

# Transcript of Podcast featuring Sayani Talukdar

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Vish Gopalakrishnan:

Hi, I'm Vish Gopalakrishnan, and this is the Manage-A-Bull Podcast where we have in-depth conversations with students, faculty, staff, and alumni to give you a comprehensive picture into the life at University at Buffalo's School of Management.

In today's episode, we speak with Sayani Talukdar, a student in UB's MS in Finance Program, from India. In our conversation, we talk about her experience in the UB MS in Finance Program, life as an international student, and how her experience at UB has helped her develop as a professional.

Sayani, welcome to the show.

Sayani Talukdar:

Hey, Vish, thank you so much for having me. I'm really excited to be here today.

Vish Gopalakrishnan:

Hey, great to have you. We learned an interesting thing about you in our research for this podcast. You are actually a civil engineer who worked as an engineer before making the pivot to finance. Tell us, how did you discover your passion for finance?

Sayani Talukdar:

Right. I must say your research is accurate, Vish, to begin with, and I am a civil engineer, and I also have worked as one professionally.

So to answer your question, first I will give you a bit of context in where I was working and what my job entailed. So I was working as an executive engineer in power grid, which is a public sector undertaking, in short, PSU, in India. It's a quasi-government, semi-government organization for the understanding of people who are not from India. The company deals with big infrastructural products, and from the very beginning, I was a project manager more than an engineer.

So we had numerous contractors and subcontractors working for us. Yes, my technical skills were required to ensure the proper execution of the project, but to supervise all the workings of the contractors and making sure that the project is in line, that was not enough. So, I did grow a bit of

managerial skills as well there. I was responsible for contract negotiations, making sure that all the paperworks are at the right places and conference is very required in this kind of work from all the relevant departments, so I had to interact with the finance department a lot on a regular basis level. So I started to enjoy the business side of finance, I must say, and I started to appreciate their workings.

And I was drawn towards it right up from the very beginning, I should say. And people in finance, they also loved working with me. I could clearly see the bias. So if they had to interact with someone, communicate with someone, if all of us are stuck somewhere, they will always prefer that I go. They will come and talk to me. That was the kind of rapport I built with them. That's how it was.

And I just knew that I had to study business, I had to study finance at that point. And also, I should mention one movie though. I watched the Big Short, and to be very honest, I should say that I couldn't wrap my head around a lot of it, all those finance jargons and whatnot. But I'm a quant head, I must tell you right now. So I have this penchant towards numbers, number crunching and everything. So I just knew that, hey, listen, I don't understand what's going on in this movie, but whatever that is, I want to do that for a lady. So that's how it was. And well, yep.

Vish Gopalakrishnan:

Yeah. The Big Short, for our listeners, is the movie about the 2008 financial crisis, the recession that happened, the global recession that happened, and it walks through the backend reason for the housing market crash and a number of different things that happened. Definitely an interesting movie. I have to admit that I've seen it twice and I don't think I still understand all of it, but I can completely see why a movie like that would inspire someone who's already kind of inclined towards finance because of their work experience, would want to get into it.

Let's talk about UB and how you ended up here. So you have this profession, you're an engineer, but also a project manager, you're working very closely with finance teams. When you started thinking about doing a graduate degree and started looking at graduate programs, what was your criteria for selecting the ideal fit?

Sayani Talukdar:

Right. So I first tell you one thing. In addition to this, to my profile, I am a civil engineer, I worked as one. And like I said, I could feel that I need to get into business and finance. I probably still didn't have that much of clarity at that point, and I believe that all of us are colossally confused most of the times, right?

Vish Gopalakrishnan:

Right.

Sayani Talukdar:

It's not that we all have the clarity at every moment in our life, but well, you just walk through that. You make one decision at a time and then you move forward from there. So I did decide to pursue an MBA degree at that point in my life, which I did do. And I went to FMS, I did my MBA degree from there. Afterwards, I joined a corporate treasury of a big corporate. So I worked there for almost three years. And when I was working, I could feel the need that I can take a deeper dive in this thing. And definitely my MBA degree, my B-school was a great school and it did equip me with a lot of skills, with which I was definitely successful in my career. But at the same time, I wanted to have an idea of the developed financial market, and I wanted to pursue a higher degree in finance at that point.

