

## International students: preparing to return home

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### Introduction

In the months before your course finishes, as well as being busy with your examinations, thesis or dissertation, you will also be thinking about what to do next. Like many students, you might be looking forward to going back to your home country, to your family, friends and colleagues, and to the culture that you know best. Alternatively, you might be planning to do another course of study or to stay in the UK for work. See our information on [Working in the UK after your studies](#). These are the big questions, but there are also many practical issues to think about. With all of this, it is important to understand that this is a difficult and stressful time for you. This Information Sheet hopes to help you through this difficult period; and to prepare you for returning to your home culture.

### Going Home

If you are returning to your home country, you should start making the arrangements as early as possible. Remember that in your last months in the UK examinations or finishing other work will take up a large part of your time, so planning for your departure should begin early.

Here are some practical things to think about:

### Travel

To get the cheapest tickets, you have to book early, at least several weeks in advance. You can often find very cheap tickets on the Internet, on the websites of either travel companies or the airlines themselves. Some agencies, such as [STA](#), specialise in student travel. Shop around and compare for the best price.

### Sending your belongings home

If you have been in the UK for a long time, you probably have more things now that you could carry on a plane or other form of transport. Check with the travel agent or airline about weight or size limits for luggage. Paying for excess luggage on the plane can be very expensive. Sending it by ship or by rail is often cheaper, but be careful to choose a company which has a good reputation and is reliable. Ask friends or your student adviser for suggestions; or consult the [British Association of Removers](#) or [British Association of Removers](#) or the British International Freight Association (BIFA) [British International Freight Association](#) or [British Association of Removers](#). Check if the price includes insurance to cover any loss or breakages. If you have items you do not need or do not want to take home, such as furniture, textbooks, a computer or stereo, you could sell these to other students, or in the local newspaper; or give them to a local charity shop. (You can find a list of charity shops in the local telephone directory).

### Income Tax refunds

If you have been working in the UK and paying income tax, you may be entitled to have some of that tax refunded to you. Contact Her Majesty's Revenue and Customs for details on how to claim an [income tax or national insurance refund](#).

### Value Added Tax (VAT) refunds

If you have recently (within 3 months of your departure date) bought items in the UK which you will take back to your home-country outside the European Economic Area (EEA), you might be able to claim back some of the Value Added Tax (VAT). To use the VAT Refund Scheme, you will normally have to buy the goods from a shop that operates the scheme. You can find more information about [VAT refunds](#) from Her Majesty's Revenue and Customs.

## Notification of your departure

You will need to tell various people and offices when you intend to leave your UK address: for example your academic department, accommodation-provider, employer (if you have one), doctor, bank, and so on. There are more details about this in the 'Pre-departure checklist' at the end of this Information Sheet. It is best to contact organisations at least a month before you leave to find out about deadlines and what you need to do.

Check if there is a specific period of notice for your accommodation and find out how you can get your deposit back before you leave, or you will be charged rent even after you have left.

Pay all bills and overdrafts before you leave the UK. Remember that UK banks have agreements with banks in many other countries, which could enable them to collect debts from your home bank. Also, your institution may refuse to give you your degree or other academic qualification until you pay any money you still owe for your tuition fees, accommodation, or library fines.

## Notification of your forwarding address

You can arrange for the Royal Mail Re-direction Service [VAT refunds](#) to forward your UK mail to your address in your home country. There is a fee for this. You may also wish to give your home address to a number of people, so that they can keep in contact with you and forward any correspondence or important information:

- friends
- a responsible person where you are living
- your institution's registry and alumni office
- any clubs or other organisations to which you belong
- publications to which you subscribe.

## Career considerations

To help you in your professional life back in your home country, it can be very helpful to have references from the UK. At least a month before you leave, contact a few people who can comment on your abilities and your work (such as an academic supervisor or employer) and ask them for a written reference. You might also want to buy or subscribe to specialist publications that you cannot find at home, or to join a professional organisation to help you keep your knowledge up-to-date.

Your institution's Careers Service may be able to help you research potential employers in your home country (or elsewhere) and to subscribe to websites which will email job vacancies to you.

## What else do I need to think about?

Before you came to the UK, you probably expected that you would need time to get used to the language, the different foods, the weather and new ways of doing things.

Many students are surprised to find that they also need a period of adjustment when they return to their home country. Although you may think that it will be easy to go back to familiar relationships and patterns of behaviour, you may have some difficulty settling back in and need time to adjust. This is called **reverse culture shock**.

## How could reverse culture shock affect me?

This can depend on several factors, such as how similar the UK and your country are; how long it has been since you were last home; and your age.

