‘Culture Shock’ – How to Deal with the Challenges of Studying Abroad

A Guide for Outgoing Exchange Students

Studying abroad for a few months may mean a dive into the unknown: you meet new people, learn a new language, encounter a new academic system and deal with cultural differences. This can certainly be fun and is a valuable part of your study abroad experience, yet dealing with so much change can also be challenging at times. This guide may help you prevent, recognize and cope with ‘culture shock’.

‘Culture Shock’ in a Nutshell

- ‘Culture Shock’ is a perfectly natural reaction to a different environment and can usually be overcome with time. The distress you may initially feel is only one element of an on-going learning and adaptation process that is triggered when you encounter difference.
- Be patient with yourself: Give yourself plenty of time, as coming to terms with unfamiliar surroundings takes time for everyone and may easily take some months.
- You can facilitate the acculturation process by various means which mostly boil down to taking action on your own instead of secluding yourself from others in frustration. Do not wait passively for things to happen and for friends to find you – become active and get involved.
- If things get really bad and you feel you need support, know where you can turn to. There are many people who are there for you in times of need, may it be friends, mentors or professional counsellors, so rest assured you will always find someone with an open ear for your troubles.
- Once you have overcome the initial confusion and disorientation that an immersion into a new culture brings about, you can congratulate yourself: you are now ready and able to cope with difference and find your way, even in a formerly strange and unfamiliar place, including different customs, attitudes, language, food, etc.!

Nonetheless you should bear in mind that cultures can be compared to an iceberg, and while you have learned to cope with the part that can be seen above the surface, there may be many more subtleties that you may not even have realized or come across yet. So when continuing your interaction with this meanwhile not so unfamiliar culture, remember that there may still be more that you do not know yet and that you will continue to learn as time passes.
What is ‘Culture Shock’?

Without maybe realizing it, each one of us grows up with many attitudes and cultural patterns that we do not usually question since they just seem so natural to us and those that surround us. It is only when we interact with people whose worldviews, values, attitudes or social behaviour differ from our own that we may realize that there is no such thing as an objective reality – a realisation that may be very unsettling as everything we took for granted may suddenly be questioned.

‘Culture Shock’ is a normal and logical reaction when someone encounters differences in another cultural environment. It may show very differently in each individual, as everyone reacts in a different manner to any given situation. In general however, ‘Culture Shock’ could best be described as a mix of emotions resulting from the sudden change that occurs when a person leaves everything that is familiar behind and moves to an unfamiliar place. In the new place, a lot may be strange at first, ranging from people, language, food or climate to subtleties like communication style, humour or everyday behaviour. As a foreign student spending one or two semesters at your host university as an exchange student, you will not only have to deal with challenging studies in a differing academic system, but will also encounter a foreign culture while at the same time being away from your friends and family. It is therefore only normal that people may react to this sudden change with disorientation, confusion, anxiety or even frustration in some cases.

The good news however is that ‘Culture Shock’ is only one phase in an ongoing acculturation and learning process which eventually allows you to feel comfortable and get along in two (or more) cultures. The initial reaction to your strange surroundings is entirely natural and is a signal that you consciously and/or subconsciously realize the differences around you compared to what you are used to. With time passing you will slowly learn to come to terms with your new situation and environment, and with even more time spent in the new place you will most probably even start to like and enjoy the immersion in a different life. On no account does this mean that you will stop being who you are and adopt an entirely new identity, have to become like people in your host university’s country or like and approve of everything new you encounter. But your stay may broaden your horizon and open your eyes for difference as you may realize that things can be done in entirely different ways. Most importantly, you will, after all, develop the ability to tolerate differences and cope with it while finding your very own way of living in another place and still maintaining your identity.

Recognising ‘Culture Shock’

Contact across cultures is inherently stressful as you suddenly find yourself in a place where you do not know anyone, the social customs and interactions as well as the language may be unfamiliar and basic concepts and assumptions that you thought to be universal suddenly do not necessarily hold true anymore in the new environment. Knowing about the existence of ‘Culture Shock’ and the fact that it is a natural
reaction to stress is the first step to minimise the effect of acculturation difficulties, yet you should also know about potential signs that may indicate ‘Culture Shock’ so you are able to recognize it when it hits you or a friend of yours. Everyone reacts differently to stress, therefore the symptoms of ‘Culture Shock’ may vary from person to person. There may be physical reactions as well as emotional reactions. Physical reactions could be allergies, aches and pains, unsettled health, insomnia or excessive sleepiness, overeating or the loss of appetite, and many more. Emotional reactions among others may include loneliness, homesickness, loss of self-confidence, mood changes, disorientation, anxiety, insecurity, depression, etc.

There may also be further effects that may concern attitudes and social behaviour, such as an over-identification and idealisation of your home culture, development of fatalistic stereotypes concerning your host culture, social withdrawal and self-seclusion, depreciation and refusal of everything unfamiliar, incapability to solve even the most simple problems, and others.

In general, we believe that you know yourself best and should therefore be able to realize when something unusual is going on with you. Keep in mind that it is perfectly normal to react to a change of cultural surroundings, yet you may want to look out for any changes in your mental and/or physical well-being so you can take proactive steps at an early stage when needed. Also if you notice that a friend of yours is showing strong indications of a ‘Culture Shock’ you may want to talk to him or her about it and offer emotional support or point out other ways to get additional assistance.

Prevention and Coping

Here are some handy tips in order to prevent or rather minimise the effects of ‘Culture Shock’ and how to cope with it:

Thorough preparation

Before you go, inform yourself about the place you will be going to for example by reading books, looking up information on the internet, talking to students or other people who have already been to that place, etc. This helps you get a better idea of the place you are going to, to develop more realistic expectations and it may prepare you for what you will probably encounter.

