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Interview with
InterActive Student
Alex Hang Tran,
Auckland,
New Zealand





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InterActive student Alex Hang Tran recently embarked on a professional and educational journey that can serve as an inspiration to us all. Studying her MBA online, Alex has been able to fulfil her passions for travel, study, and family life, all while successfully climbing the career ladder.

Speaking from Auckland, New Zealand, Alex told us about the challenges of managing your time effectively while earning your online degree, and why distance learning qualifications are increasingly held in high regard by global recruiters.

Alex:

I moved to New Zealand in June 2013, before which I had been dividing my time between studying and working in the UK and Asia. In the UK I studied my bachelor's degree at LSE in London, and then I moved to Chester in the north of England where I worked at Bank of America for a couple of years.

After that I moved back to Singapore and Vietnam, from where I studied my online MBA while working full-time for the US consulting firm McKinsey & Company. So yes, I've really been all over the place!

While I was working and studying in Southeast Asia I gave birth to my first baby, right at the end of my MBA studies actually! Shortly

after that a great job opportunity arose for my husband here in New Zealand, so we moved here and I began a new career working in the Auckland Council Economic Development Department as a researcher and department leader.





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Making the decision to study online

For me it was a very clear and easy decision to do an online MBA. The job I had with McKinsey at that time was fantastic, so while I wanted to acquire further formal education, I didn't want to give up the chance to get work experience from such an amazing company. I had to find a way to work and study at the same time. Earning my MBA degree while remaining part of the professional network at McKinsey was the only outcome I was prepared to settle for!

I was also bearing in mind the cost factors involved when starting an MBA. For example, to study an on-campus MBA you not only have to pay the tuition fees, but you also have to give up two or three years of earnings. So an online MBA is really advantageous in terms of cost effectiveness, and you can also continue earning and having that all-important real-life work experience while getting a formal education.

Online study was a very smart choice for me at that time, so much so that right now I'm looking into studying an online DBA.

Choosing the right education provider

One of the reasons I decided to go with this particular degree was because of the strong accreditation from a university which is recognised by global recruiters. I did a lot of research around which institution to go through. I did research into many online MBAs in North America at first, but a lot of these programmes are from schools which are not particularly well known outside the US.

Although many of these North American online MBA offerings are cheap, I wasn't convinced about the quality and reputation of some of the organisations involved. When you are planning a time commitment of up to two years, and also making a financial investment in your education, I don't think it's worthwhile if your final award is not held in high regard by future employers.

Therefore I had a very straightforward set of criteria. First of all the cost; not just the total amount of money, but the flexibility of the available payment plan as well.

Secondly, I was considering the time commitment in terms of how many hours of study per week is required, and how flexible is that requirement if, for example, I had any unforeseen family matters to attend to.

And finally, the assessment methods; whether that consists of exams or coursework etc. Due to the fact that MBAs are primarily aimed at professionals already working in business, it is important to be able to maintain a healthy work-life balance, so personally I prefer examinations rather than a very demanding schedule of coursework.





The online study experience

Overall I think the academic demands of the programme were at just the right level of my expectations. Working through real case studies from the business world really pushed me out of my comfort zone, and I'm sure it must do the same for other professionals as well. The ability to study real business cases is extremely valuable.

Even though I was studying from Asia, I had no problems at all following the programme timeline. All of your materials are there online and easily accessible, and the examination format gives you a window of 48 hours in which to complete the exam, so I experienced no problems at all studying from Southeast Asia.

And the level of tutor contact exceeded my expectations as well. I could simply email my tutors whenever I had any questions. And they were absolutely fantastic, they always replied in a very prompt manner with very detailed feedback about my work.

When I was writing my thesis I was eight months pregnant, but I still wanted to complete the programme before I gave birth (because trying to finish everything off once my baby had been born would have been quite a challenge in itself!) My dissertation supervisor was extremely supportive of me during this time. He knew that I needed very prompt feedback to be able to proceed to the next stage of my research. I received lots of support and encouragement from him throughout that entire period. I really believe that I couldn't have completed my thesis without that guidance. And, in the end, being able to complete my thesis while pregnant has to be one of my proudest achievements.

Commitment

Making that 2-year commitment to your MBA programme is undoubtedly an enormous challenge. Of course, sometimes you have family issues to take care of and other personal things that come along which you have to prioritise. So this is always one of the main challenges for an online student.

However, if you manage your time effectively then you get the rewards from both worlds; both career-wise and study-wise. My peers who studied their MBAs in a traditional campus setting had to give up a lot to study their programmes, and after they finished their studies they had to face the problem of finding a new job and getting back into 'the game' again.

Studying online and working simultaneously meant that I didn't experience this problem, and I found that recruiters really gave the same value to my online MBA as they would have a traditional MBA. In fact, they seemed to be very impressed by the level of commitment it takes to work full-time and study this kind of programme.

This has been apparent time and time again in interviews I've had subsequently; interviewers are always interested to know how I managed to combine these two very demanding things together so successfully. In that respect, I would even say that an online MBA gained whilst working gives you a distinct advantage in the eyes of future employers. This is something that can really help you to sell yourself.

Staying focused on your goals

One other thing that really helped me was having a friend who was studying the same programme at the same time as me. That gave me a lot of encouragement throughout the programme. But more generally, I would say the most important advice I can offer is good planning; planning your personal life as well as your professional commitments. And don't be too harsh on yourself, it is okay to take a break once in a while and take stock of things and re-energise yourself. This really helped me to come up with fresh ideas. So my advice to other students would be; plan, prioritise, and leave yourself some flexibility.

My next step is to study an online DBA, so the experience I've gained from studying the online MBA is going to be absolutely invaluable.

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