So, I had a couple of choices. Either I do a PhD or either I come for a master's in finance program. And to be very honest, PhD seemed like a lot of [inaudible 00:07:05] at that point. And it is definitely. I was not sure whether I had it in me, but as of now, I'm again not taking that off the table because the more I learn, the more intrigued I become. There's a lot of things to explore in finance. It's all science, trust me. So that's how it was.

And well, when I was trying to understand that where I should go and what degree should I pursue, I think there are couple of things I considered. There are a bunch of things, by the way, any candidate would consider, studying something from the States. So first, you have to understand what are your needs for your career goals, the kind of courses that you are looking for? Does the program offering align with your career goals? So that is one important point that I had in mind.

And then one important thing is what's the batch size? So see, there are different kinds of learners, and I'm a very interactive one, by the way. I'm very interactive. I personally feel that if a batch is too huge, you probably won't be able to communicate with the instructor. You won't get that much of face time. And for me personally, it's important. I like to assimilate the things that are being taught in class, and if I have any query, I don't shy away. I just ask. It's fine for me. So that was one important criteria for me, whether the program offering were aligned with my career goals and what the batch size is.

And another important thing that I noticed in UB, and well, this is something that it's a bit difficult to put in words, but when I was looking at different schools and different programs, something unique is there about everyone, but it's all about whether your vibe matches with the school at the end of the day because you're going to be there for a substantial period of time. And I just felt that with UB's digital content and everything that the alumni that I got to interact with from UB, there was a sense of warmth to it. People are very nice, and there is this genuineness, there's this authenticity that stood out to me.

That is something that drew me towards UB.

Vish Gopalakrishnan:

Right. It's interesting that you mentioned small class sizes was an important criteria. The vibe was an important criteria, which is certainly interesting.

One thing that gets talked about often on this podcast is the people of Buffalo and how nice everybody is and how helpful everyone is. I have a thesis or a hypothesis that it's probably the cold winters that make people rely on others because you kind of have to. You have six months of extremely cold weather and that kind of makes people help out and that could be one reason.

But the small class size is especially a unique feature because there are 33,000-plus students on UB's campus. It's easy to assume that, oh, the classes are going to be massive. But at least in the graduate programs, in my experience and in your experience also it seems like, the class sizes are small enough that you can have that one-on-one interaction with the professors and also with your fellow students. So, those are great criteria and it's a great connect with what UB has to offer also. Those are some great insights. Thanks for sharing those.

So you apply to UB and you obviously arrive at Buffalo. What was your first impression of UB campus and Buffalo in general?

Sayani Talukdar:

That is one interesting question. You know what, Vish? I was walking in Delhi before landing here at Buffalo, and well, I have always spent my life in metros, or at best, suburbs. But then there's a difference between suburbs in India and suburbs in the US because of the geographical span. If you are in India and you are in a suburb, and what, it'll take you, what, 30 minutes to one hour to be at the heart of the city? There's hardly any difference. I mean, you don't really see that.

So back in Delhi, the capital of India, you know how hustling, bustling it is, and I'm a people's person, by the way. I like meeting people. I like crowds. When I came here, it felt very quiet all of a sudden. So I mean, this numbing feeling that, should I describe it as a melancholy feeling? I really don't know. But it was very different initially and a little scary as well. I couldn't even see 20% of the crowd that I was used to overnight. So, that was there.

I just arrived and I just know a handful of people, and your human interactions are very limited. So it was a little challenging at the very beginning, but well, the campus was nice. When I visited the campus, it was beautiful. It was big. I got lost. I was waiting at the wrong bus stop. I got on a wrong bus, ended up somewhere else. It was confusing, but it was fun. And it was actually very refreshing to see all these

kids, all the students on campus. So that's when I realized that, well, it'll just take me some time to get used to this, and I have my classes and it's going to be fun coming to the class and interacting with people. There are a lot of kids here.

