



Graduate shares ‘harrowing but inspirational’ degree success story

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Reunited - Anna Bila and her mum, Inna, enjoying graduation day

There were smiles and tears all round on Thursday when a Lancaster University student from Ukraine was reunited with her mum after a ‘harrowing but inspirational’ journey to achieve an MSc in Business Analytics with a Merit.

Anna Bila, who lived, worked and studied in Kyiv when the war started, was overjoyed to share graduation day with mum, Inna, who made the 2,000-mile trip, following numerous visa complications, 22 hours by train from her home in central Ukraine and a flight, to be with her daughter.

“This holds significant meaning for me as it showcases personal growth and identifies areas for future professional development,” said Anna. “Even two years ago I couldn’t even imagine that this is possible.”

But Anna’s MSc story started in Kyiv on the first day of the war when she recalls waking up at 5am to the sound of explosions. With her family far away in central Ukraine it was, she said, terrifying.

“Thankfully our house wasn’t physically damaged,” she said, “but emotionally we all got a lot of damage. Even though now I am in a safe place I am still afraid of certain sounds.”

Anna was in Kyiv studying for a Bachelor's Degree in Banking at Kyiv National University of Trade and Economics, had a job as a data analyst and, simultaneously, started her Masters studies in Banking Business Management at the same university.

Her mother and family successfully reached out to find people who could help Anna leave Kyiv but she had to cross the whole city to reach them. Eventually after walking for miles and asking for lifts she met them and, with seven people and two dogs packed in one small car, she successfully made the journey to stay with relatives further away from the conflict area.

The initial days, she said, were 'extremely scary' with low-flying aircraft sparking almost constant air raid warnings. Two months later she left for Prague where she was able to continue her studies.

Friends, who had moved to the UK, spoke positively about the experience and Anna decided to make the move.

"I worked as an analyst and wanted to further develop my analytical skills and explore new opportunities and Lancaster University seemed like the ideal place for this," she explained.

"I discovered that the University already had some Ukrainian students and they provided a 'campus tour' and shared positive feedback about their experience."

A challenging whirlwind of preparations then ensued with Anna gaining her English language certification, securing a loan for tuition fees and successfully achieving a scholarship from Lancaster University.

She juggled studies at both Kyiv and Lancaster Universities together with a remote commercial analyst job for a fashion company in Ukraine, to top up her student loan.

She then got a promotion to head up the firm's commercial department and with that came the training of four new employees in her department and many late nights in business meetings.

"The last year was stressful but filled with support from amazing people," she said. "It was a strange experience in many ways - managing daily life while hearing about the danger my family faced from night missile attacks or my friends losing their homes - and you want to help and support but also you have an exam the next day.

“And it is extremely sad and worrying when your mom calls you and tells you not to worry if they don’t answer for a couple of days because they have no electricity. You do really worry about them. The video calls we managed to have were precious. Each moment spent talking to them was appreciated even more.”

And what really helped was all the support she received while living and studying in Lancaster.

“Everyone has been incredibly supportive,” she said. “From friends and neighbours to lecturers and course co-ordinators, everyone has extended a helping hand. I’m thankful I was so lucky to meet all these people.”

The MSc course at the University’s Management School was, said Anna, really valuable and the modules on Marketing Analytics, Data Visualisation and Operational Research were particularly enjoyable and informative.

She praised her supervisor, Dr Nicos Pavlidis, for his ‘amazing support and understanding’ during her research challenges together with the whole lecture team including Dr Ahmed Kheiri and Professor John Boylan.

Lodgings were with Professor Claire Nance, from the Department of Linguistics, who, said Anna, had provided the ‘warmest support’ and whose family had really helped her feel ‘at home’.

But, at times, when things were just too overwhelming, Anna explained how she found help and support from both the University’s student mental health team and the University’s Ukrainian Society.

“They are dedicated to providing all the support they can and it means you don’t have to face challenges by yourself,” she explained.

And looking to the future, Anna, who is now currently working as a data analyst for a clinical research company, is keen to put into practice what she has learned at Lancaster University while supporting Ukraine through donations, aid and sharing cultural knowledge.

She plans to return to Ukraine in due course, as her homeland is where her heart is.

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Anna Bila

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