



**FROM CHILDHOOD DREAM TO REALITY:  
MY EXPERIENCE AS AN INTERNATIONAL STUDENT IN THE UK**

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**Introduction**

The idea of studying abroad is usually seen as challenging. Potential students have to speak the home language proficiently and be ready for cultural, climate, lifestyle and educational system differences. There exists a myth that international students will not be able to succeed to the same degree as domestic students. Despite these potential limitations, I never considered studying in my country and always dreamed of studying abroad. I am from Turkmenistan in Central Asia, a country which is famous for its beautiful carpets, horses and hospitality. My hometown, Ashgabat, is approximately 2935 miles away from the United Kingdom. The aim of this article is to give an insight into my experience as an international student in the UK.

**Before my Journey to the UK**

I remember how I decorated my computer desk with the flags of different countries, dreaming that eventually I would end up studying in one of them. Among these flags, there was a flag of the United Kingdom, but I never even imagined studying here would be possible, as although education in the UK is really good, it is expensive, and it is hard to obtain a visa for people from developing countries.

I always aimed to study abroad but for that, good grades at school were not enough. My application had to stand out from all the other applications because I needed to achieve a scholarship to do it. So, since the very beginning of my school life, I started attending different extracurricular activities to enhance my skills and knowledge. I attended a music school for seven years and graduated in 2014; at the same time I also attended various language and math courses, preparing to take international examinations. Consequently I now speak Russian, English, Turkish and my native Turkmen languages. All of these commitments eventually helped me to manage my time better and set realistic goals for university.

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In my last year of school, I registered for international tests such as Scholastic Assessment and English as a Foreign Language, hoping to achieve good results and apply for scholarships. My results were good, but they were not enough to secure a fully-funded place. By the end of the school year, I was planning to take a gap year to find a job and keep preparing for exams to undertake them again. During my final examinations at school, my mother suggested that I apply for the government funded scholarship program. In order to apply the applicants had to provide extensive evidence, starting with healthcare certificates and ending with an offer from a good-ranking university. I chose to apply for Law through this program because I was always interested in the civil and human rights of people and how it relates to government institutions. Eventually after many applications I received a conditional offer from the University of Plymouth. To get the scholarship, the applicants had to pass an examination in relation to the main subjects which were taught at school, as well as an interview. I did not think that I would achieve this, as this programme was relatively new for our country and I believed that there were many applicants better than me. However, I passed, and this is how my dream started to transform into reality. I was going to leave my country and study in Plymouth.

### **The Path to Studying Law**

Soon I received my unconditional offer. I was not able to start my degree immediately at the University of Plymouth, because I was advised to apply for a foundation course at the University of Plymouth International College, due to the differences in educational systems and requirements. In my region schools are not divided into stages, there are no examinations similar to A-levels, no grammar or private schools and the school starting age is different. Although I was four weeks late for the commencement of my studies, due to a delay in receiving my visa, I was able to catch up with the college programme quickly. The first semester covered common subjects like ICT and Business Studies. In the second semester, law students were divided from the others and subjects like English Legal System, Contract Law, Constitutional Law, and Legal Writing started. The modules were designed to give students an introduction and a basic understanding of each of these areas of law. In the beginning, I was concerned about my analytical and research skills as at school, information was simply memorised without further analysis, research or understanding. I was also worried about my writing skills, as the biggest piece of writing that I had done previously was not longer than 500 words and it was in my native language. In these modules, we were expected to complete essays and problem-solving questions in order to pass, where all the skills that I was concerned about were required. Despite my worries, I was able to develop these skills and

discover areas of law that interested me. In particular, I enjoyed studying constitutional law because of the way history intertwines with law. As a result, I successfully passed all the assessments and proceeded to enrol on the law degree at the University of Plymouth.

### **Cultural Differences and Adaptation Stage**

Even though I was succeeding in my foundation studies, it was hard to get used to life in the UK. As I was late arriving, it was hard to find friends because it seemed that everyone had already formed friendship groups. I was also facing differences outside of my studies; for example, in my hometown, I used to shop for groceries in bazaars and even though we had supermarkets similar to Tesco and Sainsbury's, it was not common for me. I liked to shop in bazaars, because unlike supermarkets, the minimum amount of plastic is used there, and everything is organic and fresh. I was also pleasantly surprised that people are so well-mannered and polite in the shops and on the streets. People in my country are also polite and respectful, but it is not usual to hear something like "here you are, my love" in the shop or elsewhere, unlike the UK. Another challenge for me was getting used to left-side traffic. In my region the traffic is on the right-side, so for the first weeks, I often looked in the wrong direction while crossing the road.

