

International students and culture shock

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Introduction

Leaving home and travelling to study in a new country can be a stressful experience. Even though it may be something you have planned and prepared for, the extent of the change and the effects it has on you may take you by surprise. If you find that you are surprised by the effects of the change, it might be helpful to realise that your experience is quite normal. This applies whatever country you come from, and wherever you are going to study, even though some cultures are more similar than others because of geographic, historic, demographic and other connections.

What is culture shock?

"Culture shock" describes the impact of moving from a familiar culture to one which is unfamiliar. It is an experience described by people who have travelled abroad to work, live or study; it can be felt to a certain extent even when abroad on holiday. It can affect anyone, including international students. It includes the shock of a new environment, meeting lots of new people and learning the ways of a different country. It also includes the shock of being separated from the important people in your life, maybe family, friends, colleagues, teachers: people you would normally talk to at times of uncertainty, people who give you support and guidance. When familiar sights, sounds, smells or tastes are no longer there you can miss them very much. If you are tired and jet-lagged when you arrive small things can be upsetting and out of all proportion to their real significance.

The following are some of the elements that contribute to culture shock:

Climate

Many students find that the British climate affects them a lot. You may be used to a much warmer climate, or you may just find the greyness and dampness, especially during the winter months, difficult to get used to.

Food

You may find British food strange. It may taste different, or be cooked differently, or it may seem bland or heavy compared to what you are used to. If you are in selfcatering accommodation and unused to cooking for yourself, you may find yourself relying on "fast" food instead of your usual diet. Try to find a supplier of familiar food, and eat plenty of fresh fruit and vegetables.

Language

Constantly listening and speaking in a foreign language is tiring. If English is not your first language, you may find that you miss your familiar language which at home would have been part of your everyday environment. Even if you are a fluent English speaker it is possible that the regional accents you discover when you arrive in the UK will make the language harder to understand. People may also speak quickly and you may feel embarrassed to ask them to repeat what they have said.

Dress

If you come from a warm climate, you may find it uncomfortable to wear heavy winter clothing. Not all students will find the British style of dress different but, for some, it may seem immodest, unattractive, comical or simply drab.

Social roles

Social behaviours may confuse, surprise or offend you. For example you may find people appear cold and distant or always in a hurry. This may be particularly likely in the centre of large cities. Or you may be surprised to see couples holding hands and kissing in public. You may find the relationships between

men and women more formal or less formal than you are used to, as well as differences in same sex social contact and relationships.

'Rules' of behaviour

As well as the obvious things that hit you immediately when you arrive, such as sights, sounds, smells and tastes, every culture has unspoken rules which affect the way people treat each other. These may be less obvious but sooner or later you will probably encounter them and once again the effect may be disorientating. For example there will be differences in the ways people decide what is important, how tasks are allocated and how time is observed. The British generally have a reputation for punctuality. In business and academic life keeping to time is important. You should always be on time for lectures, classes, and meetings with academic and administrative staff. If you are going to be late for a meeting do try to let whoever you are meeting know. Social life is a little more complicated. Arranging to meet to see a film at 8pm means arriving at 8pm. But if you are invited to visit someone's home for dinner at 8pm, you should probably aim to arrive at about ten minutes after eight, but not later than about twenty past. When going to a student party an invitation for 8pm probably means any time from 9.30 onwards! These subtle differences can be difficult to grasp and can contribute to culture shock.

Values

Although you may first become aware of cultural differences in your physical environment, e.g. food, dress, behaviour, you may also come to notice that people from other cultures may have very different views of the world from yours. Cultures are built on deeply-embedded sets of values, norms, assumptions and beliefs. It can be surprising and sometimes distressing to find that people do not share some of your most deeply held ideas, as most of us take our core values and beliefs for granted and assume they are universally held. As far as possible, try to suspend judgment until you understand how parts of a culture fit together into a coherent whole. Try to see what people say or do in the context of their own culture's norms. This will help you to understand how other people see your behaviour, as well as how to understand theirs. When you understand both cultures, you will probably find some aspects of each that you like and others that you don't.

A model of culture shock

The process of culture shock can be illustrated by a model known as the "W" curve (see diagram on the following page). This model may not relate to your experience or only partially. Sometimes the process is faster or slower. Many people go through different phases of the process of adjustment several times, so parts of the curve in the diagram may repeat themselves. For instance, at significant times such as important family dates or festivals you may feel distressed or lonely, while at other times you feel quite settled. However, many people have reported that this model has reflected something of their experience and they have found it helpful to realise they are not the only ones to have had these feelings. The process can be broken down into 5 stages:

1. The "honeymoon" stage

When you first arrive in a new culture, differences are intriguing and you may feel excited, stimulated and curious. At this stage you are still protected by the close memory of your home culture.

