

Fondation ACUBE

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My MBA at INSEAD

In June 2024 I finished what has probably been the most intense, fun, crazy and enriching year of my life: the year of my MBA at INSEAD. The journey that led me to INSEAD started many years before, though.

When I finished high school, I decided to dedicate my career to the energy transition. After my Bachelor's in Energy Engineering at the Polytechnic of Turin, I moved to Lausanne and got my Master's in Energy Management and Sustainability at EPFL. During my Master's, I had the opportunity to deepen my knowledge on energy, but also to take a Minor in management and entrepreneurship. The Minor led me to approach the strategic and financial aspects of business, which I found fascinating. After a brief experience as an engineer working on energy efficiency in buildings, I joined an investment firm focusing on financing the energy transition. I worked for three years as an engineer, supporting investment activities and, in particular, the management of assets, such as PV plants, wind farms and batteries. I wanted to get closer to investment activities, so I completed the Chartered Financial Analyst program, by passing all three levels. Nevertheless, that was not enough. I wanted to gain more knowledge and skills related to business administration, in particular, strategy, finance and entrepreneurship. I then decided to apply to INSEAD for a Master in Business Administration.

INSEAD is one of the top business schools in the world with campuses in Europe (France), Asia (Singapore), the Middle East (Abu Dhabi), and a learning hub in North America (San Francisco). It is known as "The Business School for the World": students come from different countries and there is not a single dominant nationality nor a focus on a specific geographic area during lectures: the approach to education is truly global. The excellent reputation, the diversity of the students and professors were critical factors that made me decide to apply to INSEAD over other business schools. In addition, the MBA program, consistently ranked among the best worldwide, could be completed in one year rather than the usual two years as in the US.

MBA are notoriously expensive programs and despite having saved money for a couple of years, my savings were not enough to cover the tuition fees. Covering living expenses for one year without a salary was another significant challenge. Student loans are mainly available based on nationality and residency. Being an Italian resident in Switzerland, I was not eligible for loans either in Italy or in France, where INSEAD is based. Fortunately, I found out about Fondation ACUBE, which provided the support I was looking for. Through the help of Fondation ACUBE and my parents, I managed to cover the full tuition fees and have enough money to pay for the living expenses. I could not and I still cannot be more grateful for the support provided.

Contrary to most MBA programs, especially US ones, that offer MBA programs of two years, INSEAD MBA lasts only ten months and can be completed in either or both of two campuses: one in Fontainebleau, not far from Paris, and one in Singapore. Two cohorts of approximately 450 students start the MBA in August, as I did, and in January, respectively. The MBA program is divided into five periods of two months each, with a short break of approximately one week between each period, with the exception of the Christmas break and the summer break, which are longer.

Compressing a two-year program into one is not without challenges. There are lectures every day from Monday to Friday, but sometimes on Saturday and Sunday as well. Workshops, intense programs on topics such as communication or entrepreneurship, might span an entire weekend. The schedule changes every week, with lectures normally happening between 8:30 at 19:00, but there have been cases of lectures finishing at 22:00 as well. The time to familiarize yourself with the material is limited, as in every period you have approximately six courses and every lecture requires readings to be done in advance. Readings are usually cases, but articles, reports or pages from a book are also assigned. In addition, several deliverables must be submitted, both individually or as a group. Powerpoint presentations, Excel files, Word documents, questions or quizzes to be answered online: the amount and variety of deliverables vary from course to course, but tend to be considerable, particularly during the first months.

In the first two periods, i.e. four months, all courses are compulsory and students are divided into classes of 70-75 people each. In my year, there were four sections in Fontainebleau and two in Singapore. Sections are made to facilitate the learning experience and make it easier for students to get to know each other, by creating an environment where everyone knows each other after a couple of weeks. In addition, students are assigned to a study group of usually five people. Study groups are made of MBA candidates from different nationalities and backgrounds. They tend to spend a lot of time together, studying and working on group assignments, but, depending on the group, they can also share their free time. I was lucky enough to have a wonderful study group.

At the end of the second period, students are allowed to switch campuses and choose elective courses. Students can spend one or more periods in Fontainebleau or Singapore or have an exchange with other business schools, such as Wharton or Kellogg's in the US. In addition, short tracks are also offered. Tracks last several days only and might take students to explore the startup environment of Silicon Valley, financial firms in London or companies in the Middle East, to make a few examples. I decided to do my MBA in France but then opted to go for two months to Singapore, a decision that proved the best I could take. A mix of compulsory and elective courses are offered in the third period, while in the fourth and fifth periods, there are only electives. Places for campus exchanges and elective courses are limited, so students need to bid for each course, campus exchange or track, by using a maximum of two hundred points in total. All of these opportunities create new sections where students are mixed and get to know new classmates, form new study groups, and, of course, new friendships. After four months in France, I found myself on a totally different campus meeting new friends as if it was again the first day of the Master.

People often say that the most valuable resource of an MBA is not what you learn, but who you know since networking becomes increasingly important as you advance in your career. Nevertheless, after a few days at INSEAD, I immediately realized that the people surrounding me would not become simple contacts, but friends. At INSEAD you do not join a network, but a community. The difference between a network and a community is that in a professional network, you show the best of yourself, while in a community you show your full self: your fears and your doubts are shared with your friends, so it becomes way easier to ask for and to provide help.

INSEAD is not just intense from the academic perspective, but also from the social perspective. Every day there are dinners, parties, or social gatherings. In Fontainebleau, where I spent most of my time, every day you meet friends at the canteen, at the gym, in the garden and even where you go off campus, at the supermarket, at the restaurant, at the bar, or in the beautiful Fontainebleau forest you come across other students. I lived in a studio flat, but many of my friends lived in student residences, which for most of them soon became their home away from home. I lived next to the largest one and I was often invited there.

During the weekends, if there are no classes, it is very common for students to travel together and explore new cities and regions. In Fontainebleau, you can easily explore the beautiful regions of France, especially Champagne, Burgundy, and Normandy, which I loved. Nevertheless, trips are organised to other European cities, ski resorts in the Alps and other countries outside of Europe. For example, one of my favourite trips was to Morocco. In Singapore, instead, every weekend there are groups organising weekend trips to Southeast Asia countries. I visited Malaysia, Vietnam, and Thailand, but other groups went to Cambodia, Indonesia, China, Japan and South Korea. Trips are not just a way to see different cities, try new food and meet new cultures, but also a way to make new friends and strengthen your friendships while spending time together.

Students at INSEAD become friends for life and several couples formed in my batch. Every five years INSEAD organises a reunion on campus, but students tend to get together very often on their own even though after the MBA they live on different continents. Now, wherever I travel, I know I will probably have some friends to meet. This is probably the best gift INSEAD gave me.

After INSEAD I decided to take a summer break before starting to work again. I travelled for a month with my girlfriend across Brazil, where I also met several friends from the MBA. After this amazing experience, I am back to my previous company, trying to help the energy transition our world desperately needs. INSEAD feels like yesterday and a century ago at the same time. I miss the atmosphere, the lectures, the friends and all the experiences we shared together. Nevertheless, I feel blessed by the opportunity to work in an interesting field that I am deeply passionate about and have had the possibility of taking a gap year to pursue the MBA. All of this has been made possible by many people: my managers who were willing to give me a one-year break, my family and my girlfriend who always supported me, and the Fondation ACUBE, which made all of this possible by supporting me in what has been a simply unforgettable experience.