A stepping stone to success

SMU's MBA curriculum helped me to develop a realistic view of the market, says ARJUN BHOWMIK

MAKE no mistake: an MBA degree is not the answer to all problems in the corporate world and beyond. But it's a solid starting point effectively tackling such challenges in the future. For the two of us, completing the one-year MBA at SMU has broadened and changed our outlook toward the world.

For myself, choosing to get my MBA in Singapore was both a professional and personal decision, reinforced by my wife's move from the US to Singapore. For my classmate, Joseph Pham, getting an MBA in the Lion City allowed him to continue running his Vietnamese start-up.

He already had a background in programming, but this move exposed him to all functions of a business — including a vast business network essential for his company's future growth.

The cleanliness of the city, openness of the locals, and vibrant nightlife made settling down in Singapore a breeze. In class, both of us benefited from the educational and professional diversity of classmates as more than half the class was international.

Of course, Singapore is already a multi-ethnic society and it is not surprising to find foreigners and people of different ethnicities living and working here. But it was quite different when it came to working together in the MBA programme.

Both of us worked on various projects with classmates from China, France, India, Indonesia, Malaysia, Singapore, and Zimbabwe, which in turn, widened our knowledge and perspectives.

From accountants to food technologists, marketers to financiers, our fellow students were rich in industry experience, which provided priceless input needed to connect the invisible dots linking companies and industries worldwide.

What stood out for me was the MBA programme's focus on leadership development. In addition to functional courses such as operations and finance, the emphasis on the behavioural and ethical aspects of business was a revelation of sorts.

Every case study discussion, talk, and seminar would in some way or other lead us to see the impact of our decisions in a post-recession world. I realised how strong values and good governance are so essential to sustainability. This was one of the biggest takeaways for me.

After spending 10 years in the Indian Air Force as a pilot, I found the move from the cockpit to the classroom a big transition. I entered the programme with a limited perspective regarding capital markets based on isolated readings such as The Wealth of Nations coupled with my background in government.

The MBA curriculum helped me to adapt to, and develop, a realistic view of the market. A large part of this adaptation came from learning to listen to different viewpoints during the course of the programme.

Joseph shared the same experience — forcing himself to listen, and to be aware of, his assumptions and prejudices. For example, with Indian colleagues, he learnt that intense and extensive arguments didn't necessarily mean disagreement, but simply a different way to arrive at good solutions. In an increasingly globalised business world, these insights and soft skills are of a huge advantage.

Joseph hopes to expand his Vietnamese-based operations overseas. And when that happens, his team may consist of Singaporeans, Chinese, Indians, Indonesians, or others.

"Experiences gained during this MBA will make it possible for me to shift and operate between different cultural frames of mind," Joseph said. "I'll be in a better position to lead a diverse team — being able to draw out their strengths, and to work together effectively."

Singapore's status as a regional hub for MNCs and SMU's central location provided ample opportunities for us to interact with leaders from companies such as Intel, Microsoft, Kraft, Mercer, Accenture, IBM, Bain & Co, DuPont, and General Electric. Better still, some of the classes were taught by industry experts from these companies.

As a result, we learnt how leaders applied theories to actual situations within real organisations. Presenting to real board members, as we did in our projects, also deepened our learning.

As a tectonic shift has taken place in the global business landscape, the world is looking to Asia to build its own entrepreneurs and leaders. That's why we are here.

Arjun Bhowmik and Joseph Pham are from India and Vietnam respectively and completed their one-year full-time MBA at the Singapore Management University this month.