

My name is Iryna Kushnir, today is May 19, 2023. Zhenia is with me in this online interview. This interview is part of the project "Ukrainian migrants in the English Higher Education sector". Zhenia, do you give your consent for this interview?

Yes.

Yes. Well, tell us briefly about yourself.

Okay. I'm Zhenia, I'm 19 years old. I'm from the city of Kharkiv in Ukraine. I have studied and still study at V. N. Karazin Kharkiv National University, majoring in International Economics. I have been living in England since August, near Leicester. I am currently studying at Leicester College in England.

Tell us about your relocation experience. Okay. Basically, it was easier for me than for many people in terms of moving, because I found hosts through my mother's friends, and it was quite a spontaneous decision, that is, I applied for a visa, I won't say that I really expected to get it there, I didn't expect to get it, I had an idea that if I got it, I would try, if I didn't get it, it was no big deal. I was living in Poland back then and was ready to stay there. But I was also lucky, I quickly got a visa in two weeks. And after the visa was opened, I stayed in Poland for a month longer, finishing my exams at the university. And on August 3, I moved to England. Basically, I didn't have any problems with the relocation, I got along with my hosts right away, everything was fine. So that's how it is.

And when you were in Poland, what was the situation with your studies?

Basically, in the second semester of the first year, that is, last year, we had asynchronous studies, that is, we were sent mostly tasks and we completed them. That was the most convenient way, since I am from Kharkiv, and we are all in the same group, as most of us are from Kharkiv, so it was difficult to do something... different, but since September we have had a synchronous format, that is, lectures in Zoom, in Google Meet.

Maybe we'll go back to the way it was when you were in Ukraine in the previous academic year with an asynchronous format. Tell us more about how it happened, because I guess people were scared, these explosions were taking place.

Well, the first month, there were no classes, so they started again in the 15th - 20th of September. That is, obviously, for a month, everyone was in no mood to study, everyone was scared, everyone was relocating. Especially from Kharkiv, a lot of people had moved from Kharkiv. That's how it was, and from March, when everyone moved abroad, to the west of Ukraine, or stayed in Kharkiv, but already... figured out what they wanted to do at least at that time, then, yes, asynchronous studies began, but, basically, we were not burdened much, that is, it was easy to pass subjects, they gave us some opportunities to pass, even if there was no connection, that is, last year they were quite loyal to us.

I see. Why did you decide to move to England when you were in Poland?

I have friends in England, and they talked to my mom, and my mom said, "Oh, my Zhenia wanted to go to England when she was in the 9th or 10th grade, could you tell me how to do it?" They told me everything and said that there were sponsors who were ready to host one person. And so we decided to apply. That is, it was through our acquaintances and quite a spontaneous decision.

And did you arrive on your own?

Yes. I came on my own. My mother and sister stayed in Poland for a while and then they got back to Kharkiv.

What were your expectations about England?

Frankly, when I first came, I didn't think I was going to stay here and study. I just thought I'd try it out and see how it goes. After all, I wasn't ready to return to Kharkiv and I didn't envision my independent life in Poland. So I came here, and I had no such expectations, and when I was thinking about going to college, it

was also a rather unclear decision, I mean, I was applying in the last days of August, on the last deadline. That's how it was, I wasn't sure that I was ready to study in England at all, but I decided to give it a try.

And what were your first memories of your arriving here? What happened, what were you focused on?

The first thing I remember was thinking, how English are things here. It's so stereotypically English, you know, these phone booths, double-decker buses. And right away... Cool - it's England, just like I imagined it. Then there were some... The first euphoria wore off, and I noticed problems with healthcare, for example, problems with public transportation, because everything here is more focused on cars than on public transportation. But my first memories were kind of euphoric.

And what about those first days and weeks of adaptation? Were there any difficulties in adapting to the healthcare system?

During the first month, the hosts helped me a lot with the bank, with registering with a GP, and with applying for Universal Credit. They were very helpful. And I am very grateful to them for being with me during my transition period. Because I was confused, I had no friends here at all, yes, there were my mother's acquaintances, but they live quite far away, and so I have never seen them. It was difficult, I wanted to go to my family, because I was alone in a foreign country, not even in Poland, which is close to Ukraine, but England is quite far away. But, basically, it was more difficult morally than economically or just in terms of finding my way around. Everything was fine with that, it was just morally difficult.

