

Doing Business in South Asia: A Conversation by the Penn South Asia Center on behalf of Current Penn Undergraduates

Today we are talking with Sanzar Kakar, Chairman of Afghanistan Holding Group. He earned his Bachelor's degree from the School of Engineering and is a member of the class of 2005.

It's good speaking with you. You now work in Kabul where you are active in sustaining the Penn Club in Afghanistan. Can we start by having you tell us about how that came about?

I wanted to stay in touch with Penn and expand its network into post-war Afghanistan. Soon after I finished at Penn, like most graduates, I would hear from the Alumni Office about trying to help support the University. I thought one way I could do so was by helping to get an alumni club going here in Kabul, and things then developed from there.

Can you tell us about your path to Penn?

Well, I was born in Seattle, Washington and lived there the first few years of my life until I was about five. When war with Russian broke out, my parents – both doctors - moved to Peshawar, Pakistan to help with the relief effort. So much of my elementary and secondary education I completed in Pakistan. And then, of course, I spent my college years in the United States where I did my undergraduate degree in engineering at Penn from 2001 to 2005 and graduated with a BSE – computer science major and economics minor.

How do your college years connect with your current work?

That is a good question because it is not necessarily in a way that could have been easily predicted. When I applied to Penn, perhaps like a lot of international students, I did not necessarily know a great deal about the school. So once I got to Philadelphia there was a lot to master very quickly. With the thousands of course offerings, I took a wide variety of subjects – from legal studies to Pashtu/Farsi literature. However, while I was on campus I felt it became very easy to get swept up in the fervor during that time—and maybe still, since—around finance. So even though I was in engineering, or maybe because I was in engineering, it was very easy to fall into a flow that I didn't necessarily understand too much about. As a result, it became very easy to just assume that working in finance was the best outcome. This led to me doing an internship at Merrill Lynch during one of my undergraduate summers and then after graduating I joined the firm full time in New York for about a year. Both my parents were working in Kabul, and they called me and said that I could contribute more to Afghanistan than to New York. So I sold everything, packed up 2 bags of clothes

and flew to Kabul.

As someone who had spent most of your education outside of the country, whether in Pakistan or the United States, how did you navigate the personal and professional transition back to Afghanistan?

On arriving in Philadelphia at Penn, while—as I just mentioned—I didn’t necessarily know too much about the world of finance that I soon got swept up in, that is not to say it didn’t open up great opportunities. What I learned at Merrill Lynch and about that world more generally helped me a great deal in my move back to Kabul in early 2006 because what I was doing my first few years in Afghanistan was working in venture capital. In fact, I was helping to run a \$20 million venture fund. With that background, I was then able to take a position as an adviser to the Afghan Attorney General where we were working on a U.S. Department of State/INL program where I created the first criminal case management system, spanning 7 justice agencies. Having worked in the U.S. for a private corporation (Merrill Lynch) in IT related to finance and then for a small startup (Acap Partners) in finance related to law and then for two Governments in law with IT, I had come full circle with my education at Penn. But what I learned was that I really wanted to do something myself – so I founded Afghanistan Financial Services (which was rebranded later to Afghanistan Holding Group).

Can you tell us more about the last step? What has it been like to start your own firm?

Well, I’m the sole owner of the company, and we now have about 180 full-time professional employees – doubling our revenue nearly every year, still seven years on. The first five years of our existence, we were mostly doing Afghan tax-related work. In the last two years though, we have started branching out into other areas like payroll and auditing. Most of our business right now comes from contracts with the diplomatic and other kinds of governmental operations the U.S. has active in Afghanistan. We have grown into providing additional professional services including research, training, compliance, technology and project management.

To switch gears a bit, how would you relate the last ten years of your career since Penn to the education you got at university?

The first thing that comes to mind is that even though I found a certain footing in a career path almost by accident at Penn and even though I was in the engineering track, I always made a point to pursue a broad education. To that end, I took a lot more than just engineering and computer science courses. And in the end, I was all the better for trying to really take advantage of the many opportunities Penn had to offer to its undergraduates.

Outside of my engineering classes, I was particularly enthusiastic about the possibility of language study. So I took beginning and intermediate Pashto in the Department of South Asia Studies. One can't underestimate how important language skills are to working here in Afghanistan. Even in my case, as someone with a background in Pashto but who had spent a lot of my earlier education in other language environments (English and Urdu), it was still crucial that I took the time in college to further hone these skills.

