

Soft you now, a word or two before you go.

No, this is not the death scene from Shakespeare's *Othello*, but more 'Polonius to Laertes' in *Hamlet*; words of advice to students who intend to study in UK. I am now into the fifth month of a four month contract at ANC Colombo and things are still new. The problems which students encounter as they attempt to develop their careers are still quite clear. This won't be the case twelve months hence when I will be further from the UK system and closer to the Sri Lankan system than I am now. At that time I will not be able to offer such good advice, so read carefully and note well. Before I start, my apologies for the lateness of this advice to all but the stragglers for this academic year. At least my words will be early for those who are contemplating the UK as a study-destination next year.

My first advice is *be early*. At the start of the academic year a university is like a baby's brain, full of neurons which are not yet connected. Freshers' Week is where connections start to be made. People from all over the world meet, interact and make decisions "let's be friends/let's not be friends". I always suggest that new students put additional funds aside to join clubs and societies. Lots of social interactions take place in the Students' Union and in the Union Bar and for those who do not drink alcohol there is always a choice of tea, coffee or soft-drinks. By the end of Freshers' Week lots of the neurons are joined up and friendship groups are established. It takes a long time for the late-arriving neuron to break in, so if this happens to you, don't be surprised. Stick it out, confident in the knowledge that next year you will be an old hand, able to join in and able to help the next batch of Freshers get into the swing of things.

The next advice is *be prepared*. This is not an exhortation to scouts, but just some words to help you to *be early*. Given that international students are big business one would imagine that the Government might be more accommodating. Certainly if Universities UK was a monolithic commercial organisation then they would be facilitated, but they are dispersed and the UK Border Agency makes no allowances. Visa applications appear to be a glacial system subject to whimsical changes where the front-line operatives are frequently not up-to-date with the latest situation. Expediting your case is in your own hands and this is where it pays to *be prepared*. Read the regulations well in advance and check frequently for changes on the UK Border Agency website. Make sure that you meet all the criteria, such as the financial requirements that state that sufficient funds must be in your account for at least 28 days before making an application. Don't forget that after your application has been made there will be a further delay of at least 15 days before you receive your visa. It pays to plan ahead.

Beware the 'rumour-mill'. The rumour-mill has driven me mad during my entire academic career. I want you to imagine teaching a class of fifty students. You set them a piece of course-work which you know can be answered adequately in two pages. Students start gossiping amongst themselves and word starts to go round that in order to get full marks you must fill four pages. Then someone else says "No, no, no. A top mark is never obtained for less than ten pages". Suddenly you find that you have to mark a total of 500 pages of student submission and for what? a piece of coursework that contributes 5% to the final mark in that subject. How long do you think the marking is going to take? Please don't think that I am exaggerating. On at least two occasions this year I have had students at ANC ask me "Is it true that we need insulated boots?" Now UK may be colder than Sri Lanka, but it's not as cold as a US winter. I have never owned a set of insulated boots. Gum-boots (called Wellingtons in UK) might be useful for heavy rain and if there is really slushy snow, then two pairs of socks worn one on top of the other do the job perfectly. After some detective work it was discovered that the rumour about insulated boots did indeed have a reasonable basis. The NCUK International Diploma in Engineering at ANC delivers students in Aeronautical Engineering, Mechanical Engineering, Electrical Engineering and Civil Engineering. During their time at university students in this latter group will be required to go onto building sites. UK safety regulations are very strict, so they will be issued with high-vis jackets and protective head-gear. Steel-capped boots are also a requirement and each student must have their own. I did suggest to our Civil Engineering student that these were probably best purchased in UK as they would absorb a large part of the baggage allowance on any

airline. So when you are preparing, shun the rumour mill and seek advice directly from those who know and not from fellow students who are probably as uncertain as you are.

Be flexible. This year a very large proportion of the engineering students at ANC have opted to study at Liverpool University. There are many ways to travel to Liverpool? Emirates and Qatar Airlines both fly into Manchester airport. If you arrive early or at least on the designated arrival day you will find that many Universities have coaches to take you on the last leg of your journey, but if you arrive late, then you are probably on your own. Don't be tempted to consider (as some of our students did) taking a taxi unless you are fabulously wealthy. There is a rail-station at Manchester airport and you can plan ahead using the web (www.nationalrail.co.uk/). But even here I must issue a word of warning. If you take the Emirates 10.05am flight from Colombo, you will arrive into Manchester at 7.15pm. With emigration, baggage reclaim and customs you will be lucky to be out of the airport by 9pm. Now, there is a train from Manchester airport at 9.41pm that will get you into Liverpool Lime Street railway station at 10.48pm and you will need a taxi for the final kilometre. Consider, if you will that when you eventually get there in a state of complete exhaustion, who will be there to issue you with your room key at that hour of night? As an alternative it might be tempting to take the 3.15am flight from Colombo which should get you to Manchester at 12.25pm, but think of the sleep budget. Unless you are able to get lots of sleep during the flight, then this could be an even more exhausting option. I suppose that what I am suggesting is to do what I do whenever I travel via Manchester and that is to take a hotel room for the night. There are some very reasonably priced hotels at the airport and they are accessible via courtesy buses which stop outside each terminal. When you wake up rested the next morning the bus will drop you back to the airport rail station and you are ready to face your new life as a university student.

Be different. When I was a teenager I didn't smoke simply because the rest of my school mates did. I also remember someone who asked "You like classical music. How do you ever expect to find a girlfriend?" Given that choice, I knew which way I was going to go and stuck to it. Eventually I played the trumpet in the University orchestra where I met lots of young ladies who liked classical music. I suppose that my point is that the majority of people go with the flow, but that may not be in the best long-term interests for any individual. I always remember the many Spanish students who came to Dublin to learn English when I was an undergraduate at Trinity College. They all stuck together, speaking only Spanish for the duration of their stay; a waste of their parents' money. At the present moment there is some admirable private enterprise in my UK hometown, where a number of rich Chinese students have bought properties and have had these converted so that fellow Chinese students can pay to come along, chill out and feel at home. Again, I ask whether this is the best way to maximise the benefits of being an international student. The path for the one lemming who goes against the crowd can be a lonely one, but in the end, it can be the more rewarding. As Milton wrote in *Lycidas* "Tomorrow to fresh woods and pastures new". What could be more exciting?

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