And how easy was it to contact people?

My English is pretty good. Of course, it's an advantage, even compared to Poland, because I didn't know Polish at all when I arrived. But I knew English, and I could communicate with the hosts right away, we talked at the bank and everywhere else. And it is, of course, a big advantage when you know the language and when you are able to communicate with people. Thus, it was much easier as I knew English.

Let's also focus more on the higher education sector. What had you known about higher education in England before you came here?

Very little, actually. Apart from the fact that it is one of the best educational systems in the world, I didn't know how it was structured. I knew there were some differences between European education, for example, German education, but I had no idea how everything worked. And, yes, when I came to college, I also had no understanding of what a college was, what it would be like to go to university, and how exams were held, so it was all very new to me. Moreover, it was quite different from Ukraine. I asked my college friends about it... Both of them are immigrants, one is from (unintelligible), the other is from Latvia. They also couldn't tell me much, because they've been living here for two years, they couldn't tell me how general education works in England. It was probably a month or two ago that I figured out a little bit how everything works here. I think it's because the structure of education is quite complicated.

What were your expectations and was there anything you were afraid of when you started thinking about going to university?

I decided to enter the university, probably to try to enter in February, because I first saw one organization that helped with the admission. I never entered the university via this organization, probably because I had some doubts about their competence. I entered through another one. But, yes, I was thinking of trying, and I also thought that I would try to enter the university, and if I didn't want to study there, I would return to Ukraine. I wouldn't say that it was a very purposeful decision to enroll at the university. Yes, I mostly wanted to finish college first, at least this course, so that I could have at least some kind of English certificate, and then figure it out. But here, it doesn't work quite the same way as in Ukraine, where you pass the exams and then go to university. You have to start thinking about it in winter, and the sooner the better. You can enroll via some agencies, but if you enroll yourself, it's too late. I was told that the deadlines in January had already passed. Therefore, I decided to try enrolling through an agency.

And what kind of agencies are these?

Agencies... The first agency I was familiar with was an agency that helps Ukrainian students enroll. They are in touch with some partner universities that provide slightly easier conditions for admission, e.g., in terms of exams. In other words, it is not IELTS or GCSE, but rather an internal exam or Duolingo. And they just help with... what exactly is needed, with a motivation letter, and so on. But I entered the university through a European organization, so, basically, that's the way it is. And they help both international and English students, but Ukrainians entered, in fact, as English students, I mean, domestic students. And they have different rules, i.e... lower tuition fees, the possibility of a student loan, i.e. much more favorable conditions. Yes. And, basically, they helped me with contacting the university, they helped me apply at first. To do this, I had to provide a transcript of my school grades, write a motivation letter and a CV. Importantly, I was applying for the Foundation Year, which is a preparatory year. For one reason, it's because the rules are such that if you enter the first year, you already need to study at the university, I was already in my second year, so I could enter the first year. But in accordance with the rules, if you enroll like this, then since you already have one degree, for further student funding you need to... leave the Ukrainian university, submit a certificate that you are no longer studying at a Ukrainian university, and then you can study at an English university with student funding. I didn't want to do that, so I just applied without mentioning my Ukrainian university, with school grades, and so I could only apply for a preparatory year, but basically I'm probably glad that I did, because I will have a year of preparation. I'll have a chance to study, I mean, not right away, complex economic subjects in English, because even though I can communicate in English, economic vocabulary is still a bit different from the basic everyday vocabulary.

And how do you plan to finance this training and the preparatory year and afterwards?