Vish Gopalakrishnan:

It's interesting you bring up the difference in terms of population. Delhi is obviously massive, I think 20 million people plus. It's a New York equivalent, it's a DC equivalent. Buffalo is known to be a big town with small-town energy. It has a couple hundred thousand people, but it's very spread out. There's a lot of natural beauty. There's tons of lakes, so it can feel like there's not a lot of people around, but it is, in terms of the United States, one of the bigger cities out there.

Sayani

Talukdar:

Exactly.

Vish Gopalakrishnan:

So it's interesting to see the contrast of coming here, I didn't really see a lot of people around, and I can completely understand that. The culture shock is definitely something that international students have to adjust to. And as an international student, it can be difficult staying so far away from friends and family and the hustle bustle that you were used to. What are some ways by which international students, in your opinion, can feel more at home while being so far away from home?

Sayani Talukdar:

Right. Let's see, for me personally, like I mentioned, that I have been in three to four different cities back in India, walking, living. I usually don't feel that homesick easily. However, I have seen kids with less exposure to struggle real hard when they arrived here. And well, even when I'm talking about myself, I am used to living in different cities away from my family, but it was altogether a different country. There's no doubt about that. I cannot just book a flight and be there in two hours or something like that. I just didn't have that option. So, that was something that was definitely there.

But what I feel is that, see, for the kids who did not have much experience, they were living with their families right before coming here. There's a lot on which you have to work on your own. It's a natural process of growing up. You have to work on those things. That's one part.

However, there are two key things, which are much simpler ones. If you can take care of those, you'll

probably feel a little less homesick. One is food, second is people.

When we talk about food, needless to say, there are multiple options here. If you're missing home cooked food or something that that is Indian, Indian cuisine for that matter, there are a lot of good restaurants which are over here, even for Indian, Chinese, the particular vendor-style, Chinese food, if you're craving that, there're good restaurants here as well. There are great biryani places. There's this one place I just want to mention, it's called Hyderabad Biryani. It's a great place. Inchin's Chinese, that's a great place to have Chinese from, Indo-Chinese food. Yep.

And last but not the least, our own One World Café. They're serving authentic Indian cuisine. So if you are craving for a quick bite, just go and grab something in there. So that part, that food part, if you can take care of that, I think you will feel a little better.

Another important thing there is people. So in terms of people, you don't make your own circle, you don't form your own circle in one single day, you don't form it overnight, but the key is to interact. Meet with people, meet with more people, talk with them, try and understand where they're coming from. Just make your circle bigger. And I'm sure you're going to have fun interacting with a lot of them, and well, it'll make you feel home, I should say that.

Vish Gopalakrishnan:

Right. It's great that you mentioned food. Buffalo has a thriving South Asian community. There's a huge population from Bangladesh and also India that calls Buffalo home. So finding food, at least South Asian food, is not going to be difficult. There's plenty of options. There's also a huge Indian student body on campus, so obviously with that comes a lot of people who have great cooking skills. So if you can be friends with them, you'll end up having good food every once in a while.

And yeah, you're right, you don't form your close circle in one day or two days, but it does take concerted effort. You have to go outside of your classes to student organizations, clubs, or plan trips with people in order to connect with them. But those are two great suggestions, for sure.

Now let's talk about the MS Finance Program a little in depth. Now, the MS in Finance Program is known for its intense course load and focused outputs, which was something that attracted you to the program in the first place. Would you mind walking us through what happens during the duration of the program? It's two semesters long.

Sayani Talukdar:

It's three semesters long.

Vish Gopalakrishnan:

Three semesters long. Sorry. Walk us through, semester by semester, how does it go?

