

The Global Journey of a Fulbright Scholar from Morocco.

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Akshay Prabhakar Koltewar:

Hello. Welcome to another episode of the UB School of Management's Manageable Podcast. My name is Akshay, and I'm a second year MBA candidate, and I'm the host of this episode. We are embarking on an exploration with the distinguished UB MBA's Fulbright Scholar named Fouad Laajine, also as an alumnus of Imperial College of London, as he shares the wealth of knowledge and experiences gained from a substantial professional background, and his educational odyssey. Welcome, Fouad.

Fouad Laajine:

Thank you, Akshay. Thank you for receiving me in your podcast. It's a pleasure to share my knowledge and my UB experience, my Fulbright experience here in the US as an international student, and I would be happy to answer your questions.

Akshay Prabhakar Koltewar:

Thank you so much Fouad for being with us. Fouad belongs to Morocco and has pursued electro mechanical engineering, and master's in environmental engineering prior to MBA, and carries about 12 years of immersive experience in the water sector, managing large scale projects worth \$40 million. He is deeply committed to promoting sustainable solutions to address urgent challenges of climate change. Moving forward, he's looking forward for an opportunity in the development sector to use his technical and manager expertise to enhance government's capabilities to achieve resiliency in the water sector. Today we will speak to Fouad about his journey that led him to pursue MBA at University at Buffalo, about the Fulbright Scholarship, and what's next upcoming in his life. So to start with, Fouad, could you share with us your personal journey that led you to pursue an MBA at UB? Why MBA, and why UB at this point of time in your career?

Fouad Laajine:

Yes, sure. So I will start first with a brief background of my journey that led me to UB and Buffalo. I graduated with a master's of engineering, in electronic engineering particularly, in 2008. After a brief experience in the mining sector, I was hired as a construction engineer in the National Office of

Electricity and Drinking Water, which is a public utility in Morocco, responsible for the production, distribution of drinking water supply and wastewater management.

First, I started, as I said, as a construction engineer. I was responsible for supervising the construction works for drinking water supply and wastewater project. Basically from inception, feasibility studies all the way to the construction and then the commission. After two years as a construction engineer, I progressed to the position of head of technical service, where besides my duties as a construction engineer, I was also responsible for planning the investments, the infrastructure, the feasibility studies, and all the policy related to the water sector in the province I was working.

After almost 10 years in this position, I wanted an international experience, working at an international level, having more impact and develop myself furthermore. So I took the opportunity of Chevening Scholarship, which is a scholarship offered by the UK government to do my second master's degree in environmental engineering at Imperial College London. And because the environmental sector doesn't revolve around technical solutions only, it is only a matter of access to financing, convincing vendors and investors about the business impact and financial impact of the investments in either the environmental infrastructures, or the sustainability and green investments in general.

That's why I decided to complement my engineering background with a business background, and that led me to pursue an MBA at the UB, and now I'm concentrating in my MB, I'm concentrating in finance and analytics, because finance is very important to design solutions that are appealing to investors. And analytics, it is very important now with all the data that we are submerged in, especially in the environmental sector, it is very important to design policies, solutions that are data-driven, that really rely on tangible evidence and data has this power to provide these tangible evidence that can lead us to a good decision making, that is really reliable.

Akshay Prabhakar Koltewar:

Incredible, Fouad. I am truly impressed by your motivational and inspirational journey. I'm pretty sure the audience would be too. I think your decision to pursue MBA at UB is a wise one and very, very well calculated based on your comprehensive description of your journey, and all that you've done so far. Now, I keep wondering that you call yourself a Fulbright Scholar. Now, if you would like to just describe and put some light on this, what is the Fulbright Scholarship really, and how did you apply for it, and what's the criteria in and around the qualification or your selection? Could you please provide more information in and around this for our audience to take advantage of this beautiful opportunity that you took leverage of, and making sure that your career progression is on and on?

Fouad Laajine:

Yes, sure, Akshay. So the Fulbright program is a prestigious international educational exchange program sponsored by the US government and especially the Department of State. It was established in 1946 by Senator William Fulbright, and it's administered by the Bureau of Educational and Cultural Offers of the United States Department of State, as I said. The Fulbright program has a range of programs, and the primary goal is to promote mutual understanding and cultural exchange between the people of the United States and people from other countries.

