

Date: 12 March 2021

To: Yvonne Smith
The Board of the Yvonne A M Smith Charitable Trust

From: Roimata Claasen

Subject: Report One

Me mihi ka tika ki a koe, e Yvonne, mou i tautoko mai i āu ki te whakakī i taku kete matauranga. E rere ana te whakamaiohatanga ki a koe, a kāti, ki te Poari hoki. Tēnā rawaatu koutou.

[It is only right to pay tribute to you, Yvonne, for supporting me to fill my basket of knowledge. I send my appreciation to you, and to the Board. Thank you all.]

This report provides an update on the first six months of my time at Oxford University pursuing a Masters of Business Administration (“MBA”). I will begin by sharing some academic highlights from the course so far, before touching on the experience of studying in the UK during a global pandemic.

1. Academic highlights:

The Oxford MBA is incredibly intense. While most MBA programmes stretch over two years, the Oxford MBA covers the same ground in just one year. The academic year is comprised of four terms: Michaelmas (September – December), Hilary (January – March), Trinity (April – June) and Summer (July – August). Each term is split into two teaching blocks of four weeks, capped off with a week of assessments. Essentially this means we have four weeks to learn a topic in sufficient detail before being assessed. Perhaps “intense” is an understatement.

(a) Michaelmas term:

Michaelmas term was dedicated to nailing the business basics. In the first block, we covered Organisational Behaviour, Technology & Operations and Accounting. The assessment required us to integrate the learnings from each course to formulate a set of recommendations to British Airways on how the company can “build back better” in an industry decimated by Covid-19. My own recommendations included repairing customer trust by reducing call centre wait times, creating new revenue streams by focusing on domestic tourism and incentivising customers to choose travel vouchers instead of refunds in the event of cancelled flights. I thoroughly enjoyed the opportunity to apply academic concepts and theories to real world business problems.

In the second block, we covered Analytics, Business Finance and Marketing. It was a joy to work with numbers again – not something I dealt with often as a commercial lawyer – and to re-learn the fundamentals of statistical modelling. I also enjoyed revisiting marketing concepts I had not thought about since my undergraduate degree. As with the first block,

the assessments were firmly grounded in the real world, including an analysis of the effectiveness of Covid-19 tests and creating a marketing plan for a cutting-edge digital marketing firm.

(b) Hilary term:

After a brief Christmas break, we dove straight into Hilary term, starting with more business fundamentals, Firms & Markets and Strategy. The assessment involved carrying out an industry analysis and formulating a go-to-market strategy for a fictional company looking to enter that industry. I enjoyed the opportunity to flex my analytical and strategic muscles, and to think creatively about how a company might go about entering an industry characterised by large and relatively powerful incumbents.

We are now halfway through the second block of Hilary term, which is proving to be the busiest to date. In addition to completing two individual papers – Capitalism in Debate and Strategies for Impact – we were also required to form teams to tackle two separate and significant projects.

The first project is part of GOTO (Global Opportunities and Threats: Oxford), a flagship course that aims to teach students how to map the systems which create and perpetuate “wicked problems” and identify leverage points for shifting the dial. My team is exploring job creation for young women in rural Rajasthan and has had the privilege of speaking to a diverse set of individuals currently making an impact in that space. The challenge of job creation in rural communities is something I am passionate about and I am sure this project will generate valuable insights and learnings that I can apply to my own rural community in time.

The second project is part of the Entrepreneurship Project, a course that aims to teach students how to create, validate and scale entrepreneurial business ideas. My team is working on providing low-cost solar energy solutions to businesses and households in Zimbabwe who currently have no or limited access to a reliable energy source. This kind of business model, which combines revenue generation with social purpose, is again something I am passionate about and I am thoroughly enjoying the process of learning how to build a business from the ground up.

(c) Looking ahead:

In preparation for Trinity term, we were required to choose five electives that align with our interests and goals. I have selected topics which centre on strategy, social impact and business transformation and am looking forward to getting stuck in. I will provide an update on those papers, and the content of Summer term, in my second report.

2. Studying in the UK during a global pandemic:

When I applied to Oxford’s MBA programme at the tail end of 2019, I imagined spending my days learning from academics and industry leaders, my evenings getting to know my diverse classmates (preferably over a pint), and my weekends exploring Oxford and further afield. For obvious reasons, it hasn’t quite turned out like that.

The experience so far has been incredibly challenging. The UK has been in and out of lockdown for almost a year now. The business school has implemented a hybrid model of learning, comprising a combination of pre-recorded materials, live online lectures and the rare in-person lecture. The faculty are doing their best to make the online content engaging, to varying levels of success. When in person, the professors are stationed behind plastic screens, students are spaced so far apart that small talk is all but impossible, and everyone is required to wear a mask at all times. Not exactly the collegiate experience I was anticipating.