Sayani Talukdar:

Right. Let me give you an overview of how the structure of the program looks like. So it's a 36-credit courses program, and you do have some core courses that are approved, and you do have a basket of electives from which you can choose from. And there are four tracks to follow. One is quantitative finance, one is financial risk management, third one would be quantitative finance with fintech side, and fourth one is financial risk management with the quantitative side. Your post-work would look very different given the kind of track you chose.

So I mean, needless to say, as the name suggests, the quantitative finance track is a little more concentrated on quants, financial mathematics, and financial risk management, it's a little heavier on the theoretical side of it.

On top of that, I should say that there are certain requirements, like these are the certain number of STEM courses that you have to complete to be eligible to get your degree. Those things are definitely there. At every point, you should always consult with your academic advisor to make sure that you're fulfilling your requirements, your degree requirements. That is there.

And I'll give you a little overview of how the subject matter looks like here. I am pursuing quantitative finance here. It's a little math-heavy. If you're a numbers person, if you're into probability, if it doesn't scare you, if you get intrigued by it, solving some complicated probability helps you sleep at night, then go for it. If you are not that kind of person, if you don't like doing these things, I suggest that you go for a [inaudible 00:22:14]. That's the broader division.

And at the same time, if you are interested in data part of it, for example, data visualization and things like that, a little bit of programming, probably take the fintech along with that, the fintech side of those respective fields. So, that's how it is. It completely depends on what kind of career you are planning to pursue going forward and the courses that you're taking, whether those will align with your career goals.

Vish Gopalakrishnan:

So you mentioned quantitative fineness, that's the field. It's a little mathematically heavy. And with that, obviously comes to question of, okay, the classes are probably going to be intense and they're going to be difficult.

Now, I'm sure you've had a lot of classes or favorite classes and professors in the program, but if I asked you for your absolute favorite in-class experience in the program, what would it be and why?

Sayani Talukdar:

Interesting. I really hope that not all my professors are tuned into this program right now, but well, if I have to choose my absolute favorite, and it probably won't be just me, if you take a survey from all my seniors, anyone who has attend his classes, they would say that he's the best instructor. It's Professor Thomas Labert. He teaches Derivatives. Well, he taught Derivatives to my batch, and he's an amazing instructor. He's the best instructor, and he's going to drill down the concept in your head.

That's the kind of instructor he is. He encourages a lot of plus participation and just the kind of class I like, trust me. And I do have a strong liking for the subject matter itself. That also plays a role, definitely. But yeah, he's a great instructor and I absolutely loved sitting in his class. I just feel very fortunate that I got the chance to attend the class under his supervision.

Vish Gopalakrishnan:

That's incredible. Derivatives, right?

Sayani Talukdar:

Yeah.

Vish Gopalakrishnan:

I wish I could ask you a lot of follow-up questions on that, but my knowledge in finance is extremely limited, so I'll move on to the next question.

In-class learning is a crucial component of the learning experience at UB. Obviously you mentioned your favorite class, and that's one aspect, but that's not all that the School of Management has to offer. Why do you think it's important for students to go beyond the classroom to gain holistic experience in the program? Or why do you think they need to go beyond the classroom and classroom projects to be more well-rounded in their fields?

Sayani Talukdar:

Right. So I personally feel that if you're just going to class, you are missing out on a lot of other opportunities that are available on campus. And well, once you've graduated, those are not going to be

there. You might not realize how great those opportunities are, but once you graduate, those are just gone.

And see, I understand that we all have a very busy schedule. We have our own post-work, which has its own obligations. We have our own academic obligations that are there, and probably some of us are working part-time as well on campus. And then obviously, you have to do your own household chores. It goes without saying.

So those are there, but at the same time, you could go out and participate in a club or you are part of some clubs or organizations or any competition that just popped up from any particular School of Management or maybe School of Arts and Sciences or anything, any competition probably that is available for everyone. So if you take part in those things, you actually get to apply the things that you are learning inside the classroom and taking it a step forward.

