Welcome to Royal Roads University

Congratulations! You have already embarked on a life changing journey, one which will encompass incredible challenges and rewards. Your decision to join the learning community is only the first step and one of the most important things to keep in mind is that you are not alone. Your fellow learners have much more in common with you than you can possibly imagine. The average age of our intake was forty, with sixteen years of real life work experience. Most of our cohort had already started a family, some were even expecting during the first months of the program. Many will be seasoned executives while others will be adult learners without the benefit of an undergraduate degree. The commonality you share is that you have all recognized the opportunity to grow as a person and as a leader in the business community. I would love to share some of my personal experience with you to help you navigate an amazing eighteen months.

Getting Started

The program will start online with two of the four courses that you'll be doing in your first residency (Res 1). The first tool you will be introduced to is “Moodle”, which is an open source online community based learning platform. This is an important tool, and being aware that it is not Royal Roads proprietary software will help to avoid some inevitable frustration on your part. It is simply one of many tools you will use to complete your graduate degree, and if you spend some time familiarizing yourself with how it works it will become your good friend.

The strengths of Moodle are that it allows you to share your ideas and solutions with fellow learners. It keeps a record of your course work and deliverables; essentially, it holds the answers to many of the questions you will have throughout the program - you just need to know where to look. Moodle is, however, not without its limitations. Like each learner is different, each of your course facilitators is different and as such, some of the common Moodle elements will look a little different for each new course you begin. Do not let this get you down! Embrace the change and move forward because getting frustrated will not help you accomplish your goals.

Your course work begins online, so jump right in. Many of the learners in my cohort were paralyzed with the thought of tackling accounting, but accounting is a core skill in every MBA degree around the globe. There are preparatory courses available to help you gain some valuable knowledge and experience if your background does not include any accounting (contact the program office for assistance in registering). The most important thing to remember is: you are not alone. There will be many learners who do have a wealth of accounting and finance experience and the sharing of these experiences is one of the strengths of this program.

RRU has done a great job of putting together a virtual tour of the grounds, the library and writing center as well as many other services available to you. Take the tour (through the MyRRU for Students site), but do not worry. These services will be explained again once you arrive for your first residency, and you will have an opportunity to visit them in person. You will also have access to the learner profiles for your cohort. Spend some time getting to know your colleagues; it will help you once you finally meet in person.
Arriving at Royal Roads for the First Time

One of the things I regret most in my experience is that I did not stay on campus during the residences. I live in Victoria and I chose to commute instead of staying on campus. The first residency is intense, and the twenty or so hours I spent in my car during the three-week period could have been better spent. One of the most challenging things you will need to do is to make sure you park your other commitments before starting the residence. This does not mean that you can’t call your loved ones or check your work email now and again, but you will not have time to solve problems that are not related to your MBA learning. This first residency is an “all-day, every-day” experience and if you are not fully committed it can be overwhelming.

Participation is an important part of the Royal Roads experience, and a significant portion of your grade. Much of the learning that you will do will come from the discussions you have with other members of your team and cohort. Spend some time prior to your arrival reflecting on your challenges at work as they relate to leadership and how your organization functions in general, and be prepared to share these challenges and the solutions you implemented. As far as the marking is concerned, the quality of your participation is much more important than the quantity, so do not feel that you must inject yourself into every discussion.

One of the foundations for success in the Royal Roads MBA program is the team environment. Your learning community functions just like the business community. You will be required to operate in a team of between four and six members, where individual success is difficult to achieve without team success. The bond that you create in your first residence will be very strong, and will help you throughout the entire program, as you will continue to support each other even after you move to a new team. One of the keys to building strong and lasting relationships with your teammates is honesty. You will participate in the creation of a team charter, a document that each of you is meant to honour. If your personal goals do not match your team goals, that conflict can create significant stress. One of the guiding principles of my first team charter was “B’s get degrees”, but if achieving the highest mark in the class is your primary motivation, then your team needs to know.

A great majority of your time will be spent interacting with your team, but make sure to mingle with the rest of your cohort as you will form a new team with most of them at some point during the program. The wealth of knowledge and experience in the room is extraordinary and getting to know these people at least a little will help you once you move to an online learning community.

