

CAMPUS

/Beyond Borders/

From Dropping out of School to Getting into the University of Cambridge

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I still don't know how this all worked out but here I am at Cambridge doing a PhD at the MRC Cognition and Brain Sciences Unit writing my first year report. If you had asked anyone where I would end up when I was a teenager, I guess most people would have said something like the gutter and to be honest, I cannot blame them.

For a long time, it was completely unimaginable that I would attend any university at all, let alone going to a prestigious elite university. In the course of my life, I went to five different schools without ever moving. Passing a class was rarely certain and my performance was basically always a concern. Most teachers though saw in me a smart kid and therefore I enjoyed a relatively great amount of clemency. Nevertheless, emotional problems and my lack of interest in school led to my drop-out in 10th grade without a proper degree. Only due to the intervention of a dedicated teacher, did I make it to enroll at a school for second-chance education from where I obtained my A-levels allowing me to study.

After getting my Bachelor's and Master's degree from the Ruhr-University Bochum, I looked for a place to do a PhD. I got an interview at one place, but didn't hear back from them. Out of frustration, I applied at the best place I could think of - without really believing that I had a slight chance of getting in. But here I am in Cambridge. However, not only did I get admitted into Cambridge but I was also awarded one of the most prestigious scholarships in the world, the Gates Cambridge Scholarship funded by Bill and Melinda Gates. In 2017, over 6.500 people applied for 100 scholarships and I was selected. Having this scholarship still feels so surreal. This special treatment sometimes leads to embarrassing situations. A Cambridge student once asked me what time

it is, then saw my Gates badge, said "Oh, sorry for interrupting", and rushed away.

Life itself here in Cambridge is really different to what I was used to in Germany and I must say, it's really complex. No one really knows how this university with its 31 independent colleges, which resemble the houses in Harry Potter a tiny bit, work. At our welcome dinner, the Gates Cambridge provost told us that Cambridge has had 800 years to get this complicated and I think he is absolutely right. Cambridge is a place of traditions. Many of them are quite undemocratic and archaic like fellows sitting at high tables at formal dinners, which are called formal halls or the dress code, which involves wearing academic gowns to certain events. I am not really fond of traditions. On the contrary, I'd say that I am fundamentally opposed to a lot of them. Still, I am trying to be open and navigate myself through the jungle that is Cambridge without compromising my principles, which is quite challenging sometimes. Moving here meant exposing myself to this new environment. Looking back, I think it has already changed me for the better and for the worse.

Now, I'm going to all these posh events like formal dinners. Yesterday for instance was the annual Gates garden party celebrating the end of the academic year. There were tables covered in white cloth, loads of Prosecco regardless of the fact that it was only 12 pm and violin players entertaining us. When I looked around with my glass of Prosecco, I could not help but wonder again where I ended up

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