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# **The learning experiences learner development and work experience of studying abroad in England and my future career as a forensic psychologist**

When I think about the knowledge and skills that I have acquired during the past three years, I can't help but feel excited about my future career, proud of my achievements and grateful to my family, for having supported me in every possible way. Even though my parents have always encouraged me to educate myself and to seek new opportunities, as an international student, I have faced several difficulties during my studies in England. My ambition and desire to become a successful forensic psychologist are the main reasons why I left my country and gave up the opportunity to work with my family. Even though I was relatively satisfied with my life before leaving my country I felt the need to challenge myself in order to realise my full potential. That is why, when I was seventeen, I moved to England alone, where I completed my college education. At that point, I had already developed a strong passion for forensic analysis, to the extent that I spent a significant part of my spare time watching crime documentaries and reading books about forensic science and psychology, which contributed to heightening my interest in finding out why people behave in certain ways and how individuals with criminal tendencies can be examined and evaluated. I decided to specialise in forensic psychology after attending a lecture about this subject and now that I am about to complete my degree in psychology and criminal behaviour, I must say that I am glad I decided to pursue this particular subject.

## **Learning Experiences**

When I started university, I was particularly interested in criminal investigative methodology, which is probably why I enjoyed every lecture related to this subject, especially geographical profiling and eyewitness identification. My strong interest in these topics encouraged me to read books in my spare time and to entertain discussions with other people after each lecture. Since I have always found it easier to memorise concepts through visual stimuli, I used videos and images portraying the notions taught during the course to gain a better understanding of how they could be applied to real-life situations. For example, after attending a lecture on eyewitness identification, I watched several videos on YouTube which covered most of the topics addressed during the lecture, including eyewitness misidentifications and methods to test eyewitness memory. Thinking about the numerous concepts that I have had to memorise during the past three years, I can definitely conclude that videos and films have been an important part of my learning strategy. However, thanks to the vast amount of visual resources available online, I have always been able to access a variety of films, videos and documentaries for little or no cost at all.

As an international student whose native language is not English, language is one of the major challenges that I have encountered during my studies. To be more precise, any tasks involving listening and / or speaking have always been very difficult for me, as my vocabulary is not particularly rich and I must always pay extra attention to what is being said in order not to misunderstand my interlocutor/s. My ability to stay focussed and concentrated for a long time has certainly helped me a lot during lectures, as even when I heard a term for the first time, I managed to infer its meaning by identifying context clues. While speaking and listening have

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always been quite challenging for me, I do not mind writing in English and am quite proud of the significant progress that I have made in this field thanks to my studies. In fact, writing allows me to collect and organise my ideas in my own time, research new terms, enrich my vocabulary and double check what I have written in order to make sure that those who will read it will find it understandable. Speaking in English and listening to English-speaking people, on the other hand, requires more effort and attention, especially if you are the kind of person who is too embarrassed to ask others to repeat what they have said more than once.

My English dictionary is another tool which has certainly played a fundamental role in helping me to understand and learn new words. For example, lecturers often use presentations to support their statements and help students understand certain concepts; thanks to my portable English dictionary, every time I come across a word which I have never encountered before, I can easily look it up in just a few seconds and write down its meaning. After each lecture, I always revise my notes and repeat all the words that I have written down out loud in order to memorise them. Lecture slides have also proved extremely effective during the revision process. This is because memorising all the theories and key points illustrated during lectures can be difficult and one may not be able to write down every single concept introduced by the lecturer. Therefore, being able to access concise slides after each lecture has made it easier for me to memorise relevant notions.

Similarly to the aforementioned learning strategies and tools, effective time management has assisted me with my studies, by allowing me to organise my activities and tasks more efficiently. As Williams (2011) observed, time management is crucial to academic success, which is why it is important that students stick to a carefully-planned routine. I personally believe that studying independently, outside of lectures, can be very beneficial, as long as one learns to manage their time efficiently. In spite of a few initial difficulties, during the past three years I have certainly learnt to appreciate the value and usefulness of time management, which I am sure will help me maximise my productivity in the future.

