

# Cold comfort and stimulating studies: reflections of a Nigerian student in the UK

What are the challenges of studying in a European country? Kat Akingbade caught up with a postgrad from rural Kwara State, now studying in London

Nigerian born Issa Muraina, mid 30s, is a second year PhD research student at King's College London, in the UK. His research interests lie in the area of Biomedical Nutritional Toxicology, a considered choice in light of his background in veterinary medicine. His early graduate research focused in particular on the toxicology of disease, and the development of vaccines for humans in contact with animals; for communicable disease control.

When I meet Issa, on less than 24 hours notice, he has made hasty preparations for me to interview him in his office. He is in the middle of running some experiments in his lab, which, he explains are sensitive and prone to contamination, otherwise he would have allowed me to speak with him there.

His office, a small rectangular box, is stuffy and overly warm but thankfully has a window and desks lining the walls. The whirring of the computers and the proximity of one's neighbours, I fear, must make the room a nightmare when stocked with its full compliment of brainiac boffs. Today we're joined by one other, a nameless colleague who after nodding a hello, keeps his back to us and his head down. I guess that the room holds about six people in total and I try to hide my alarm. Issa explains that he spends most of his time in the lab and only uses the office to do paperwork and go online.

While not exactly self deprecating, Issa is modest to a fault, and with a shy smile, begins to recount to me, his remarkable journey (although not in his eyes), from his rugged rural village in Nigeria to the Waterloo Campus of King's College, University of London.

He was born and raised in Kwara State, Nigeria, where he developed a love for animals at an early age.

---

Kat Akingbade is a post-graduate student studying medical anthropology at Oxford University in the UK.



They made up part of his landscape and being the sort of man who has an appreciation for everyone and everything around him, it made perfect sense for him to pursue a career in veterinary medicine. He is com-

pletely artless when he tells me that in Nigeria even the poorest people who have nothing can beg for help, but that animals have nothing, no voice, no saviour. In that moment I am struck by his warm and obliging nature.

We begin the interview with Issa describing his career in Nigeria. After he qualified as a vet, he was snapped up by the federal government to work as a research officer at the National Veterinary Research Institute,

Vom, in Plateau State. He loved the work but he began to grow restless, and frustrated by the seemingly endless interruptions to his research, due to woefully limited resources, he sought to travel abroad to pursue new and more challenging academic experiences.

Issa took to the internet and began to thoroughly investigate research opportunities overseas. 'I spent a lot of time online [sic.], I was inspired by the nature of the research in the UK,' he tells me. Within a short while, he had found a programme of research that suited his needs and also met, online, a professor (now his PhD supervisor) who provided a willing ear for his ideas.

I ask Issa about what came next; now that he had decided what he wanted to do and where he wanted to go, how did he bring it about?

'The process was not, easy, in fact I would say that, it was a real challenge. But I am a single-minded man and anything I set my mind to I achieve. I made sure that I was completely clear in my mind about where I was going. In fact I did a lot of research.' Thorough research seems to be something of a theme, and I do not underestimate the significance of this for an instant.

He continues, 'at first I was a bit discouraged because

of all the research opportunities available, only a few were open to non-UK and EU students, and then there was the eligibility criteria. But I remained focused on what I wanted to do. And then there were the fees.'

He was accepted onto the Masters course by a research programme with the Department of Nutrition at King's College London, one he describes as a momentous and uplifting experience. He shakes his head at the memory and looks into the distance as though he is suddenly aware of how fortunate he has been, 'I was lucky, very lucky.' I decide not to interrupt him.

'Truly I was one of the lucky ones. When I finally found one of those courses, I submitted my proposal to the university and they liked my ideas. And then I applied for some financial assistance (scholarships) and I got some help, and I thank God. I say that it is because of God that I have this opportunity.'

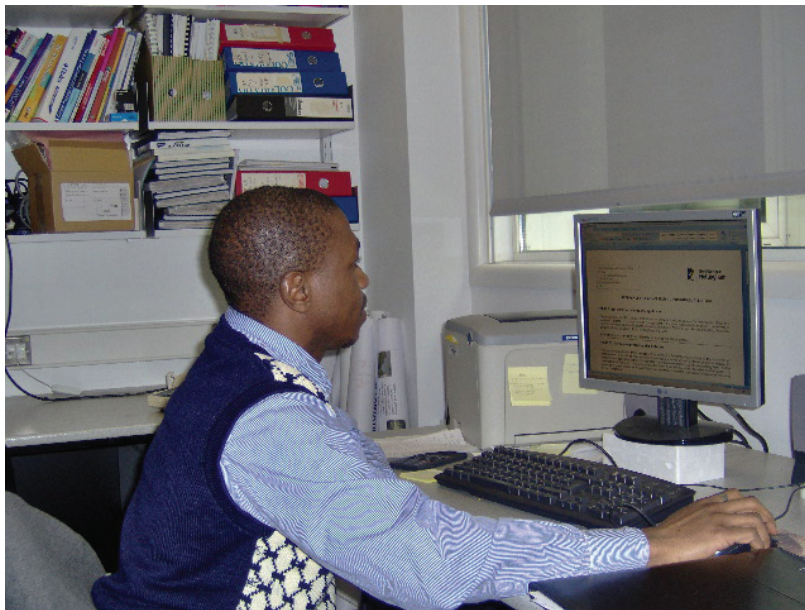
I probe him further on this. Attributing his success to God would, after all, be of little comfort to anyone who has no such faith to fall back on.

