

A story that shines a light: My Journey as an International Student from Nigeria during second wave of COVID-19

by Stephen Alabi- Project Shine a Light Officer UoS

The Decision to Pursue My Dreams Abroad

Leaving behind the familiar for the unknown is never an easy decision. As a student from Nigeria, I embarked on a life-changing journey to pursue a Master's in Public Health at the University of Sunderland during the second wave of COVID-19 pandemic. Little did I know, this decision would lead to a transformative experience filled with challenges and triumphs.



My Arrival to UK

Overcoming doubts and taking charge

Before my departure, I encountered scepticism from the private educational agency in Nigeria. They tried to discourage me from paying my tuition in full upfront, but I was determined to find the best path. Thanks to the internet, I discovered that the University of Sunderland allowed only a four-month instalment period, from September to January. I also realized how almost impossible it would be to raise such a huge amount within just four months. Armed with this information, I made the full financial commitment to my tuition fee.



A World of differences

The culture shock hit me the moment I landed in Sunderland. The extremely cold and windy weather compared to the warm climate back in Nigeria. The urgent need to change my clothing to suit the new weather and the new culture around me. I also experienced difficulties with the mapping, transportation and the accent. The new educational system was completely different from what I was accustomed to in Nigeria. It was a challenging transition.

Unforeseen challenges accommodation and employment

In addition, I had initially assumed that finding accommodation and a job would be straightforward, but reality hit me hard. Landlords were demanding guarantors and significant financial commitments, while employers sought UK-based experience. The obstacles seemed insurmountable.

Turning the tide: Finding support and community

My salvation came in the form of International Student Support. I discovered I was eligible for an accommodation scholarship that allowed me to live rent-free for a year. This was a lifeline I desperately needed at that time.



Navigating academic hurdles

Arriving a month late into my program, I'd missed the induction. Yet, the university's catch-up induction program proved to be invaluable, helping me bridge the gap. For my assessment, academic writing and dissertation, the library support was exceptionally useful.

Battling isolation and low-level Depression

My routine, once broad and diverse in Nigeria, narrowed down to a straight line from class to my lodge. This abrupt shift triggered mild depression, anxiety, and a profound sense of isolation. My failure to secure a job and being stuck indoors after classes added to my challenges.



Finding my place and purpose

I decided to break free from my isolation. I signed up for volunteering activities within the university and locally within Sunderland community. I engaged in student representative activities with the Student Union and connected with fellow students facing similar experiences.

Triumph and recognition

My journey's turning point was becoming a Course Representative of the Year in 2021-2022 and the Vice President of the Nigerian Student Society. I received a Vice Chancellor's recommendation letter and an award for the best course representative. The Student Union became my refuge and my source of motivation.

Forging a path forward

By May, before the end of my program, I had secured my first job as a Biomedical Scientist with the NHS, thanks to Sunderland Futures, now Employment and Enterprise Hub.

Shining a Light

My network within the university opened doors for me, and I now serve as a **Project Officer on 'Shine a Light.'** This initiative guides students from various ethnic backgrounds through their academic journeys, showcasing the plethora of support services available. **It's all about shining a light on mental health.** A project that aims to support students, **both home and international**, from other ethnic minority background such as African, African-British, Indian, Indian-British, Arab, Arab-British, Pakistani, Pakistani-British, Gypsy, Traveller, Roma, Showman, Boater, Afro-Caribbeans. The Shine a Light projects intends to get these students closer to different University services and encourage all through their student journey with hope that they can have a smooth university experience.

The Support System That Matters

As a student, I've been privileged to help other students access services like **Wellbeing support, Counselling, Financial Guidance, and International Student Support.** The University of Sunderland takes pride in its commitment to every student, offering a range of services that cater to unique needs.

In retrospect, my journey as an international student from Nigeria during the COVID-19 pandemic has been a rollercoaster of challenges and triumphs. It's a testament to the power of determination, community, and the unwavering support of a university that cares deeply about its students' success. My hope is that my story will inspire others to pursue their dreams, no matter the obstacles they face, and to take full advantage of the invaluable resources that our university offers to support and nurture an unforgettable academic journey.

For Wellbeing support: email wellbeing@sunderland.ac.uk

For more information on project- Shine a Light: Stephen.alabi@sunderland.ac.uk

To participate in the on-going Mental Health Creative Competition: Send a Dm on Instagram to @studentsupportuos

For information on various student services available: Stephen.alabi@sunderland.ac.uk