## **My learner development**

For my first assignment, I chose to discuss the problems that we face when trying to detect deception, and what empirically-based techniques can be used to improve our lie detection abilities. Before starting to write, I read a book called 'What every BODY is saying' (Navarro and Karlins, 2008), which gave me some excellent ideas regarding the topics and areas that I should have covered in order to produce a good essay. I also read other texts related to deception, which gave me enough confidence to begin my essay. After submitting my work, I received some useful feedback which highlighted a number of areas of improvement. I analysed the comments and realised that English was one of my greatest weaknesses. To be more precise, the lecturer's feedback suggested that I needed to seek assistance in academic English writing in order to achieve higher grades. With regards to the contents of my essay, I obtained an A and B range for the body of the essay, a C range for the Introduction and a B range for the Conclusion section. Unfortunately, I got an E in both written English and Referencing, which resulted in an overall grade of C-. In spite of my initial disappointment, I tried to keep a positive attitude and realised that improving my written English had to become one of my main goals. Therefore, I asked PAD for help. After checking my grammar and reading every sentence, the tutor suggested that in order to improve my English, I should have read more articles and tried to rewrite each paragraph in my own words. Considering that inaccurate

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references had also contributed to my C-, I made a commitment to learn how to use APA referencing before undertaking a new written assignment.

## Work Experience

Firstly, I am a very sociable person who likes communicating and interacting with people. During my last holiday, I worked as an activity leader for ISIS Education and Travel, which enabled me to interact with people aged between 11 and 17. This experience strengthened my communication and problem solving skills, as I had to be friendly and kind to everyone whilst identifying their requirements and needs under various circumstances. I have also gained a better understanding of how younger people think and attempted to address any problems they had by giving them my personal advice. While I usually interact with people my age, my job at ISIS Education and Travel gave me the opportunity to learn how to communicate with younger people, who were definitely more playful and less serious than me. In spite of our differences, I certainly enjoyed taking with them and answering their questions. In order to connect with them, I shared some of my personal experiences from when I was in secondary school and tried to use my stories as tools to make them understand the importance of education and hard work.

Besides being an effective communicator, I am also capable of managing time and setting priorities in order to enhance my productivity and achieve better results. I have to admit that before moving to England, I had never really appreciated the value of time management. However, studying in a foreign country has motivated me to develop and acquire new skills, which is why I have been pressuring myself to learn many new things, whilst pursuing my degree. Social learning theory states that human behaviour can be understood by observing and imitating others. (Griffin, 2006) As a result of that, most of the activities that I have undertaken during the past three years involved some sort of human interaction, as I wanted to be able to observe others in order to become a better problem solver. That is why I have been working part time as a customer assistant at Chingland Travel Agency in Luton.

My work experiences have brought motivation and excitement into my life, whilst allowing me to strengthen my decision making and problem solving skills, form interpersonal relationships and adapt my communication style to various circumstances. I am certain that the skills that I have acquired through my work experiences will help me with my future career and will contribute to my employability. In fact, being used to interact with many different people, I will be able to adapt to any work environment and to get along well with different groups of people.

## My future career

As mentioned previously, my goal is to become a forensic psychologist. In order to enrich my knowledge and enhance my employability, I intend to dedicate a significant part of my spare time to extensive reading; while I have already identified the books that I would like to read, I haven't been able to start reading them yet due to my busy schedule. I am also interested in technology, which plays a very important role in examining criminal behaviour. For example, tools like the polygraphs can be used in forensic psychology. Furthermore, I am trying to make myself more qualified in specific academic areas, with the purpose of successfully applying for a Master's Degree in psychology. Although I am eager to make a difference in forensic psychology and have been studying hard in order to succeed in this field, I still don't feel confident enough to enter the job market. That is why I intend to continue my education, as I am

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sure a Master's degree would allow me to acquire more knowledge and skills, thus giving me the confidence to finally "get out there".

## **Progression**

Considering how this year started, I am currently feeling a lot more positive and optimistic than I was initially. Although my grades are still below my expectations, I am willing to listen to others and take their advice in order to achieve better results. During the past few years, I have learnt a lot but I have also identified a number of weaknesses which I am going to have to address in order to become a forensic psychologist. Improving my English and referencing skills are among my top priorities as they will certainly help me obtain higher grades. However, I also intend to use the feedback I have received to perform better both academically and professionally. In order to strengthen my skills, improve my written English and produce a good dissertation, I am going to quit my part time job. This way, I will have more time to develop my ideas and the data that I have collected so far into a quality dissertation. Although I feel anxious about my final year, I am looking forward to it.

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