I will apply soon, also through the same agency, but this service costs 56 pounds, if I'm not mistaken. I decided to apply through this agency. Basically, it is possible to do it on your own, but I decided to play it safe, although in general you can figure it out and apply for student funding on your own. I will apply, and I will have my tuition fully paid for. It's a loan for all 4 years, i.e. the first preparatory year, then 3 years of studying. Furthermore, I entered the London... the Anglia Ruskin University in London. And I will be paid a thousand and something a month. It's like a scholarship, but it's also a loan. That is, when I graduate from the university and start earning, if I stay in England, more than 25 thousand, if I'm not mistaken, then I will have to pay back... every month some percentage. I don't remember exactly how much, maybe eight percent, I think, but that's how it is. If I come back to Ukraine, then if I earn more than 40 thousand hryvnias, if I'm not mistaken, it will be eight percent of this amount. So the conditions are very loyal with regard to the entire student loan, but you have to understand that this is... this is a loan, not just free education. Because in England, it is exceptionally difficult to qualify for free education, you need to have a perfect command of English and impeccable academic performance. I had high grades, and I passed the English test just fine, and I don't have to go through an interview with the university, I was accepted right away. If they have any questions about the English test or grades, they may call you for an additional interview at the university, but basically, as I was told, this interview is not scary either. I mean, these are quite basic questions, they want to know about your motivation to study, and about your additional successes.

And was it easy for you to agree to such conditions with a 4-year loan?

I talked to my parents about it, but they said: "Of course, Zhenia, go ahead". I understand that if I return to Ukraine after my studies, if I get 40 thousand UAH, which is a big amount of money for a Ukrainian salary, given the average salary of 13-14 thousand UAH, of course, I will be able to give 8%, it will not be as stressful as in England, if I get 27 thousand pounds a year. Yes, there are costs, but this training will allow me to earn more than 27 thousand pounds a year. Because, basically, as I see it, as I was told, higher education plays a pretty big role when it comes to employment in England. So that's how it is.

Speaking about the agency, did you choose the university or did they suggest any particular universities? And as for the CV and motivation letter, did you write it and they checked it, or were they not involved?

Regarding the first question, yes, they have a special list of partner universities from which you can choose. Basically, it's important to know that these universities are neither the best nor the worst. They are the most average institutions. And if someone wants to apply through an agency, they need to understand that they won't help you get into Oxford University. I was ready for this, because I chose a university that I had to attend twice, twice a week, although I studied from 9 to 6, which is full time, but twice a week. Why did I have the opportunity to work and combine my work with my studies at a Ukrainian university? Yes, if I'm not mistaken, this is the 40th university in England... out of top 100, so it's an average university. So, for such universities, it is enough to have a B-2 English level. If you want to be in the top 10, then of course, you need to have C1 and higher. And agencies won't help you get admitted to a university, because that university won't cooperate with anyone to find students. As for the motivation letter and CV, I sent it, I looked at it, but they didn't tell me anything about it, they just told me that everything was okay, everything was fine. So, to be more specific, they advise on how to write, for example, a motivation letter. Of course, it is important to write it without plagiarism and to include some facts from the university, i.e. why you want to study there. Well, I wrote that it was a top 40 university and so on, and it was in London, for example, you wrote on your website that you had received such awards, in other words, you need to show the university that you are interested in entering this particular institution. But actually, as far as I know, people wrote motivation letters even last year to get admitted to Ukrainian universities. But I applied earlier, so I don't know. So it's not much different and there is nothing complicated. It's two pages in a Word document, and there are special questions that can be included in this motivation letter. You basically answer the questions, and then you tie it together a little bit, and you get a motivation letter. As for education, of course, if you have any experience, you indicate what kind of education you had. If you are applying without specifying a university, then of course you should also indicate this university in your CV.

Is this agency service free of charge?

It was when I was applying. As far as I am concerned, it costs 40 pounds now.

Yes, that's right. So what are your hopes and fears about starting now, because you also mentioned that you are continuing your studies at a Ukrainian university, so you will combine them, right?

