received a great deal of attention. The bottom line is that the calamitous experience of the 1970s had much to do with egregious macroeconomic meddling, and inflation did not appear suddenly out of nowhere. Misguided price controls and wage freezes disincentivized supply adjustment and destroyed demand growth. The 1970s bear no resemblance to what we are talking about today: stronger demand growth, employment, and supply adjustment and more stable, mild inflation consistent with price stability, broadly defined.

Our current outlook calls for growth continuing to slow on a sequential basis, supply chains resuming their historic efficiencies, and peaking corporate profit margins moderating. Coming from historically high valuations, we would expect only modest outcomes for equities over the coming quarters.



INVESTMENT PERFORMANCE (AS OF 9/30/21)

	QTR	YTD	1 Y	3 Y	5 Y	10 Y
Class I (SI: 11/01/05)	3.58%	11.27%	30.25%	15.97%	12.46%	11.30%
Class N (SI: 11/01/05)	3.47%	11.00%	29.81%	15.64%	12.13%	10.97%
MSCI AC World ex-US Small Cap Index (net) ¹	0.00%	12.23%	33.07%	10.33%	10.28%	9.44%

Performance cited represents past performance. Past performance does not guarantee future results and current performance may be lower or higher than the data quoted. Returns shown assume reinvestment of dividends and capital gains. Investment returns and principal will fluctuate with market and economic conditions and you may have a gain or loss when you sell shares. For the most current month-end performance information, please call +1 800 742 7272, or visit our Web site at www.williamblairfunds.com. Class N shares are available to the general public without a sales load. Class I shares are available only to investors who meet certain eligibility requirements.

EXPENSE RATIOS (%)

	Gross Expense
Class I	1.25%
Class N	1.52%

Expenses shown are as of the most recent prospectus.

IMPORTANT DISCLOSURES

The Fund's returns will vary, and you could lose money by investing in the Fund. The Fund holds equities which may decline in value due to both real and perceived general market, economic, and industry conditions. International investing involves special risk considerations, including currency fluctuations, lower liquidity, economic and political risk. Investing in emerging markets can increase these risks, including higher volatility and lower liquidity. Investing in smaller companies involves special risks, including higher volatility and lower liquidity. Convertible securities may be called before intended, which may have an adverse effect on investment objectives. Diversification does not ensure against loss.

The Morgan Stanley Capital International (MSCI) All Country World Ex-U.S. Small Cap Index (net) is a free float-adjusted market capitalization weighted index that is designed to measure the equity market performance of small capitalization developed and emerging markets, excluding the United States. This series approximates the minimum possible dividend reinvestment. The Index is unmanaged, does not incur fees or expenses, and cannot be invested in directly.

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