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Studying in London, a Jamaican's Experience

by Myiah Gauntlett



I kissed my fiancé goodbye at the airport in Jamaica. I was about to depart to London for the first time in my life. It was an emotional experience knowing that we were about to be separated for a year and a half. Sitting in a plane for nine hours did not help the situation that much, as it left too much time for reflection. Upon arrival in London, I boarded a bus to Luton, where I intended to live. The bus ride allowed me to see the beauty and greenness of England's countryside. It reminded me of the words in Elton John's dedication to Princess Diana, "footsteps will always fall here along England's greenest fields..."

Stepping into City University London – Cass Business School was like a dream come true. I always imagined studying in England and although it was not Oxford as in my dreams, City University of London – Cass Business School was like the Oxford of actuarial science to me, and I was proud to be there. There were people from all races and nations at my school, which was much different from living in Jamaica. On the first day I attended a social function where I was able to meet quite a number of different people.

I was impressed by the quality of teaching at the school. There was a certain

standard of decorum that was displayed by the faculty staff. We had two, one-year-long courses, which I thought should be lifelong courses because of the difficulty. They were stochastic calculus and financial mathematics. The other courses were more manageable. Overall the lecturers did a great job.

To attend City University London—Cass Business School I had to travel from Luton to London. The return fare was 18 Great Britain pounds. I realized I had to move as the little money I had dwindled quickly traveling from Luton to London. I ended up sharing a two-bedroom flat in Euston, with four others. For someone who was used to having his own bedroom, it was a bit strange but I quickly adjusted. I shared the flat with an Irish man, a Chinese man, a Thai and a South African. I learned to say, "I love you" to my fiancé in four different languages as one of my flat mates was dating a Korean.

The different cultures in my flat reflected London in general. I felt that the national motto of my country, Jamaica, "Out of many, one people," was more appropriate for London. All of my flat mates helped me in whatever way possible and this included finding a job. I tried three different part-time jobs before I found one that paid enough to cover all my bills. One of my part-time jobs was working at the Chelsea Football Club (Americans call the game soccer). Due to the fact I was good in mathematics, I was quickly promoted to the cash register, which allowed me to watch the games. I learned that soccer is another religion in England. Some good advice: try not to be at the train station when the home team has lost a match.

My main part-time job was working at a Jamaican money transfer agent, which was a home away from home. This job provided me with the extra funds to afford seeing some of the sights of London and England and sampling new activities. I was able to go to the theater, bowling (which we don't have in Jamaica), ice skating (which I'll never do again), and paintball shooting. I also visited the Isle of Wight, and spent a weekend in Telford and Stevenage. These will always be memorable experiences.

I made quite a number of friends. I got to understand why on the passing list you see many Chinese names. My Chinese friends studied hard and worked together as a team, a method I quickly adopted. I met someone of the Jewish faith for the first time. I found out from a Korean friend that all boys in Korea had to join the army at a certain age. He told me about the effect it could have on you. I was especially grateful for the friendships I made with people from Africa. We were able to relate well and their stories brought me so much closer to Africa, the continent of my ancestors many years ago.

We quickly formed study alliances in order to achieve the ultimate prize of being exempted from all nine of the 100 series examinations of the Faculty & Institute of Actuaries and graduating with a distinction. Most people went after just getting six of the nine exemptions, but coming to London to study was a major sacrifice for those from developing countries, so six exemptions was not good enough. We developed a study plan, even gave the plan a special name and went all out to accomplish the goal. Upon graduation, I was lucky to be exempted from all nine exams, plus I earned a distinction.

Another dream was to get actuarial work experience in London. This was more difficult because I needed a work visa, plus it was very difficult to get interviews for actuarial positions. However, on reflection now three years later, I am happy to have come home to my fiancé (now my wife) and family and my current career. This adventure was very worthwhile. My studies abroad gave me a good technical grounding for a career in the actuarial field and the start of my global orientation to an ever-changing world. □

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