Completing Residency 1 and Moving to Distance Learning

Once you finally come down from the high of your first residency the reality of life will present itself once again. The challenges you will face to meet your commitments at work, at home and at school will be significant. The pace will be stressful but the support of your team during the first few months will guide you to a successful outcome. Your participation during the distance modules will consist of online discussion forums. I cannot stress enough the importance of being involved in the discussion in a continuous manner. If you wait until the end of the week to read and respond you will be overwhelmed with the sheer volume of information. Create a loose schedule for yourself allowing for twenty or thirty minutes every day to check into the discussion, even if you have not completed all of the reading for the week.
At some point during the program you will need to make a decision about what is most important. Do not obsess about reading every word of every article if it means you only get five hours of sleep. Maintain balance in your life and you will be that much more successful in your studies. At the start of the program the pace is furious! The demands on your time are significant and the learning curve is steep. As you progress through the program you will adjust. You will learn and it does become easier to manage, so hang in there.

Some Tips for Success

- Time will become your most precious resource, so prior to arriving for Res 1, do as much reading as possible.
- The dormitory rooms are not large, so bring only what you need. Having said that, one of my teammates brought his bicycle, which he needed. There is no wi-fi in the student residence building, so bring an internet cable along with a power bar. If you like to hold a document when you read it, you might like to have a printer with you but it is not necessary as there are plenty of places to print on campus. The new LIC building is an excellent environment - there are plenty of places to work, either as a team or on your own and there is always somewhere to plug in.
- A contract company provides the food services on campus, and to be blunt, the food is average and expensive. There is a Thrifty’s grocery store and a London Drugs outlet within five minutes by car (twenty minutes on foot). If your room has a fridge, use it! Pick up some necessities for lunch and snacks. There are several decent restaurants that are not far from the university, either in Langford along Goldstream Avenue or towards Victoria on Sooke Road. If you have a car, Victoria is only fifteen minutes away.
- Bring some comfortable walking shoes or runners. The Royal Roads property is incredible and there are many trails to explore. You will need to stretch your legs and get some fresh air.
- If time is your most precious resource, technology will be your best friend. You will need to be proficient with Microsoft Word, Excel and Power Point. I also recommend Adobe Acrobat Professional as an excellent tool to be familiar with (Acrobat Reader will work for you, but Professional will allow you to make notes in the body of the document if you don’t want to print everything out). Once you move into the distance portion you will need to communicate with your team in real time; we found Skype to be the most efficient tool. Many of my teammates used a tool called Endnotes, for helping with citations. I did it by hand but those who used Endnotes swore by it.
- Ah, citations. There is no need to ask the question, “Do I need to use citations?” Even when your writing is reflective, if you are quoting another author or representing someone’s idea, you need to cite it. Get in the habit of practicing your Chicago Manual of Style (CMOS) citations and by the time you get to your major project you will be a pro. The MBA program has added a course on academic writing, so the CMOS and writing style guidelines will be made abundantly clear. One recommendation I have is not to use ten words when three will do. Practice being concise and you will be able to express great depth in your shorter assignments.
- The library staff is an incredible resource for you, so take notes during their presentation and actually reach out for help when you start your research.
- Create a calendar of your deliverables and set reminders. Moodle makes it easy to export course deliverables directly to Outlook or Mac Calendar, but consider a large poster board stuck to the wall as a constant visual reminder of what you need to get done.
- A word of warning for using Moodle. If you are “EDITING” a post, you only have thirty minutes to make any changes (once you’ve posted), so consider writing in Word and then copying and
pasting. Each Internet Browser interacts with Moodle a little differently, so if it’s not working for you try another. Microsoft Internet Explorer works well, as does Firefox. Safari and Google Chrome do not work well with the text formatting features of the Moodle forum.

Be Open to Change

During the first six months of the program, between my first two teams, we experienced six job changes, two cross country moves, one cross province move, one divorce and one birth. Life will not stand by while you complete your degree, so embrace the changes that are inevitably going to occur. It will help you as you move through the program. I was lucky enough to be able to take time away from work for a significant portion of the program and I put this extra time into supporting my teammates when things seemed unbearable. Remember: you are not alone, so do not be afraid to ask for help. Royal Roads understands that life can sometimes get in the way and the MBA program staff will do everything they can to support you in the successful completion of your graduate degree.

When I look back at my experience over the last two years I am amazed at the changes I have made, not just in my professional life but also in my personal life. The MBA program is truly “Life Changing” and I know that if you persevere and embrace the changes that occur in your life, you will experience a similar metamorphosis. I am thankful for the understanding and support of family and friends, co-workers and teammates, MBA program staff and Royal Roads support staff. Without them, it would have been difficult to complete this amazing journey. If you find yourself wondering, “how can I manage”, or “when will it end”, just remember: you are not alone. Know that you can always reach out and someone will be there to support you. I know several alumni that would be willing to share their experience with you and help guide you through challenging times, so if you ever need someone to give you a nudge, or simply just to tell you how great you are, reach out. I would be happy to help.

Sincerely,

Jason Ripley, MBA Learner 2011-1 (convocation pending; October 2012)