Yes, I am going to choose an individual plan for the Ukrainian university, but if I get it, because it is difficult at my university, then I will switch to distance learning. I'm at a loss as to how to combine it, because I still plan to work. And then there's my education in London. It's hard to find accommodation in London. I mean, these 1,100 pounds that will be paid are really nothing for London. I'm going to rent an apartment - 4 people in a room, and it will cost about 500-550 pounds a month. If you rent it for two people, for example, it will cost about 800-900. If it's for one person, it's 1500 pounds, so that's not even enough to cover the cost of living, let alone food or transportation. And transportation is also expensive. I mean, of course, you have to work, if it's in London. But I don't plan to live in London permanently. I plan to find a job around Derby. Most likely, I will spend about two nights in London, so one room for four people will be enough for me. Of course, if you live permanently, it's probably difficult to live with four people like that. So you also must understand... and probably, if I were told now, I would choose to study somewhere in big cities like Birmingham, Liverpool, but not London, because accommodation in London is really expensive and London is still something totally different. But why did I choose London then? Well, first of all, I chose based on the university's ranking, it seemed to be the best university among the ones offered, and I would like to be a marketer, I chose a specialty in business marketing, because many people just had business degrees, and I wanted to have a marketing degree.

Is this dormitory a regular one or a university dormitory?

This particular university does not offer dormitories, there were other universities that did, both in London and in other cities. But it cooperates with some... other universities providing dormitories. So I applied to live in a student dormitory, but there will be students from different universities there. So it's not a specific dormitory provided by my university.

What are your plans for landing a job?

I haven't really thought about it that much yet, because I plan to go to Ukraine in the summer and pass my driver's test, because I also realize that I need to buy a car as soon as possible, because it's hard to get around without a car. Yes, so, but basically, I'm considering such options as working in a clothing store, as an administrator, and so on. I wouldn't really like to work in a restaurant, because... I wouldn't really like to work in a restaurant, because... It will be a little bit challenging to drive at night, because there is no public transportation at this time. But I do consider a fairly wide range of options.

How do you envision studying at your new university?

I actually read some specific feedback on my course, and on the preparatory course as well. There are very few English students there. That's because English students usually enter after college, as first-year students. So, yes, the preparatory course... The preparatory course is more for foreigners, and also there are often people of all ages on the preparatory course, ranging from the age of 20 to 40, as they said, so it will be quite an interesting experience, I think. Also, in the preparatory course, there are mostly subjects such as information search, public speaking, so these are not economic subjects, they are focused on developing English and soft skills. So I don't think it will be too hard. The preparatory year is not that hard, and from the first year onwards, of course, it's going to be harder. However, I'm interested, I love economics, I love English, so I think everything will be okay.

So what helped you accomplish what you have?

As a matter of fact, when it comes to some personal traits, it is the ability to take risks in a sense, that is, I went to England alone, and I made phone calls to find out how to apply, you don't have to be overly fearful, you have to try, because if you don't do it, you won't know. But in general, I think it's about having realistic expectations of myself. I mean, I realized that I wouldn't be able to reach C-1 English level in a single month. I realized that I needed to go to university so that I could get a job. And so I was already looking for something of that kind that would meet my requirements. That is, if I wanted to study at a top university, it would have been a slightly different year. I would have been more engaged in learning English, I would have paid more attention to it. I wouldn't start applying there in September. But you need to understand what you really want. That's why I chose this option.

How well do you think the infrastructure for helping Ukrainians who relocated to England due to the war and want to study at English universities is developed?

In fact, if we talk about universities, it's an average level, because it seemed that there were some organizations that claimed to help Ukrainians and everything, but... It takes a long time to get a response from universities, I mean, it takes more than one day, sometimes a week. And, for example, when I applied, I received an unconditional offer, which I could accept, and that would be it, I would be admitted. But it turned out that I had to apply all over again through a special website, because something had gone wrong. And it all takes time. And I realize that if I applied on my own... It's difficult to figure it out, and it takes an awful amount of time and effort. Even though I was enrolling through an agency, I still had to make an effort, and it's not just a matter of luck. I mean, it takes time to write a motivation letter, to see what the university wants, what it requires. That's why I wouldn't say that the assistance from universities is very useful. What actions did the government take? Well, I'm grateful that the government gave us the opportunity to study as English students, because that means completely different money, completely different student funding, for I understand that few Ukrainians would be able to pay 20 thousand pounds without student funding. And as for the agencies... Well, they certainly do it not only because they want to help, they have their own interests, but you just have to understand that if you are satisfied with such conditions, then this is a great option.