Can you tell us about some of the other classes you had at Penn that you look back on fondly now?

In addition to Pashto, I also studied Persian, another important language for life in Afghanistan—though only at the beginners level. I have often thought back and wished I had found more time for it. Though as an engineering student a lot is expected of you and it was not always practically that easy to find as much time as I would have liked to for all the language study I ideally would have wanted to do. I also remember a very good comparative religion class I took that was focused on Islamic traditions. There was another very interesting course in legal studies that I took with a professor named Nick Constan. I think that, oftentimes, it was the professor rather than just the content that made the biggest impression on me. Overall this was one of the reasons I really treasured the ability to pursue a lot of different types of classes.

What about the work you did as part of your main focus on engineering and computer science? How have those disciplines fit into your current work?

You know, to be honest, I have found that I have not necessarily directly used that much of my education in computer science in my career to date. The focus in the classes for my major was very much on teaching you the theory of computer languages. So while the work I did for the major did give me tools for sharpening my ability to think analytically, the relationship between what I learned and what I have done since is hard to capture because it has been indirect. And I think I would say the same for my advanced mathematics classes more generally. While they were useful tools and skills that I used throughout my career, the majority of the substance was not directly applicable.

Perhaps interestingly the opposite has been true for the classes I took outside of my major. The language classes—both Pashto and Farsi—for me really have been the ones that I have used on a day-to-day basis. The ability to function in these languages is really key here in Kabul. It is a basic prerequisite, for example, even simply for something like hiring people so that the firm can function and exist. So if I were to be able to do my undergraduate education over

again, I really do think I'd do more language. At the time, however, the possibility of such study was not one I was very well acquainted with and nothing necessarily put it front and center on my radar. To the degree that I did try to take advantage of the resources Penn had to offer in such areas of study, my efforts were more ad hoc than was the case with my mathematics, engineering, and computer science classes.

Given your last answer, do you feel there are any particular areas of the curriculum at Penn that could have been stronger for the purposes of helping you do the type of work you now do?

Well, to me, that question really is easier to answer by thinking about how my education has related to life in general, from which one's career is never that separate. To return again to the theme that may be emerging from my answers so far, I think in my humanities classes I would have liked for there to have been even more in depth experiences available. While I really enjoyed the religious studies class I just mentioned on comparative aspects of Islam, for example, the deeper the roster of such classes I think the better. That is not to say that all that was available was Islam 101 but finding something beyond the basics to fit into your schedule does depend on the diversity of offerings.

Especially as someone coming to Penn having grown up in 'the East,' so to speak, one is often coming in with a whole lifetime of experience to that point where it has been culturally drilled in to one's head that one should study to become a doctor or an engineer. And in my case, once I got to Penn, I then suddenly found a whole new set of invisible forces that seemed to be highlighting a career in finance or banking as the only path to take. From the perspective I now have 15 years later, I feel that the deeper Penn's offerings in humanistic areas of study the easier would it have been for me to free myself from these pressures. In fact, I think from my current standpoint, were I to do it over again, I'd definitely major not in engineering but advanced language or some other kind of academic study of religion.

To close, do you have any advice for current undergraduates who might be interested in working in the Afghan context?

I'd definitely recommend that first year students at Penn try to live in the Quad! More seriously, I would say that it can be easy to change one's mind a lot about what to study once you are in college. So without sounding like I am suggesting that people should not find their own passion, I would still say that it can be worth reminding yourself that sometimes it is best to just stick with something and commit yourself to it. To me, there is more harm in constantly switching priorities and not completing at least one degree in 4 years, than to go through and finish what you started.

More generally, I'm a believer in the idea that history really does repeat itself, and, therefore, that having a cultural and historical point of view on your environment is really important. This is one of the reasons I feel that my language training at Penn was so important because language really is a key to any society. Before I started my company, on returning to Kabul I worked for the U.S. Department of State for a time. And they require all employees to undergo a two-week crash course on the history of the country and, as I discovered, the approach and content left much to be desired. I mention this just because it emphasizes that the type of opportunity one has at a place like Penn to learn about other cultures and histories is rare and as you get older it becomes that much harder to really access such opportunities. So it is important to not take them for granted and to make sure you take full advantage of them. Lastly, I'd also say that undergraduates would do well to not just take the most simple or basic classes just to get by with an easier ride. Really trying to focus on the part of the world you want to work in and getting to a deeper level of insight is worth doing at the highest and most challenging level possible – you may not get another chance to do so!