Trains, planes and EMBAs

Discriminating students are prepared for long and costly weekend commuting to study at the school of their choice, writes Rebecca Knight

Tim Pearson, an executive MBA student at MIT Sloan School of Management, once spent 12 hours getting home from his class.

Mr Pearson, who lives in Ottawa, Canada, commutes 200 miles to Massachusetts for the programme, which meets every third weekend over 20 months. One January evening, a combination of bad weather and delays meant his usual eight-hour journey took an additional four hours.

But he was undeterred. “Because I made a focused decision to attend MIT Sloan, anything that happens from a travel perspective is immaterial,” says Mr Pearson, a senior adviser in product management at Ciena, the network systems company.

He is not alone. An increasing number of students enrolled in EMBA programmes — an MBA for working executives, often with weekend classes — are crossing state lines and country borders, and sometimes entire oceans, to reach their courses.

Despite the gruelling commute and the cost of travel and accommodation, students say the decision is worth it.

Last year, nearly 18 per cent of all EMBA students travelled at least 250 miles from their home to school, while 6.5 per cent travelled from another country, according to figures from the Executive MBA Council. In 2008, only 6 per cent of students travelled at least 250 miles to get to their programmes.

“There is a sizeable segment of students which is only going to enroll in a programme that really fits their needs and job expectations and is aligned with their specific interests regardless of where that programme happens to be located,” says Michael Desiderio, executive director of the council.

The rise in super-commuters comes as corporate support for EMBA programmes is on the wane. Only 30 per cent of EMBA students were fully sponsored by their companies in 2010, down 7 percentage points from 2005, according to council figures. About 36 per cent of students receive partial reimbursement and 35 per cent foot the bill themselves.

The industry average cost of an EMBA programme is $65,000; programmes at top-tier schools are priced at about $120,000. Add airline fare, airport parking, hotel costs and other travel incidentals and the figure is much greater. Mr Desiderio says that because students are footing most of the bill themselves, they have become “more discriminating” about their choice of programme, making the added time and expense of commuting negligible.

Besides, he adds, many of these students already travel considerably for work. “If they’re motivated to get this degree, it’s such an intense experience, the travel is just white noise,” he says.

In some cases, the travel is precisely the point. The Trium EMBA, run by NYU Stern School of Management, the London School of Economics and HEC School of Management, includes 10 weeks of classes in New York, London and Paris, while the EMBA Global run by Columbia Business School in New York and London Business School features residential study in both cities.

Paul Bodine, an admissions consultant based in San Diego, says the increasing willingness of EMBA students to travel great distances is part of a “flight to quality that we’re seeing with other MBA programmes”.

“As the market becomes more competitive, people are less willing to put up with lower-ranked programmes,” he says. They want the brand name,” he says. The travel is manageable, he adds because students believe they are investing in a “transformational, career-changing” degree.

Of course the great question for these super-commuters is whether they receive a high enough return on investment upon graduation to make the travel and expense worth it.

Don’t indicate the degree does make a difference, according to the Financial Times Executive MBA ranking 2010, on average graduates from the class of 2007 were earning 57 per cent more three years after graduation than before their EMBA studies.

There is also the networking factor to consider. “Students are joining an exclusive club,” says Mr Bodine.

Indeed, admissions officers say that the prospective network is perhaps the biggest factor behind the decision to study for an EMBA. Since the majority of EMBA students are relatively local, attending a programme in a given city is one way of achieving a ready-made group of professional contacts in that area, says Sylvia Haas, director of admissions for the EMBA programmes at UCLA’s Anderson School of Management.

“They’re with us for 22 months, but that degree, that experience, that network will last a lifetime,” she says.

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