As I said, there are several types of these grants, including the Fulbright to US students program, which I'm part of. This program sponsors students from multiple countries around the world to come and study for a degree program here in the US. There are other programs for doctoral students or for post-doctoral students, and I think every year the US receives more than 8,000 scholars. The grants and the Fulbright program are really competitive, and applicants are selected based on their academic and professional achievements, leadership potential, the feasibility and the impact of their proposed projects. Because during the application, you have to say and to tell why you are applying for the Fulbright program, and how you will benefit your country once you're back.

It is also very important to highlight how you will contribute to the relationship between your country and the US. The Fulbright program through its years since 1946, as I said, had significant impact on fostering cross culture exchange, and building lasting connections between individuals and institutions around the world. To prepare for the application, you have first to, as I said, state your projects, the sector that you're working on, what are you trying to gain, and what will you gain from your experience culturally in the US, and also on an academic level. These all are criteria that are considered by the committee selection, and it is very important to know that Fulbright is always looking for individuals who have the leadership potential, and they are wanting to make an impact on other people on a global scale.

Akshay Prabhakar Koltewar:

Well, Fouad, that was quite comprehensive. I must say, this Fulbright Scholarship is quite a comprehensive one in its nature, and looks at a lot of aspects that you described very, very well, and undoubtedly that clearly reflects that I have a gem with myself here today on the podcast, and I'm so, so proud to share my space in the classroom with him in a lot of courses. I get to learn from him in every aspect of my journey here at UB. So, Fouad, would you like to reflect on some of the challenges that you

faced for just bringing it to our audience notice while you were working on the Fulbright Scholarship application, and how did you go about overcoming these challenges?

Fouad Laajine:

Yes, of course. Well, first, as I said, you should have a clear goal and project for your career that aligns with your background, with your experience, and it is very important to highlight where you come from and where are you going. The second thing that was challenging for me, especially coming from Morocco, it was the diversity on the high number of universities here in the US, because also one of the requirement of the scholarship is to select four universities that you intend to apply for.

Also, as I was out of school for many years, it was for me very challenging to prepare the admission tests, the GMAT and the TOEFL. As you know, we international students, we have to prove our language level through the TOEFL, and as also is an important component of the admission to an MBA program is the GMAT tests, that it takes at least two, three months to prepare for.

It was also very important for me to find the Fulbright alumni in Morocco, talk to them, discuss with them my projects, and get their advice on how to deal with the application, what are the expectation of the selection committee. So in a nutshell, I think these were the, I wouldn't say very challenging tasks, but it is very important to pay attention to these details when applying to the Fulbright scholarship.

Akshay Prabhakar Koltewar:

Very well said, Fouad. I sincerely appreciate you being so frank and upfront about the challenges that you face, and describing them in such detail so that people could truly understand and make sure that they connect to these dots. I, myself, experienced with seven years of work experience in the financial service industry, I completely second the thought that it is kind of difficult to appear for GMAT, GRE or all those language proficiency tests. So to just sum it up, Fouad, what advice would you give to the prospective students considering applying for a Fulbright Scholarship for an MBA program?

Fouad Laajine:

Yes, sure. That's a great question. A lot of people, when they see me as a Fulbright scholar, they reach out to me either through LinkedIn or through other people that I know, and they ask me about what are the tips or advice that you can give us to succeed in our application? I think most and foremost, and the most important thing for me when applying to Fulbright Scholarship, is that you should be yourself, because I know that each one of us, every one of us is unique.

So don't try to mimic someone, or take someone else's application and take it as your own. Try to be yourself. Find your story that describes you well, describes your journey, describes your experiences, and as I said before, it is very important to highlight where are you going. First of all, you should list your achievements, whether they are small or big. Try to have all these achievements in front of you and then try to craft them in a story that can be meaningful, and that can highlight your journey overall.

Another key element in the Fulbright selection criteria is your ability to represent your country and convey your culture. As I said before, the Fulbright program is not just about doing your degree, and studying for your degree, and going back, but it is also very important to share your culture, share your values, your national values with your colleagues, either at school or in class, or even during internship work, and all your experience as a whole. Another criteria is that your journey and your work should serve a noble cause. As I said, for you, it is very important that your work should have an impact, at least on your community, your country, or why not, even on a global scale?