But there are silver linings. Not being at business school from 9am until 5pm means I can spend my time doing other things to enrich my experience. Socially distanced one-on-one walks with members of my cohort often lead to deeper connections than an occasional chat between classes. I have more time to research career options and network with prospective employers in New Zealand. I can ease into my day with yoga and a walk (English weather permitting) and pop downstairs to chat with my husband whenever I want. I am incredibly thankful for these silver linings.

In any case, the outlook is positive. The recently announced Government roadmap includes a phased lifting of restrictions over the next few months, with all restrictions to be lifted by June 21st. There is a feeling of hope in the air, mingling with the first signs of spring. I am hopeful that the last six months of my Oxford experience will be everything I imagined, and more.

It is truly a privilege to be able to step away from “real life” and dedicate this year to learning, exploring and growing. Again, my sincere thanks to you Yvonne, and to the Board.

Kia haumarū te noho. *[Stay safe.]*

Nāku noa, nā *[Yours sincerely,]*

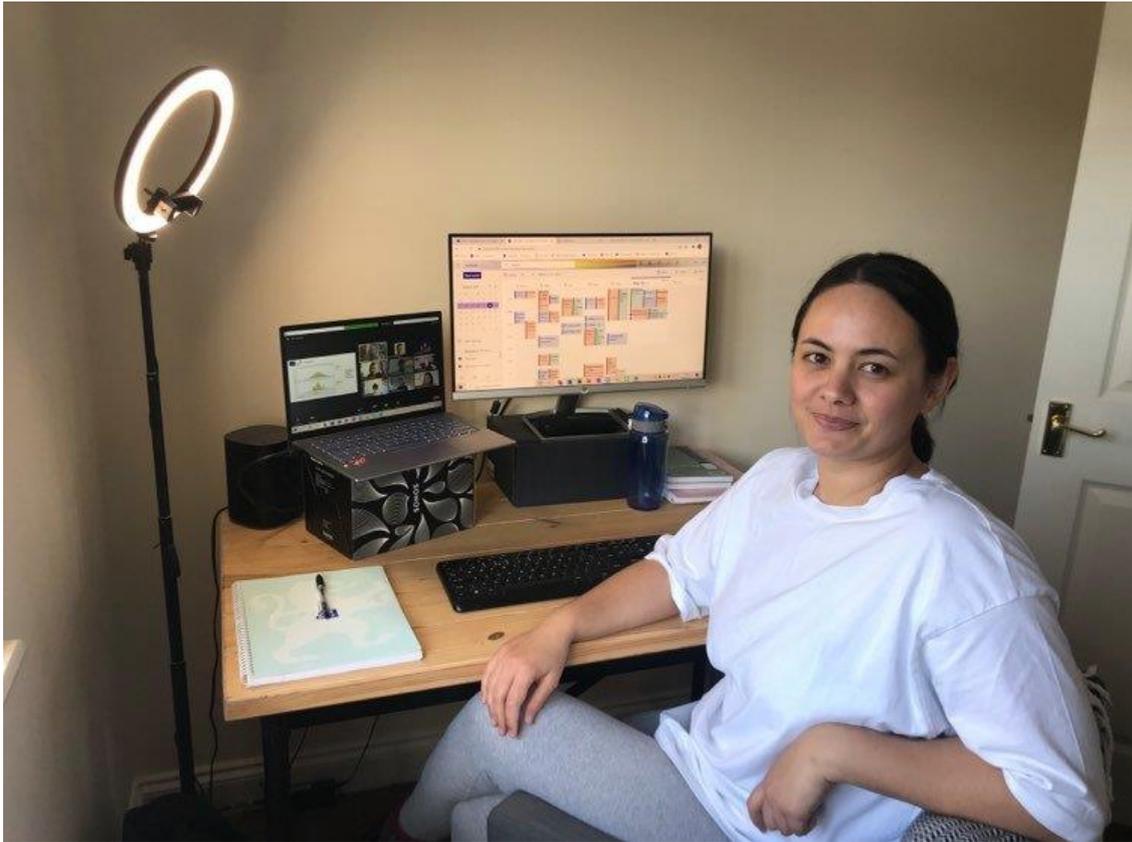
Roimata Claasen
(Ngāti Porou)

312 People, 67 Nationalities



Oxford MBA. Day 1.

A diverse cohort meeting digitally during a global pandemic. Can you find me?



Prepared for online lectures.



Socially distanced in-person lectures; note the plastic screens and masks.



Saïd Business School featuring the winter snow (above) and golden hour (below).





Proud to be a member of St Anne's College.



Beautiful Oxford – a city of spires, lanes and historical buildings.



The Radcliffe Camera.



#ChoosingToChallenge on International Women's Day.