That's the reason I believe it's very important that you participate in the things that are not just limited by your classroom, all the opportunities that are available on campus. But at the same time, yes, I think it's important that you take on your plate as much as you can eat and make sure that you are eating everything that you have taken. Right?

Vish Gopalakrishnan:

Right. No, that's a great way to put it. And make sure that you put a lot on your plate, but then make sure you eat everything that's on your plate. That is also a maxim or a saying that we hear a lot in India also. I think the context there is more from a parenting perspective like, "Make sure that you eat everything that's on your plate," it's just good matters, but it's a great way to put it. Like, yes, there's the opportunity to put on a lot and experience a lot, but make sure you're living that and taking the best out of it.

Now, one of the key benefits of any of these outside-of-class experiences that you mentioned, participating in competitions, clubs, et cetera, is that they help you develop soft skills.

Sayani Talukdar:

Right, absolutely.

Vish Gopalakrishnan:

The classes teach you a lot of the technical aspect of finance, quantitative finance in this case, but the outside experiences help you with the soft skills.

Now, in your experience, what are the three most crucial soft skills necessary for success in the field of finance, in quantitative finance in particular, and how do you think UB prepares students for the same?

Sayani Talukdar:

Right, absolutely. No, that's a very interesting question, I must say.

I think there are some important soft skills that quants should develop. One would be adaptability. Second would be communication. And third, last but not the least, would be time management. These are the key things one person should definitely develop.

Time management is very crucial when you are here in the United States. You're completely on your own. You are managing everything on your own. You don't have... This is for the international students particularly because we are not really used to these kinds of things. We are very much used to our safety nets, our households. I don't know whether we are spoiled kids or not, but that's how it is. And it is just different ways of living at different continents. So time management is the key. You have a lot of involvement on campus and you have to make sure that you are fulfilling the needs of those things. So yes, time management.

Adaptability goes without saying, you are getting accustomed with a completely new kind of syllabus, a completely new kind of structure of courses, coursework, and everything. So adaptability, yes, definitely there.

And communication, yes. I think when we talk about soft skills, sometimes we just try to say that, "Okay, these are the soft skills and these are your core skills," or something like that. But even the line between soft skills and core skills, it's not a hard line. It's a very soft line. It's more of a range, I must say. And what are your core skills, even, without your soft skills?

I mean, let's say that I am a part of an equity research group, and let's say I'm doing a stock pitch, and well, I have a lot of material, I'll have a lot of meat in my presentation in my pitch, and I am just not capable enough to show them in an efficient manner. It doesn't help. So apart from the capability of doing extensive research, you need to have the ability to make an effective presentation as well.

So those are important, both of these things are important. So yes, that's how it is.

Vish Gopalakrishnan:

Right. Time management is something that is, I think, applicable no matter which program you're in. You're going to be... There's a lot thrown at you as a graduate student, so that's certainly important.

Communication is particularly important because as international students, you're speaking in a

language that is foreign to us, and you're communicating in a language that's not the language that we speak back home. So the ability to convey meaning in a succinct manner, why a speech or writing is extremely important. Add to that the complexity of, I have to explain these difficult, mathematical, complicated concepts to someone who may not necessarily understand them.

Sayani Talukdar:

Absolutely.

Vish Gopalakrishnan:

So being able to do that in a clear way is great. And adaptability is just, I think, a crucial skill no matter where you are, but especially as an international student coming into a different culture.

Sayani Talukdar:

Absolutely.

Vish Gopalakrishnan:

Being open to new experiences, being willing to learn and grow and become a different version of yourself can be very rewarding if you have the right mindset.

Now, if you had to select and recommend, let's say, a few must-do activities or experiences for students considering the UB MS in Finance Program, especially to develop these three skills, what would you suggest?

Sayani Talukdar:

That's a very interesting question. You know, this is something that I suggest to a lot of kids with whom I'm interacting, the prospective students, when I'm interacting with the student ambassador.