He tells me that he graduated just shy of a first class undergraduate degree and a distinction in his Masters programme. This coupled with an impressive work record, an impressive research proposal, and a dossier of recommendations from university tutors, employers, and government officials, seem a more plausible explanation for his success, but I decline to tell him so.

Issa explains that for a moment he was shaken when he realised that the crucial scholarship support was open to students not just in Nigeria but around the world. He was uncertain of his success and was again thankful to God when he won a scholarship. His deep-rooted modesty surfaces instantly when I mention that he must have been an outstanding candidate; that my own research indicates that the overseas graduate research grant which Issa received, awarded by King's College, attracts about 10000 applicants per annum. He says 'no, I thank God.'

He continues that his offer of a place and the scholarship were by no means the end of the story. He applied for a student visa and was accepted, but he points out that he made sure that every conceivable document that may have been required was ready and waiting for inspection. Also he had travelled before and had been certain to adhere to any imposed regulation. Issa I am learning is meticulous and his attention to detail exemplary, and it has clearly stood him in good stead. I tell him I understand the semantics of what he is telling me, but that I want to hear the human side of the story; was it a culture shock, was he ready?

'I took the bull by the horns,' he says, 'I had to leave Nigeria. What people don't realise is that if you are serious about your work, and if you want to make progress, you have to leave Nigeria. In my country you wait for



materials to run some experiments and your research can be delayed by up to a whole year. I saw that it was taking people 5 years to complete a Masters, or 10 years to complete a PhD, I didn't want that to happen to me. I had to get out and I wanted to come to England. And I made it clear that I would return to my country and use my knowledge to help others.' His recital is touching and I believe his passion.

I ask him how much of a culture shock the experience has been. 'Well,' he says with a laugh, 'if I had known what it was like I wouldn't have taken so much for granted.' The idea of Issa taking anything for granted I find utterly astonishing.

'I believed that I would come to England and get a job to sustain myself and that everything would be OK. But when I came I had to meet the shortfall in the scholarship funding, which was £8000 per year. It's a long story but luckily for me, my supervisors decided to help me and we set about applying for other sources of funding. I also had saved £5000, which I had planned to use to sustain myself, but this money was with my employer who told me that because of the credit crunch there was a scarcity of sterling in Nigeria and there was some delay in sending the money to me. Ah, it was a difficult time; when I started my course there was a lot of pressure for me to pay the outstanding fees and I was suspended from my programme.' I ask him what impact that had. 'Well, I was very lucky, if I had been on a taught programme it would have been a problem. But because I do research I stayed at home and worked.'

Eventually, his money woes were sorted but Issa offers a stark warning, 'no one coming from Nigeria should take it for granted that they will be able to manage. I think very seriously that if I did not have the academic background and the support then my experience would be very different. I live with my aunt here in England but the journey is a 4-hour round trip every day and it gets hard when you are studying all the time.'

I ask him about a social life – has he made any friends in the year and a half that he has been here?

'No. I don't have time, I spend all my time in the library or in the lab or at home. I have no friends.'

He doesn't complain though and is still smiling when he tells me this.

I ask about culture and how he would define his UK experience so far and whether he has any advice for students who wish to embark on a similar journey.

'Well, people talk about the weather, the recent snow was a complete shock for me, but I loved it. I have only seen it on television, and I have a warm jacket and there are heaters at home and here, and on the bus so it was OK. I was lucky though because I worked in the coldest part of Nigeria and got acclimatised to cold weather, but then it only ever got to 10 degrees, I have never heard of minus temperatures before. And

then the food, well, I like it, my favourite is burgers and chips. But where I live there are lots of Nigerian shops so I still have my amala and my pounded yam; the only problem is the cost!'

He takes a moment to consider his response before adding, 'I think anyone coming from Nigeria should really be realistic about life abroad. We have the impression that you will come to England and find work and everything will be fine, but the process I went through to get here was very long and a challenge. It is only because of how single-minded I was that I made it, but it was not easy and it is easy to give up. Also if I didn't have my aunt here I don't know what I would do. I would be suffering now. My savings that I had planned to use to sustain myself was swallowed up to pay my fees. I know that if I didn't have the support I had my story would be very, very different. The visa and all of that was straight forward and applying for the course and looking for funding. Its just the time it takes that might discourage some people and I think it you are not focused you will give up. The system only supports the serious minded But I like England, I like the security. I can travel to and fro at any time of night and nothing bad happens to me, I have no fear of being molested. I like the people, they are friendly, Overall my time here is positive.'

I wrap up by asking if there is a wife, a girlfriend or children back home, I want to know why he works so hard, who its all for, and for the first time he is visibly uncomfortable and reticent. 'Um, can I say that is a private matter?' I assent. The warm smile returns and I conclude the interview.

Issa Muraina is a dedicated, intelligent, personable man who having recently been awarded his PhD status has his eyes firmly fixed on his goal. He has no time to be distracted by the bright London lights and it would seem that one thing he keeps constantly in mind is the reality that his life may have been completely different had he not had God and luck on his side.

I find myself somewhat inclined to agree.