Student life abroad: a 'new' entirely academic African perspective

Kat Akingbade interviews four students from Africa who have come to the UK to study.What has been their experience?

For many, the opportunity to study aboard would be considered one too valuable to miss, where the potential for new and exciting experiences far outweigh any challenges that such a move might pose.

Here, four African students – having swapped the vibrant, dynamic, and agreeable chaos of their native lands for the relatively idyllic semi-rural English countryside – share their accounts of student life at the University of Essex in the UK, a home from home for both the students and their burgeoning academic careers.

Zainab Opeyemi Sa'Idu



Thoughtful, reflective, observant, Zainab is a crossword enthusiast who relaxes in her spare time with light reading. She is 28 and has lived in the UK for less than 1 year.

It is easy to see why the historic county of Essex appealed to Zainab, who by all accounts finds the generally restful atmosphere on campus conducive to productivity. She begins 'Coming from a Nigerian background it's quite different. I'm used to being more formal with academic staff and being from a professional discipline (pharmacy) it's a very strict relationship within the academic setting. I've found that to be different within the UK. Overall its a definite culture change but its relatively easy to adjust as they have no particular restrictions on my school life.'

It would appear that the 'culture change' Zainab eludes to, has made it possible for her to adapt easily to life in Essex. Asked whether she feels she feels genuinely settled in she goes on to say, 'Yes, I do. The University has a host of clubs and societies that you could belong to and I'm currently a member of the Islamic society. Especially being a Muslim in a generally non-Islamic setting, it's very helpful to find easy access to praying rooms and other Muslims. I live in a flat on University grounds so also get to interact with other students and so have friends outside my department."

Zainab has a level-headed approach to her new life in England. For her no aspect of the move has so far posed particularly challenging, although she does seem a little reticent when drawn on this; she is definitely reluctant to complain and it is not difficult to believe that she is more than equal to what she has signed up for, being a student in a foreign land. She has the intelligence and the personality to ensure that her experience will be played out on her own terms.

She quickly points out there is little room for isolation, 'there is certainly an African society within the University organisation, but most of us tend to be more informal and just associate as friends who live together and attend the same classes.' Again, Zainab doesn't want to give the impression that there is any novelty attached to being an African student in the UK, perhaps testament to just how quickly and how well she has adapted to her new surroundings.

As she warms to my questions, a little more of the elegant, reserved, and somewhat cautious young woman emerges. She concedes, 'Initially I felt I would have to work hard at trying to prove myself and convince not just the lecturers but also the fellow students that I'm just as 'good' as they are even though I come from a 'developing country', but I realised it was unnecessary. I'm treated just like any other member of the class including the home students because ultimately that's what we all are: masters in public health students irrespective of ethnicity or previous discipline.'

Her answer is a tad unsatisfying, for me she qualifies everything she says with the skill of a seasoned politically correct professional, however, in fairness she has clearly understood that this goes hand in glove with the culture she has adopted, and her ability to recognise and utilise this is for me clear evidence of her palpable intelligence.

On the topic of the most striking differences between life back home life in Essex, Zainab astutely steers the conversation in the direction of her studies, after all this is why she is here, therefore no tittle-taltle about British weather, whether or not she has seen the London eye, nor what she thinks of the food. 'The experience is extremely different from that back home,' she says. 'Here, you are given more responsibility for your work and tools are available for you to make the best use of. The lecturers are more of a guide to you and more open to questions and ideas, unlike back in Nigeria where unfortunately most lecturers just give you numerous pages of books to memorise and expect you to repeat it during an examination. It's very rewarding to be able to express yourself in class.'

But Zainab is quick to redress the balance, something that is almost a reflex, Nigeria she adds effusively

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is not all bad. 'Nigeria, it's a truly great place to work and I know this because I worked there for 2 years before coming to do my masters. It's true that a lot of times you feel your efforts are not being appreciated but that tends to happen everywhere now and again. I strongly believe Nigeria is capable of making changes. I believe the problem we face in Nigeria is more management than prevention.' It is evident that she cares, she has no plans to 'run away', rather she already has ideas for how the skills she has gleaned during her time in the UK can be put to good use back home.

And as for any advice she may have to offer to students planning to study abroad, she concludes, 'If you can afford it, it's extremely advisable and even if you can't there are lots of sponsorships and grants that are available. The world is dynamic and it would be to your advantage to be a part of that process. You could learn a lot of things from this, not just academically but personally as well.'

I ask whether Zainab knows of any African scientists she would consider role models and I sense sincere bemusement. Iit has never occurred to her that they would be necessary, everyone should be encouraged to celebrate their academic achievements, no one group should be singled out – a girl after my own heart, but ever the politician Zainab is quick to mention scholar Wole Shoyinka who in her words is a 'perfect example of how much potential we have as Africans and we should all be inspired to excel in our chosen fields.'

I am inclined to believe that Zainab will be extremely successful.

Ismail Said



He is at first a little brusque – I am sure unintentionally so –and handles my barking speech and forthrightness exquisitely, allowing an occasional glimpse of friendliness. I find him reassuringly composed. Like Zainab, Ismail is cautious and readily equipped with the standard politically correct terminology.

Ismail enthuses, 'as a foreign student in Britain my culture has helped in creating good rapport and relationship with colleagues and people I came across especially in the aspect of social cohesion and participation. I felt part of the University life. University of Essex is a multicultural society, am a registered member of the Student Union and Islamic Society.' I cannot help feeling as though he is reading from a script and try to get more out of him but he does not deviate.

'We have a large community of African students. For example 80% of my class members are Africans.' He adds. I change tact, what does he think of his degree programme? Has the upheaval been worth it?

