

# Steps to get yourself study-fit for the MBA journey

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An MBA degree is arguably one of the most challenging experiences any student can have. However, it is important to note that akin to climbing Mount Everest or running the Comrades Marathon, undertaking – and successfully completing - an MBA requires extensive preparation. The University of Pretoria's Gordon Institute of Business Science (GIBS) Director of Academic Programmes, Tanya van Lill, says: “An MBA is not a sprint, it's not even a marathon, it is an ultra-marathon and you have to be prepared for it.”

But how exactly do you prepare for an MBA? Van Lill offers 10 training tips for the MBA student looking to get the most out of a life-changing two- to three-year experience.

## **1. Ask why?**

Van Lill says understanding why you want to complete an MBA degree is the first step in the preparation process. Whether it is to advance your career, a goal you have had for a long time, or that you simply want to undertake something different and challenging, Van Lill says the ‘why?’ needs to be very clearly spelled out. “We have seen more success out of people who can answer the ‘why?’ question than those who come in completely blind.”

## **2. Buy-in for support**

The next step is to get buy-in to this MBA commitment from your bosses and also from your family and friends. “We tell our students that they definitely need a strong support structure. They are encouraged to explain the rigour of the course to all stakeholders in the process,” she says. “Students need to share how much time they will spend in classrooms, doing assignments, and working in their syndicate groups – and how this will affect their work and family life. GIBS actually encourages students to bring their spouses and bosses to the campus to introduce them to the place that will virtually be their second home during their MBA; in order to make them feel included in the process.”

## **3. Start developing awareness**

The next step in your MBA preparedness is to develop awareness of the world around you. Van Lill says: “Start reading more widely, and listening to the radio or TV news segments with intent. It's about being more aware of what is going on around you.” She does, however, say that students do not have to process an economist's understanding of global politics or the macroeconomic state of the country; it is rather about opening up their minds to receiving new information from different sources.

## **4. Brush up on skills**

One of the first things many prospective MBA students do is to take a speed reading course, a skill which Van Lill believes is a key skill requirement for anyone doing an MBA. “The MBA requires a lot of pre-reading in order for the classroom environment to be as dynamic an experience as possible,” she explains. Van Lill elaborates: “It is about being able to read very fast for understanding in a short space in time.” In addition to reading, Van Lill also encourages students to get really comfortable with their computer skills, and especially programmes like your Microsoft Office products including PowerPoint, Excel and Word. But brushing up on skills does not end there, Van Lill says people also have to practice writing again. She says: “You need to be able to write a three-hour exam, so you need to test your ‘hand-fitness’. Exams are about writing fast, and legibly.”

## **5. Leave preconceptions at home**

Chinese philosopher Lao Tzu is credited with saying: “Act without expectation.” This is especially true for MBA students. Van Lill says: “Prepare yourself mentally for the fact that you are going to be stretched, but don’t come with any expectations and set ideas, rather try your best to come with a clean slate and flow with the experience.” This, she says will make a student’s assimilation into the programme smoother.

## 6. Be prepared to be uncomfortable

It is inevitable with a quality degree like an MBA that the process will make you feel uncomfortable. Each student’s preconceived views of the world will be challenged. “You need to be aware that you are going to experience discomfort, so get comfortable with feeling uncomfortable,” says Van Lill. She urges students to be open and allow themselves to see things from different perspectives, since this will ensure they learn and grow.

## 7. Know yourself

“There will be times when students get tired, where there is a lot of pressure on them from work and family, so emotionally MBA preparation is about knowing your boundaries and being able to ask for help,” says Van Lill. She recommends that, in order to stay the distance, MBA students give themselves permission to put up their hands and say, “I am not coping.” “It is about knowing your trigger points before you burnout,” she says. GIBS has a strategy in place to help students get to grips with these often uncomfortable potential vulnerabilities.

## 8. Keep moving and having fun

Squeezing in time for exercise and some fun will keep students sane on their MBA journey. Whether you enjoy your morning run, watching *Game of Thrones*, or playing with your hobby train set, Van Lill says it is important to make time for things that give you joy. “These are the small things that re-energise you, and it is important to make time for them.” She says GIBS encourages students to keep exercising. In fact, she says, MBA students tend to form their own exercise groups and you will often find them going for walks at lunch, or running and cycling together. “Exercise,” she says, “is a great coping mechanism.”

## 9. Eat Well

“This year GIBS is experimenting with a new food philosophy. We believe food plays a big role when you are doing an MBA,” explains Van Lill, noting that GIBS understands that many people turn to food as a coping mechanism and for comfort. She says healthy food choices will not only prevent students from putting on weight but, more importantly, will give them greater mental capacity to cope with their studies.

## 10. The re-integration dilemma

“Getting to grips with the demands of an MBA will take a student anything up to three months,” says van Lill. After that, students do find a routine, make new friends and embrace their studies with unprecedented enthusiasm. However, students need to think about what happens once they have graduated. Over the last two years, GIBS has seriously examined how to help students reintegrate with their work colleagues, family and friends post-MBA. She warns students to be aware of the emotional lows that follow the completion of a degree like the MBA. In order to help students with this, GIBS has instituted a programme to help their Alumni after graduation; another step in ensuring that the MBA experience continues to add depth, even after the final graduation ceremony.

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