Akshay Prabhakar Koltewar:

That is very well simplified, Fouad. I must say, you put it up in such a structured manner that it's so, so easy for anyone listening to this podcast to understand what are the nitty gritty of this Fulbright scholarship, and what are the key piece of advice coming from a Fulbright scholar himself that will definitely lead them to pursue this forward, and make sure that there is a lot of learning across this process. Reflecting about some support and resources, what kind of support and resources did you find most valuable? Did you, as a Fulbright scholar, at UB MBA, did you use any UB resource particularly for your Fulbright scholarship that you would like to reflect upon?

Fouad Laajine:

Yes. When applying to the Fulbright Scholarship, it was very important for me to have a clear vision, and one of the key elements to this vision is, why am I pursuing this MBA? This is the first question I had in my head. So it was very important for me to have a deep knowledge of the MBA program and what to expect, the modules, the courses, the professors, how these two years basically are going to unfold for me. So the first thing was to delve into the UB website and get as much as I can of the information needed, the courses, the concentration available, the projects, and all the experiential learning that is part of the MBA. This is something that can be easily found on the website. You can also find the alumni or current MBA students that you can reach to them, contact them and establish a relationship, or have

a call with them to have real experience, or real account of the experience, either at the university or in the city of Buffalo as a whole.

Akshay Prabhakar Koltewar:

Very well said, Fouad. I must say that it would be really very, very helpful for the students who are preparing for this, and the kind of resources and support that you reflected upon form the key foundation for anyone to start their process. So I think it's super, super important that candidates ask themselves why are they pursuing the particular program that they're really interested in, and via graduation at this point in their career, and that forms the key and the foundation of all the preparation going forward. So, Fouad, how has the Fulbright Scholarship and the MBA program impacted your personal and professional life? And looking forward, what impact do you hope your Fulbright experience and UB MBA education will have on your career?

Fouad Laajine:

Yeah, that's a great question. I think since the beginning, I had a lot of expectations for the MBA program from an academic standpoint of view, but also on the Fulbright's experience here in the US and my immersive experience in this country entirely. So I think as someone who has an engineering background, it was very important for me to have some sort of broader perspective than the technical aspects that I was dealing with before in my job.

Because I think a lot of engineers can relate to it, is that many of them are really sometimes very focused on the technical aspects that they forget that doing business is not just about numbers, about technicalities, about just these, I would say, formulas. But it is also very important to improve your leadership, your management skills, especially when dealing with people, because most of the project, you cannot succeed by yourself.

You have your team and the team has different expectation of the projects, have diverse dynamics. So it is very important as a leader to take into consideration all these aspects. That's why the MBA program came to compliment my engineering background, and now I'm more aware of how to deal with the people, how to lead them toward a common goal, and how I can manage a multidisciplinary team that can work toward achieving what either the company, or the organizations that I will work for, and achieve the goal that they're aiming to.

I think also now the Fulbright experience and living in the US for almost two years has an impact that is very important to my career. Now, having studied and worked with colleagues from different

backgrounds, from different nationalities is very enriching. Now, I can probably say that I can work in a multicultural or multinational companies easily. That's something that I haven't experienced before during my first experience at work.

So all these new experiences will certainly enhance my ability to make an impact, especially on the environmental and sustainability sector, because this sector particularly is a challenge for everyone around the world. So it is very important to gather all people from different places, from different countries, from different backgrounds, and gather all these people and work with them towards their common goal, that is ultimately preserving our planet.

Akshay Prabhakar Koltewar:

Wow, Fouad, that was truly an exceptional response. I think this question and your response was so, so critical, and it literally tied up all the aspects of Fulbright Scholarship, every course that you take on MBA program, and the very, very important impact of it on your personal, professional life, and you definitely tied it up very well as you look forward to step in your career. So just reflecting upon the future, where do you see yourself, and what are your real plans after completing your MBA degree from UB?