What was their benefit in asking people to pay 40 pounds? What is helping them? They cooperate with partner universities, and I guess they get some profits from partner universities. Basically, apart from the top 10 universities, as we probably have in Ukraine, there is fierce competition for the top 10, and then

everyone else wants new students. Therefore, I think it is beneficial for them to keep students coming. And on top of that, students... They have a sufficient level of education, because I believe that Ukrainians have a high level of school education. When it comes to math, when it comes to geography, it's a higher level than the people in England have. And I suppose that's why it's more profitable for them to enroll Ukrainians who have a sufficient level of education rather than mediocre English students. Well, Ukrainians or Europeans, foreigners, of course.

What were the challenges you faced all this time before you got admitted?

Actually, first of all, when I came to college, as a student, I could have gone straight to the third year in college. If I entered the third year in college, I could choose a university and enter according to the English rules, which means that I could enter the first year right after the third year. But I was not admitted to the third year, I was told that my English was not good enough to understand the curriculum. The problem was that my English was good in terms of comprehension, reading, listening, everything was fine. I scored 199 points on the EIT, so I knew academic English, but my spoken English was not great. Even more so, because those were the first weeks when I arrived, I was confused, I wasn't used to the English accent yet, so because they didn't let me write a test that would show that I had a sufficient level of English, I had to go to the first year of college, and after that, that is, the first year of college is worse, I mean, lower than our 11th grade. If I had not graduated from a Ukrainian school, I would not have entered any higher educational institution after the first year of college. And, basically, the information provided was as easy to understand as possible. And that was a chance for me to improve my English and all. I mean, I didn't learn any new things about business when I attended the business course. So that's how it is. As for entering the university, why did I refuse to work with the first agency? It's because no one told me that if I entered the first year of my studies, I would have to leave the Ukrainian university. I learned this from another organization, and I tried the former to see if it was true, but they told me that they just wouldn't put it in the student application, and I understand that this is some kind of... It's probably a violation of the rules if we tell universities that I entered a Ukrainian university, but there is no student funding, and it seemed to me that this could then affect me anywhere... and that it's bad, because it's some kind of violation of the law, or at least a violation of the rules. Therefore, you have to be careful about all these rules, because then you have to account for this particular situation, not the agency that said something wrong.

And if there was something else that could be done to improve assistance to Ukrainians, either at the state level here or at the university level or maybe at the level of some organizations, what would be useful in terms of what you went through for others who are trying?

I think universities could probably offer clearer conditions for Ukrainians on how to enroll, because they, the universities, are more focused on European students. And European... Well, I mean the European Union students. There are specific rules about what conditions they need. As for Ukrainians, not everyone immediately understands how to apply, and not all universities want to admit, for example, based on Ukrainian school grades or university grades, especially leading universities, they want to see English documents on education, and it turns out that you have to go back to a college and study all the stuff you already know. Then, I think it would be great to have some kind of IELTS or TOEFL courses at colleges. They are available at some universities, but it's difficult to enroll in them, i.e. people come and they are mostly sent to ESOL or just, like me, to a Business course, but not to such specifically English courses, although if a person has a certificate with grades and scored 7 or higher on IELTS, he or she can enter any university. It's a wider choice. Otherwise, GCSE is required, and GCSE is an internal English exam, and it has its own peculiarities. If English is not your native language, then, of course, it is more difficult to pass than IELTS.

What are you most proud of with regard to your achievements here in England?

I think that I was able to adapt to independent living, and that I was not afraid to try things, and probably that I was able to combine Ukrainian and English education, and I was quite successful. And as for college. I was probably the second best in a group of 18 people at college, given that there were some English students there. By the fact that I passed the English exams at first attempt, I passed functional level 1. And

some people had to retake them three or four times. So, basically, I am proud of myself for trying, for not giving up, and for pursuing my goal. How easy is it for you to communicate and interact with your peers at college? I mean not only in terms of English, but also on a personal level.

In fact, in my group, the diversity of people is as broad as possible, both in terms of religion and nationality. We have a subject called personal development, where we talk about equality between everyone, let's put it this way. But this does not mean that we are simply told, "Remember that we are all equal here." No. We have discussions, and I like the fact that we can freely express our opinions. Of course, it is challenging, because there are people with absolutely different views. I communicate more with a girl from Latvia, but she is my best friend in college, because we have a similar mentality. And also with a girl from Greece, who is European. Be that as it may, it's a more similar mentality, because the same thing, in our college, we have groups either on religious or national characteristics. It doesn't mean we have any discrimination, no, of course not, we treat everyone equally, we treat everyone well, but, anyway, it usually happens that people want to look for friends who are like them.