He is 30 he tells me, a family man and mature enough to deal with studying abroad. He has spent his entire life in Nigeria and life in England is by no stretch a difficulty.

The interview returns to the academic. 'The teaching is mostly focus on UK health issues and it would better if health matters are discuss in a global perspective.' This Ismail's only indication of what matters to him. He is not just a Nigeria who wanted the chance to escape. Although he is all too aware of the reasons why he has been given the chance to study abroad.

He tells me, 'as a student coming from developing country there is dearth of teaching facilities and manpower but here in university there is up-to-date learning resources (both hard and electronic journal, book, e-databases, and periodical). The teaching staff are always available, helpful and respect you as human.' An interesting addition. He provides additional detail about why he likes the course but I feel they don't add to the discussion.

He is generally impressed by everything the Essex campus has to offer: labs, libraries, computers, and so on. But he is determined to return home.

'I will practise it in my home country Nigeria because I want to transfer the knowledge and experience gained so as to bring change in our tradition belief.' Ismail is part of a growing number of African academics who are keen to see the skills they learn elsewhere benefit the country that nurtured them. He wants to give back.

He gives no clue as to whether he is facing any financial or general living difficulty, in fact this certainly does not appear to be the case. Studying in the UK has proven enjoyable and by no means difficult but this is something that he attributes to directing his focus on the task in hand.

Witness Mapanga



Shamelessly adorable Witness Mapanga cuts a rather different figure to his Nigerian counterparts, he is softer for one thing, carefully spoken with a less discernible albeit equally steely determination.

'I was born in Harare, Zimbabwe and I came to the UK last year (2011) beginning of October, at the age of 27years, and I am categorised as a foreign student.' Every word choice is felt.

Witness is naturally cheerful, this is obvious and all answers are delivered with a smile, and a willingness to oblige,

He speaks about his experience in an even open manner which is soothing. 'My culture has had a positive impact on my experience as a student because I have been able to get along with other students and making new friends and at the same time, it has helped me adapt quickly to the British environment. However, I had difficulties adjusting to their food and weather but, I am now so much into them. A good experience I can say.' I feel it best to let him continue without interruption. 'I do enjoy University life as much as possible when I am relatively free. I do attend different cultural functions that are organised by students of different nationalities. I also enjoy watching sports and doing

physical activities to keep myself in shape. Yes, there is a large community of African students at the university, dominated by Nigerians.' His only criticism seems to be a lack of post graduate opportunities open to foreigners. The expense for one thing will freeze many out denying them an opportunity to learn essential skills and equipping them with the resources to be truly competitive in the professional world.

He cites lost opportunities to understand correct English which will have an impact on the way in which African researchers communicate with the global scientific community and lack of exposure to the best and latest research technology as the greatest problems.

But Witness is thankful for the chance he has been given. 'As a student I do enjoy the experience of new academic challenges because they make me research more so as to find the solutions and by doing that I feel I am doing exactly as what I am supposed to be doing.'

And, like his colleagues his thoughts are with the African country he has left behind. 'I would love to practise in any country in sub-Saharan Africa, especially my own country, because I feel my experience and expertise are more valuable in that part of the world since public health professionals are few compared with the demand.'

As with his approach to the other questions he is enthusiastic in saying 'getting to know new people and a new environment, always has a positive impact on me. I talk to everyone and appreciate people as there are.'

In conclusion he cautions, 'I think a lot more needs to be done in marketing public health professionals to the outside world because I feel there is a lot of areas that need these professionals but lack of marketing hinders recruitment.'

Nwokedike Jennifer 'Jenny' Ogechukwu



Jenny completes the stable of African Masters in Public Health students. A sharp, lively, and extremely bright personality who counts travelling, salsa dancing, and shopping among her myriad hobbies. At 25 years of age, she is the youngest and is also a Nigerian.

I begin with a few questions about cultural differences and the impact this has had. She shrugs, 'We live a communal lifestyle in Africa so mixing up with other people is not a big issue. As a Nigerian that culture really helped me to integrate, work successfully with my course mates, and live with other students from different ethnic backgrounds. I was also involved in student societies and that helped my social development. I learnt new skills. We do have a big community of African students from different countries in Essex University, although we are not very massive but quite significant.'

I try to draw Jenny on what she could share from her own experiences of University life that prospective students back home might find useful to know. She tells me 'I think one of the greatest challenges for most foreign students is integrating into a new system and understanding their learning methods. As a medical student, I had to understand the learning method was different from what I was used to, there was this shift from descriptive to critical analytic writing. I had to drive my own personal development and ask for help when necessary because there wouldn't be anyone chasing me around or monitoring me to ensure I do my coursework or meet deadlines, I had the choice to either work or play.'

She is matter fact, is not asking for favours, does not expect anything to be handed to her on a plate and takes full responsibility for her experience.

I like Jenny, I find her cool, single-minded, and mischievous (in the best possible way). She does not lack energy, drive, or ambition which seem to me an essential and in her case a winning combination.

She describes the university thus, 'The environment is enabling, I like that I have access to information and other facilities that enable me excel in my studies. The social life in the university isn't so boring, there are lots of nice places to relax and meet up with friends after lectures. I have fun and often explore new social activities.' As with all of those interviewed Jenny says she would love to work in Nigeria but qualifies her response with 'at some point'. She is keen to make a success of things for herself before 'giving back' to her home country.

She ends with, 'My advice to other students is that they use their time very wisely, make use of any available resources at their disposal for personal development and use the opportunity to learn more about other cultures and build new relationships.'

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