There are a few things that are of high importance. You have to be up-to-date with the current actors. So you have to read up, you have to read newspapers on a regular basis. That is there. Try writing, I must say that. Do reflective writing so that if you can write something which is comprehensive enough for yourself, what you were thinking at one point in time, if you feel that it's doing justice to that, then yes, you can communicate with others as well through your writing. That is important. And talk to people. Talk to people, understand whether they are able to understand what you are trying to make them understand.

So, these three things are important. In short, communicate with yourself, with people.

Vish Gopalakrishnan:

Right. You know, as someone who's nearing the end of their time at UB, what resources does UB offer you to equip you with the tools you need to conduct a successful job search?

Sayani Talukdar:

UB actually has a lot of resources, particularly for a job search as well. We do have Handshake, we do have BizLink. At the same time, we do have our Career Resource Center and Career Design Center.

I personally found out this particular formation to be very helpful. If you want to develop your skill, let's say, particularly effective writing or effective communication, there are a lot of resources. If you reach out to these offices, they'll help you out with this, and they will also help you develop an effective regimen. That is also there.

So yes, those are the resources, some of the resources that I'm mentioning there, which are very helpful in the job search.

Vish Gopalakrishnan:

Right. The CRC and the CDC get mentioned, the CDC here is the Career Design Center, get mentioned a lot on the podcast. Thanks for mentioning Handshake and BizLink, which don't get as much airtime. But Handshake and BizLink, for our listeners, are essentially online job portals where companies come and post job openings. University also has a lot of jobs, student jobs, graduate assistantships, student assistantships that get put up there. So it's a great resource, not just for that.

BizLink is a bit more than a job search. It's where you go to register for events. It's where you go to find additional resources in your job hunting journey. So it essentially acts as a one-stop shop where all kinds of information is available to students to help them conduct a successful job search.

So now that your time with UB is almost coming to an end, what's next for Sayani? What are you up to next?

Sayani Talukdar:

Yes, absolutely. I'm already in my second semester, one more to go. And it was beautiful. It is beautiful being here, but well, at one point, it's going to end and it'll be time for me to look for the dream job that I want to pursue my career in graduating out from UB. So that's where I'm going to concentrate and

that's how I am developing my skills, which will make me industry-ready and I'll be successful when I'm in that position doing that particular dream job. That's how it is.

Vish Gopalakrishnan:

Right. So Sayani, there's a lot of great gems in this conversation. I think a lot of our listeners, especially prospective students, are going to learn a lot. What advice would you give to our listeners who are thinking about applying to UB's MS Finance Program?

Sayani Talukdar:

You know, this is one very interesting question, and probably one that is very close to my heart because I give this one piece of advice to a lot of students that I interact with, and there's one important thing that you have to understand. When you are applying for a school, you are submitting a bunch of piece of papers, and those are just papers. And you have to make sure that the essay that you were writing, the resume that you were submitting, it all has to form one single story. And that story has to make sense.

So whether your story is there in one piece, and it is understandable, your journey is understandable to the people who are just looking, going through your paperworks, it's important that you present it in that manner. So this is something that I find, I believe is very important, that your storytelling has to be on point.

Vish Gopalakrishnan:

Right. Sayani, as I mentioned earlier, tons of great resources mentioned on this podcast. A lot of great insights, especially the skills that you mentioned are something that a lot of people can benefit from. If our listeners want to continue to follow your journey, where can they find you?

Sayani Talukdar:

They can get in touch with me on LinkedIn. My LinkedIn handle is S-A-Y-A-N-I. That's my first name. T-A-L-U-K-D-A-R. That's my last name. You can search for me. You should find me.

Vish Gopalakrishnan:

Well, Sayani, thank you so much for taking the time. This has been great. Hopefully it was a fun experience for you also.

Sayani Talukdar:

Yes, absolutely. It was wonderful being here, and thank you so much again, Vish, for having me. It was great talking to you. Always looking for a meaningful conversation.

Vish Gopalakrishnan:

It's our pleasure.

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