During the cold, windy days in Plymouth, I missed my warm, sunny country. I remember how Plymouth used to seem too small for me, as my hometown is about four times bigger than Plymouth. However, I did not realise how quickly I started to like the flow of life in Plymouth. I like the way that people seem to be relaxed and do not rush anywhere. I also like that everything is close by, so it is not necessary to use public transport every day. Eventually, I was able to make some friends, start a new hobby and enjoy my studies and life here to its fullest.

### **Induction Week**

This year I was very excited to start my studies at the University of Plymouth. I knew that there would be a higher number of students studying on the degree course, compared to the number of students on the foundation course. I also knew that most of them are domestic students and that is why I was worried about not being able to understand or communicate properly. These worries dissipated quickly, as I was able to make some friends and answer the questions in introductory sessions easily. The staff of the faculty were welcoming and ready to help with any queries or questions the students may have. I also liked the size of the law school; it is compact, so everyone has a chance to engage in tutorials or other discussions.

## **The First Modules**

The very first module that is taught to the law students is Introduction to Law. The first lecture took place during the induction week. This was the first time I had a lecture with more than 150 people in the lecture theatre. During the module, we covered the basics of the English Legal System. Some themes like sources of law and courts in English Legal System were familiar to me, as I had already covered them during my foundation course. However, there were some new topics and terminology that I had never heard about before. The course was very dynamic, as it was designed to introduce the most essential parts of the legal system in order to succeed in the following modules. I was a bit worried about the first assessment because there were lots of new details and as the final exam was weighted at 100 percent of the module mark. Despite my worries, the examination was straightforward, and I achieved a first-class mark. After the completion of Introduction to Law, the module was followed by Contract Law and Legal Systems and Skills. I find both of these modules interesting, as they make me think of legal problems from an angle I had never thought about before and also improve the essential skills needed to succeed in a law degree.

## **University of Plymouth Law Society and other extracurricular activities**

It is the expectation that law students are not only successful in their studies, but also to be active outside of studies, as the legal sector is very competitive and our applications or curriculum vitae have to stand out. I was therefore eager to join the University of Plymouth Law Society (UPLS). UPLS offers a range of competitions like debating, mooted, negotiation, client interviewing and a mock trial. As I am planning to work as an in-house solicitor after the completion of my studies, I signed up for negotiation and debating.

All of the competitions offered by UPLS require teamwork, excellent communication and public speaking skills. I was nervous and excited before the first rounds of these competitions, as my ability to work in a team and public speaking skills were relatively weak. The first competition was debating, which is based on a motion that is given for proposition and opposition. Negotiations are based on a fictional scenario where two teams negotiate to reach an agreement on behalf of their clients. During the competitions, I was able to recognise my weak points, work on them, improve my public speaking and teamwork skills and discover my passion for negotiation and debating. Although my teams were not able to reach the quarterfinals, I had an invaluable experience that I believe will help me to develop the skills I need to succeed in the future.

UPLS also organizes additional seminars, talks, lectures, and networking events. I attended some lectures organized with the University of Law and Aspiring Solicitors. One of them was about how to choose the right area of law and the law firm for you. I found it very interesting, as I did not know much about the practice areas and sector focus before. The Aspiring Solicitors lecture was about interviews, application forms and what graduates legal firms prefer to hire. I also liked the panel discussion on the effects of Brexit; it helped me to understand Brexit in more depth than what is reported in the media. Recently I attended the 26<sup>th</sup> Pilgrim Fathers lecture delivered by the Lord Chief Justice, Lord Burnett of Maldon. The lecture was about the High Court, its divisions and its history. It was interesting and fascinating because I had never attended anything like this before and the students were able to meet and talk to Lord Burnett after the lecture. There are many other upcoming events in the future organized by UPLS and I am eager to be part of them.

### **Conclusion**

My experience as an international student has so far been immensely positive. Despite all of the fears and challenges for an international student, education in the UK is attainable and possible with hard work and commitment. It can provide a good foundation for a bright future and career. I hope to learn and discover as much as I can during my time at the University of Plymouth, in order to share my knowledge and skills with others. I am grateful to be given this opportunity to study in one of the top 1000 universities in the world, discover the culture of the UK and share the culture of my country.