What are your plans for the future now?

I'm planning to graduate from a Ukrainian university, I have two more years left. And during these two years, while I still have to study at the Ukrainian university, I will do some work, not too hard, not too much, that is, for two or three weeks, three days a week, to combine my studies at the English and Ukrainian universities with work. Then, after graduating from the Ukrainian university, I can look for something more specialized, because I will have already completed my first year of university, so I will already have some understanding of English marketing. I haven't decided yet whether I want to stay here or not after graduation, so we'll see, I miss Ukraine, I miss my family, of course, but I'm still planning to study.

And in terms of importance, is it more important for you to graduate from the first or second university, or is it not yet possible to say?

Of course, I would like to graduate from both universities. I probably want to allow myself the first six months to explore, so I didn't want to switch to distance learning if I was given an individual plan so that I could better understand what English education is. But if I manage to successfully complete this first preparatory course and realize that I like English education and everything goes well, then the English university will be more important. After all, I think that for employers, English education will look better than Ukrainian one, either way. Although I would like to graduate from both.

In general, what are your plans for work, for the future? What would you like to do for a living?

I would like to work as a marketer, I really like analyzing advertisements, I really like to have an understanding... I read some books and articles on advertising on my own. Well, I like watching a billboard and thinking about whether this ad will appeal to the audience or not, and why. That's why I love it so much and would like to be a marketer.

And as for employment, you mentioned that you miss Ukraine and would probably like to come back. But suppose you graduate from, say, this university in England, would you return to Ukraine with an English diploma or would you look for a job somewhere else?

I believe having an English degree in Ukraine is better than having a Ukrainian degree in England, let's say. I mean, with an English degree, you can get a job both in Ukraine and in Europe, let alone in England. One thing I heard about English education is that employers around the world love English diplomas. Therefore, I will be more free to decide where I want to live, where I want to be employed. So that's how it is.

And to what extent have your expectations from the higher education sector in England been met so far? Well, how to say, I still don't know, of course... I learned... I don't know how effective higher education is in England, I can say about college that I like the number of practical tasks, the number of group tasks, it's all well organized, that is, it's not dry lectures, yes, and... everyone has a computer, that is, this is also some

kind of connection with information technology. And as for my admission to the university, well, my expectations were met, because I got admitted, almost got admitted to the university, and I wouldn't really say it was a titanic effort. No. I mean, yes, sure, you have to work hard, but just like at any Ukrainian university, you also have to work hard to get enrolled.

And with respect to living in England in general, to what extent have your expectations been met when you came here?

I would say that England is not a panacea, I cannot say that England is an ideal country to live in and that it will suit everyone, I mean, it was difficult for me to get used to it, and I probably got used to living in England a little bit only a couple of months ago. Before that, I had seen some shortcomings, as I said, in medicine. In other words, it's almost impossible to visit a specialized doctor, for example. And as for transportation, I was late for college several times because the bus was either late or didn't show up at all. But you have to understand that the transportation system... Well, I live near Leicester, not in Leicester itself. For example, if you live outside the city, using public transportation is a challenge. Moreover, the weather, the stereotypical English weather, is also quite difficult to get used to. But generally speaking, England is a fairly comfortable country to live in, but you have to get used to a different mentality, because if you compare it to Poland, Poland is a country close to Ukraine in terms of mentality. England is totally different. So you have to account for this fact and it takes time to get used to it.

Thank you, Zhenia. And these are all my questions. I would also like to ask if there is anything else that has come to your mind that I have not asked about, but would be worth mentioning in terms of the higher education sector in England, or life in England in general, some aspects of opportunities and challenges.

No, I guess I can't think of anything right now, basically, I've shared everything I wanted to share, so that's it.

Okay. Well, thank you so much, Zhenia, it was a truly interesting conversation, and of course, it's a very useful information for our project. And thank you so much for your time.

Thank you for inviting me.