The feelings and reactions described below are experienced by very many students when they return home after studying in another country.

## Family relationships and friends

One student said: *Here I have grown used to my privacy and independence. I know when I return home I will lose these. My parents realise what I am going through, but they are not sympathetic.*

You might feel that you have changed a lot while you have been away from home. You may now have very different ideas and attitudes compared to when you left home. However, your family and friends may expect you to be just the same as you were when you left, and they may find it difficult to get used to the 'new you'. For example, perhaps you now think about the roles of men and women in life in a way that is different from what your friends or family think. Perhaps while you were away you enjoyed a lot of freedom in matters of food, how time is organised and leisure activities, and this might be very different from attitudes at home. You might also find that young members of your family do not really remember you or may seem jealous that you have been away. Of course, your family and friends have also changed in the time that you have been away: you may be shocked by how much older your parents seem; and friends may have got married, or had children. All these changes can cause tensions at home and make it more difficult for you to re-adjust quickly.

You can find more information about the stages of culture shock in our Information Sheet:  
[International Students and Culture Shock.](#)

## Work

Another student said: *Sometimes people at home don't appreciate your achievements... When I got back I really had problems at work. Nobody wanted to accept the ideas I had learned.*

If you are returning to your previous job or employer, you might find that, while you were away, you have lost touch with important information or developments. At first, you may feel unable to contribute in meetings and conversations. In addition, your colleagues may be jealous or hostile, because you had an opportunity that was denied to them. They may be suspicious of your new skills and knowledge; and may think that the changes in the type of clothes you wear, the way you behave or the way you speak mean that you think you are better than them. Perhaps they will have unrealistic expectations of what you can achieve. In the beginning, you may not have much chance to use the skills that you worked so hard to develop during your study, because of lack of equipment or funding. You may also feel frustrated by different ways of working or procedures.

## Economic and political conditions

You may find that your country has experienced economic problems and that it is difficult to buy things that you could find very easily in the UK. You may have to go without some of the conveniences you got used to in the UK. However, if your country's economy has become very successful, you may find that familiar environments are now very different and that there are now new procedures and regulations. A different government may be in power and there may also be new political groups, so you may feel out of touch with politics.

## Customs and ideas

When you came to the UK, you probably had to adapt to a number of cultural differences, which in time you came to take for granted. On returning home, you may find that it also takes time before the customs and ideas that were once so familiar to you in your everyday life seem normal again. Many areas could present challenges, such as:

- preparing and serving food
- the way people dress
- the way women and men are expected to behave
- administrative procedures
- attitudes to timekeeping
- tolerance for minority views.

If your children were with you in the UK, it may also be difficult for them to adapt to your home culture. As well as the areas already mentioned, they may be going into a school system which is very different from the UK's and where the teaching methods or subjects studied are unfamiliar. They may also miss

their UK friends.

### How can I prepare for reverse culture shock?

Of course, many students going home are looking forward to returning to their family, friends and a familiar way of life. However, as we have discussed, it can be difficult in the beginning to adapt to being back home. This can be made easier by knowing about reverse culture shock; understanding that you might experience it; and accepting that is a common and very normal reaction.

Your institution may offer a special workshop for students who are about to return home, which will look in more detail at the type of issues we have mentioned and help you to develop strategies to deal with reverse culture shock. Ask your international student adviser if your institution provides a workshop like this.

If you are not able to attend a workshop, here are a few ideas to help you prepare for your return home:

- take addresses of friends and others with whom you want to stay in contact after you leave the UK
- discuss their experiences with students who have already returned home
- stay in contact with people from your home country, using your own language
- read newspapers and magazines from home (these are often available on the internet)
- write to your friends and family at home
- if you do not already have a job in your home country, visit the careers adviser at your institution; and sign up to job-hunting websites
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### Keeping in touch

When you have returned to your own country, it can help to talk to others who have returned home after living in another culture. Your institution might have an Alumni (graduates) Association in your country, which may organise activities and provide services of interest and help to you. Be sure to check before you leave the UK. Even if there is no Alumni Association, the Alumni Office may be able to give you the names of former students who live near your home and who would be willing to meet you. The office of the British Council in your country may also be able to tell you about local alumni, and may have facilities that will enable you to keep in touch with developments in the UK.

In conclusion, bear in mind that when you return to your home country after a long absence, there can be difficulties to begin with and it can take time to re-adapt. Be aware of reverse culture shock, but do not worry about it. Concentrate on enjoying the positive aspects of being back home, such as being with friends and family, and re-discovering your own country.

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