Fouad Laajine:

I think for this question, I have a really straightforward answer. I think I want to continue my career in the international development, particularly in the environmental sector, because to make an impact now, the gap in finance and international development projects in the environmental sector is huge. Now with my MBA program, with my MBA degree, I am confident that I have the knowledge to convince vendors and investors to join the race to tackle climate change.

Now, I am confident that I have the ability to design projects that are efficient, and can drive this climate resiliency, especially in the most vulnerable countries and developing countries. This MBA degree will certainly compliment my experience in construction work in the environmental sector. So my goal now is just to utilize my finance and my business acumen acquired during this enriching experience to mobilize finances in the environmental sector, and make the impact that will satisfy my aspirations.

Akshay Prabhakar Koltewar:

I'm confident of your ability to, Fouad. I'm pretty sure that you'll be able to take leverage of the finance and data analytics as concentrations and the courses that you pursued as part of the MBA program in both these concentrations, and tie back them into the impact that you're trying to make in the broader

sector and the development of the world. I'm pretty sure that you'll do very well in your future endeavors, Fouad. So reflecting upon the support from your personal network, summing it all up from your mentors, what do you think, how has the support from your personal network mentors, or the Fulbright community shaped your experience as a scholar so far?

Fouad Laajine:

Yeah, I think I wouldn't be here without the support of my people that surround me. First, my family was really supportive for me to pursue this journey. They were confident in my abilities to step out of my comfort zone, because it's always very difficult to leave your city, your country, your family, your beloved ones, and pursue studies or career in the other parts of the world. If it weren't for my family who were very supportive and they always encouraged me to pursue my dreams, I couldn't be here. Also, my professional circle and my colleagues in the office, they also encouraged me to pursue this career in the finance management sector, and they are confident that I can have a better impact with this degree. I also have friends who were alumni of the Fulbright program and who gave me the advice and tips needed to apply for the scholarship and guided me to embark on this journey. So overall, as we say, your network is your net worth, so all the people around you can contribute to your success, and I am the perfect example of someone who relies on the people to support him in this journey.

Akshay Prabhakar Koltewar:

I'm so glad that you have such a rock solid support from your personal network, mentors, your family, and the Fulbright community, and very well reflected upon how you connected with the Fulbright community, the alumnis. And I love that quote, your network is your net worth. Truly, when you come down here miles away from home, your network forms your net worth. It's really, really imperative to keep expanding our network, be it from social gatherings or be it outside of your school. It is time to learn from each other, it is time to collaborate, and this modern world requires those skillsets. As we wrap up this session with Fouad, one last question and one last reflection from Fouad. As you reflect on your journey, who would you like to express gratitude towards and why, Fouad?

Fouad Laajine:

I would express my gratitude for everyone who contributed to this journey. As I said before, first my family, they were very supportive. They encouraged me to do whatever I feel is good for my career and for my aspirations, and all the people who surround me before, my ex-colleagues, my professional

circles, Fulbright alumni, but also my colleagues here at the UB MBA program, because without them, I don't think I would succeed as I did with them.

But, like, all my teammates were very supportive with me, especially during the first days of the program where I was just adjusting to the environment, to the climate. They were always very supportive and they were guiding me through the task, and helping me with my teamwork. I think every one of them contributed to who am I now, and also I learned a lot from them, because everyone in the MBA program has something to offer.

And due to the diversity of the background of the people in the MBA program, you always learn something from someone. So I am really grateful for the opportunity to pursue this experience in a world renowned educational institution, in a really multicultural country where people are really driven and motivated by good work, excellent work, the US culture and companies are known for their innovation and excellence in business skill. So I am really grateful to have this opportunity that changed my life so far.

Akshay Prabhakar Koltewar:

That's so true. I truly believe it is a cohort which makes a lot of difference. I see people coming from diverse walks of life, and it is truly impressive to share space with all of them. It should be we are really proud of this cohort, and it is our pleasure to be sharing space with each other in the classroom. With every day learning from each other, with every day that we see ourselves growing, it is such a great feeling.

Thank you so, so much, Fouad, for your valuable time reflecting upon your journey, and that was truly an insightful session. I sincerely, sincerely thank you from the UB School of Management to share your exceptional journey through this Fulbright Scholarship program, and I wish you all the best in your future endeavors. We look forward to joining you back again. See you.