2. The "distress" stage

A little later, differences create an impact and you may feel confused, isolated or inadequate as cultural differences intrude and familiar supports (eg family or friends) are not immediately available.

3. "Re-integration" stage

Next you may reject the differences you encounter. You may feel angry or frustrated, or hostile to the new culture. At this stage you may be conscious mainly of how much you dislike it compared to home. Don't worry, as this is quite a healthy reaction. You are reconnecting with what you value about yourself and your own culture.

4. "Autonomy" stage

Differences and similarities are accepted. You may feel relaxed, confident, more like an old hand as you become more familiar with situations and feel well able to cope with new situations based on your growing experience.

5. “Independence” stage

Differences and similarities are valued and important. You may feel full of potential and able to trust yourself in all kinds of situations. Most situations become enjoyable and you are able to make choices according to your preferences and values.

Diagram of *W-Curve: Stages of adjustment experienced during orientation*.

Adapted from *Orientated for Success*, edited by M Barker, Australian International Development Assistance Bureau, 1990.

Some of the effects of culture shock

Some of the symptoms of culture shock can be worrying themselves. For example, you may find your health is affected and you may get headaches or stomach aches or you may start worrying about your health more than previously. You may find it difficult to concentrate and as a result find it harder to focus on your course work. Other people find they become more irritable or tearful and generally their emotions seem more changeable. All of these effects can in themselves increase your anxiety.

How to help yourself

Though culture shock is normally a temporary phase, it is important to know there are things you can do to help so that some of these worrying effects can be minimised. Don't feel “this isn't going to happen to me”. Culture shock can hit you whatever culture you come from and however experienced or well-travelled you are.

- Simply understanding that this is a normal experience may in itself be helpful.
- Keep in touch with home. There are several ways you may be able to do this: for example telephone, letter, fax, email. Several telephone companies offer greatly reduced charges for international calls. Check your Student Services, Students' Union or International Office for information. If you live close enough to travel home at weekends, it is a good idea not to go home too often as this will make settling more difficult. Once or twice a term is probably best. Newspapers and satellite TV will also be an option for some people, again, see what is available for international students in your college or university.
- Have familiar things around you that have personal meaning, such as photographs or ornaments.
- Find a supplier of familiar food if you can. Your student adviser or a student society may be able to help. Eat a healthy and balanced diet.
- Take regular exercise. As well as being good for your health it can be a way of meeting people.
- Make friends with international students, whether from your own culture or from others, as they will understand what you're feeling and, if possible, make friends with the local students so you can learn more about each other's culture. Be prepared to take the first step and find activities which will give you a common interest with UK students e.g. sports, music or volunteering.
- Take advantage of all the help that is offered by your institution. In particular, the orientation programme offered by most colleges and universities can be a valuable way of meeting people and finding out about things that can help you.
- Use the university or college services, where there will be professional and experienced staff. For example the health service, the counselling service, the International Office or hall wardens will provide a friendly, listening ear. Even if at home you wouldn't consider such steps, in the UK it is quite normal and they may help when your familiar helpers are missing. If you are finding settling down difficult, your personal tutor probably also needs to know. She or he may be able to help, particularly with adjusting to a different academic system.
- For some students linking with a faith community will put you in touch with a familiar setting, whether it is a church, mosque, synagogue or temple. Many universities have a chaplaincy in which several faiths may be represented. There may also be religious student societies. Many chaplaincies welcome students of all faiths for pastoral or social activities.
- Investigate the Students' Union and its societies. There may be an opportunity to learn a new sport or activity or continue an interest from home. A further advantage is that these societies bring together students from different courses and countries with a shared interest. There are often national societies

that will celebrate significant occasions such as Chinese New Year or Thanksgiving. For UK students, student societies can be one of the many ways of making new friends.

- Above all find some one to talk to who will listen uncritically and with understanding, rather than isolating yourself.

Finally...

It is important to stress that culture shock is entirely normal, usually unavoidable and not a sign that you have made a mistake or that you won't manage. In fact there are very positive aspects of culture shock. The experience can be a significant learning experience, making you more aware of aspects of your own culture as well as the new culture you have entered. It will give you valuable skills that will serve you in many ways now and in the future and which will be part of the benefit of an international education.

Useful resource

What's up with culture? is a web-based training resource, designed for US students abroad but potentially of interest to any international student wanting to learn more about cultural transition. for information about how to make such an application.

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