

UBC aims to shape global economic leaders, world changers with new undergrad program

BY TRACY SHERLOCK, VANCOUVER SUN AUGUST 28, 2013



Students Beni Habarugira, left, and Sindhu Jawed discuss global issues during an orientation program at the University of B.C. on August 22, 2013. The students are enrolled in UBC's new Bachelor of International Economics program.

Photograph by: NICK PROCAYLO, PNG

A new bachelor's degree program at the University of B.C. has set a lofty goal of transforming some of the world's best undergraduate students into the next generation of global economic leaders.

It's early days, but the students signing on for the Bachelor of International Economics program certainly have ambitions, dreams and aspirations to change the world.

For example, Beni Habarugira, 18, from Burundi — one of the world's poorest countries — wants to return to his home after he completes his university degree to work within government to make improvements and develop the country. He has already spent a couple of years in China, where he became fluent in Mandarin.

Sindhu Jawed, 20, from Pakistan, has already founded a non-governmental organization that provides orphans with educational and recreational opportunities. She is in Vancouver on a full scholarship and says she feels very lucky to be here.

Organizers are looking to combine the best qualities of programs at leading institutions such as

Harvard and the London School of Economics by giving gifted students small classes, global experiences and career support.

A flagship offering of UBC's top-ranked economics school, the BIE program will focus on international trade, finance and international development and is designed to educate students to fill a wide range of global leadership roles in business, government, NGOs or academia.

"In this rapidly globalizing world, our leaders will need international educations, experiences and networks," says Ashok Kotwal, director of the new program and a professor in UBC's newly expanded Vancouver School of Economics — Canada's top-ranked economics program and one of the top 25 in the world, according to UBC.

"Our goal is to prepare graduates for these top roles, where they will be in a position to make real change in the world."

While many international business students land at hedge funds or in financial management jobs, BIE students typically have a higher calling, according to Kotwal.

"Our representative student is not someone who just wants to manage a hedge fund," he says. "These students are interested in global issues and making the world a better place — and have already started down this path."

There are 85 students in the new program. Half of them are international students from 23 countries including India, China, the U.S., Spain and Pakistan.

The international students participated in an orientation period at UBC during the last two weeks of August, before the Canadian students joined them. The students and Kotwal discussed the eurozone crisis in Greece, Spain and Ireland during the orientation session and Cristina Blanco Iglesias, 19, provided some first-hand information about Spain's housing bubble.

A Spaniard, Iglesias has studied in India for the past two years and wants to work for a global NGO.

Milena Khalil, 18, is from Belgium, but she spent several years in Panama, where she attended an international school. She says going from a developed country to a developing country opened her eyes to the issues of development — the field she wants to work in, possibly for the United Nations.

Varit Senapitak, 18, is from Thailand and says he was attracted to the program because of how it is designed for a specific cohort of 85 students who stay together throughout their four years of study.

"You can imagine these students sitting in class, and they move forward as a cohort, making connections, friendships, relationships across different parts of the world," Kotwal said. "They are soaking in experiences from these other people, so they are learning not just from curriculum, but also outside that and through the perspective that each person from a different corner of the globe brings."

All 85 spaces in the program are new spaces, and Kotwal emphasized that international students

don't take spots for Canadian students funded by taxpayers. They pay for new spots to be created, which wouldn't exist otherwise, he says.

He also said that the program was specifically designed to educate students from a mix of different countries, so that they could learn from each other.

"It's a rapidly globalizing world," Kotwal said. "What happens in one place, affects every place. We thought it would be very advantageous to have a student body from all sorts of different countries.

"There are huge benefits for the Canadian students as well because they get to learn from this diverse body of students who are going to be their friends."

Anjali Vyas, who was born in Vancouver and grew up near Victoria, is one of them. The 19-year-old thinks the perspective provided by the international students will be invaluable.

"In North America, we're so caught up in our own world and our own economy that we don't see the social and economic situations going on in other countries," Vyas said. "I was so happy when I heard that there are students from 23 different countries. It's going to be such a great learning experience."

She also said the small cohort of students and professors was a factor in her decision to enrol in the program. "Those relationships are really important," Vyas said.

The BIE program was just announced in December, so organizers were surprised when more than 2,150 applications came in for the 85 spots.

"We didn't even have our website ready," Kotwal said, adding that student selection was based on grade point average as well as a personal profile.

A dedicated career centre and career counselling — designed to help graduates find jobs — are also planned for the future.

The program is part of UBC's Vancouver School of Economics, where more than 700 students in the school's undergraduate and graduate programs study topics such as international trade, global economic growth, inequality, the roots of poverty, financial crises, environmental sustainability and gender discrimination.

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