

# The exquisite joy of an Asian MBA

Doing an S3 Asia double-degree MBA teaches **ABHINAV CHARAN** the nuances of doing business in Asia

**W**HEN I embarked on my three-university double-degree MBA journey, little did I realise that the experiences en route would include insights like how the mere addressing of people in South Korea can make or break a business deal. Or that “effective” communication has little to do with speaking good English but truly understanding the various cultures of the world’s economies. These are lessons well learnt, especially in today’s increasingly globalised world, whose diversity boggles the mind.

Today, when I look back at the last 1½ years, it’s been a brew of experiences that run the gamut from academic know-how to building an international network of relationships and yes, of course, savouring the sights, sounds and flavours of so many wonderful cities.

I am part of the first cohort of the S3 Asia MBA double-degree programme – a unique, exciting programme that is the outcome of an alliance between three universities – the National University of Singapore (NUS), Fudan University in Shanghai, and Korea University in Seoul. This double-degree MBA pro-

gramme has given me an opportunity to spend one semester in each of these dynamic countries. And the complete immersion in local cultures, and the interactions with businessmen in Singapore, China and South Korea, have truly widened my horizons.

What distinguishes this programme from the multitude of other international offerings is its expertise in key Asian economies, which are unanimously acknowledged as both the present and future of the business world. Some of my friends call it the “vacation MBA”: studying in three exotic locations. Yes, we did get to do some amazing travelling, but that is countered by a truly demanding curriculum that is on par with the best in the world. The modules – conducted by world-class faculty holding academic and corporate experience in Asia and the US – consist of a mix of classroom lectures and case studies.

Instead of merely focusing on traditional disciplines such as finance or marketing, we get to develop skills required for doing business in Asia, through special modules and field trips. For example, the “Business in China” module taught us the key elements of Confucianism, the judicial and banking systems,

the Chinese economy and some survival strategies of MNCs in China, while the “Business in Korea and Japan” module used examples of domestic business groups and taught us about the critical differences between the *chaebols* in Korea and *keiretsus* in Japan in terms of their structures, business practices and HR policies.

Through field trips, we visited local businesses in Shanghai and Hangzhou in China, and Seoul, Pohang, Ulsan and Gyeongju in South Korea, and were exposed to diverse industries such as automobiles (Shanghai-GM, Hyundai Kia Motors), e-commerce (Alibaba.com), broadcast media (Shanghai Media Group), heavy engineering (Volvo, Hyundai Heavy Industries), electronics (LG, Samsung), Steel (Posco), and the beautiful site of the Shanghai Expo 2010.

In any good MBA, much of the learning happens outside of the classroom. However, my programme has the added advantage of having truly diverse views based on different cultural backgrounds and age, making the topics more interesting and insightful. My cohort consists of 31 students from six nations (the US, China, India, Indonesia, South Korea

and Singapore), bearing a variety of work experience ranging from 3-22 years.

For instance, our Korean classmates would often add an indigenous perspective to discussions of companies such as Samsung and LG. Our Chinese classmates also gave us great insights into the workings of the state-owned enterprises (SOEs) and the importance of having *guanxi* in China – thus helping us to understand the companies’ business practices far beyond the black print.

The MBA programme is also about building networks – and we get three times the opportunities! We get to study with both local and exchange students in all the three schools, and interact with them at the same time. For example, we had several opportunities to interact with the NUS alumni in Shanghai, and even went on a two-day trip with them.

The programme has taught me to be adaptable. Having studied and worked in India, I was bred on Indian food, customs and the widely accepted English language. Shanghai was an awakening for me, with its completely different culture, previously unheard-of dishes and the inability to unite my peers through English – a language that I had always thought of as the global leveller. My first group discussion in the managerial communications class was a complete disaster; I could not get across any of my points to the rest of the group that consisted mostly of Chinese students.

It was then that I realised the need to abandon previously conceived paradigms and, today, I can confidently say that I can adjust anywhere in the world in a very short time – a critical requirement for managers in a contemporary global regime. That is the power of this multicultural learning experience!

I would be lying to say that I didn’t enjoy the recreation and leisure moments; from karaoke to adventure sports, the social life and travel trails were scintillating. We travelled within China and South Korea, taking short trips to Beijing, Suzhou, Hangzhou, Hong Kong and Macau from Shanghai; and from Seoul, we got to travel to the Demilitarized Zone separating North and South Korea, to Busan and to lovely Jeju Island.

After three eventful semesters, we come away richer with knowledge and experience. And I am sure that with the abundant experiences that we have gained, we shall all find our niches in the corporate world with ease.

*The writer is a student of the first cohort of the S3 Asia MBA offered by NUS Business School, Fudan University School of Management and Korea University Business School*

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