Learn Language Basics

If you go to a place where the everyday language is not English, try to learn some of the language before you go so you are able to say small basic things like “hello” and “thank you”. Especially if you plan to stay longer, language is a key factor in settling in, but also for shorter stays language is important in connecting you to local people. Remember: It is not about speaking the language perfectly or understanding everything, but much more about making an effort, showing interest and making yourself understood in everyday situations. Language courses are available at the Language Centre of the University of Zurich and ETH Zurich, some host universities may also offer language courses.

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“Be curious, try to tolerate differences and respect others.”
Know and accept ‘Culture Shock’

If you notice signs of a ‘Culture Shock’ in yourself, do not worry but keep in mind instead that it is a natural reaction and part of a learning process with a positive outcome. Do not give up, rather give yourself time and be patient with yourself. Be aware that there are ways to mitigate the symptoms and facilitate the acculturation process, and if things get worse, know where you can turn to. Try to see ‘Culture Shock’ as part of your experience while abroad – encountering acculturation difficulties can be seen as proof that you are really deeply diving into a new culture and undergoing a learning process that will eventually leave you with new skills, attitudes and a broadened horizons.

Familiar Items

If you feel the stress of the new environment it may in some cases help to surround yourself with familiar things – may this be by speaking your own language, eating familiar food, reading your favourite newspaper, etc. This is certainly not an encouragement to totally shut yourself off from the new environment, yet keeping some familiar items around you while dealing with the unknown at the same time can really help.

Social Contact

Make sure you maintain a network of people you love, trust and can talk to. Keep in touch with your friends and family at home by phone, email, social media, blogs, etc., while also surrounding yourself with people whose company you enjoy at the new place. It does not matter whether they are locals, people from your home country or other countries, it is having people around you that you really care about and trust in that counts.

Contact to Locals

If you do not easily get in touch with local students, do not let this bother you too much. Due to your short stay of often just a few months, it is normal that contact to local students may not be too much, especially as they find themselves in a totally different situation than you with their existing network of friends and family and leisure activities firmly in place. They may therefore not try to actively establish new contacts or simply already have a very busy schedule with studies and extracurricular activities. If they do not approach you this has nothing to do with you but with the different situations you are in. It is therefore quite normal for exchange students to find themselves surrounded by many friends from various countries other than the host university’s – which is also an enriching experience. If you nonetheless wish to have more contact with local students you will in most cases need to be the one to take initiative by engaging local students in a conversation, suggesting a joint leisure activity or the like. A good way to get in touch with local students or local people in general can also be by volunteering in an organization or by joining a club of your interest, may it be sports, cinema or music.

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Physical Health

Being physically active and doing the things you like or discovering new activities may help. Most host universities offer various sports activities, so check what is on offer and what conditions apply. Keep in mind also that any kind of activity may be good for you, it does not necessarily have to be sports if you are not into it. Also, make sure you eat a well-balanced, healthy diet and get enough sleep. Lots of caffeine or excessive alcohol consumption may further increase already existing anxiety, therefore you may want to think about reducing your consumption.

Avoid Stereotyping, Keep an Open Attitude

Classifying and categorizing reality as we see it is a natural process of the human mind as it helps us to simplify a complex world to make it graspable. However, stereotyping people and cultures can have a detrimental effect as it may lead to overgeneralizations and may therefore close your eyes for internal differences while not leading to a genuine understanding of the culture and people. Try to keep an open mind, observe without judging and try not to judge people’s behaviour by the norms you might use in your home country as you would then only close yourself off from a learning opportunity. Also, try not to criticise everything about the new culture you are to encounter and refrain from idealising home. If things frustrate or annoy you, try to keep your sense of humour as the ability to laugh things off can be very useful. Be curious, try to tolerate differences and respect others.

Keeping a Journal

Some people recommend keeping a personal journal where you can put down in writing everything about your stay abroad, from your reasons to go abroad, your expectations before arrival, to the experiences you make, difficulties you encounter and lessons learnt. This can help recognize potential signs of a ‘Culture Shock’ but at the same time may become one of the most-valued memories of your stay abroad in retrospect.

Tips for Coping with a Different Academic Environment

An academic stay abroad also brings about an unfamiliar academic environment which may differ in many ways from that you are used to. Here is some advice that might be useful:

Get Yourself Informed

Information is key, therefore make sure you attend any orientation or registration events offered, study the information that you receive carefully and read up further details online. This will help you learn about services on offer, locations and organisational and administrative matters. Furthermore, being informed enables you to make use of the resources available and to get an idea of where to look for information you might be looking for later on.

Brace Yourself for Difference

Depending on what kind of academic environment you are used to, studying a semester or two abroad will confront you with more or less differences in various aspects. Prepare yourself for some aspects will most
probably be new and unfamiliar to you, may it be in teaching or learning styles, communication and interaction with peers and lecturers, types of examination, content, didactic methods etc. Some of these differences you will encounter may be bigger, others smaller; some you might enjoy, others you might dislike – which is perfectly fine. In any case, try to experience these differences with an open mind and see them as an opportunity to immerse in a different academic system. Do not reject and judge everything unfamiliar to you, but see it as a learning experience that is part of your exchange.

Communication and Interaction

Depending on your host university and potentially the individual course and lecturer, communication and interaction in class may differ substantially from what you are used to. Try to see this change as part of your exchange experience, and observe the behaviour of local students in class. However, even if your communication is different from the way local students interact, do not hesitate to ask for further clarification in class if you feel it is necessary.

Managing your Workload and Exams

Studying in a different academic system may mean that the workload is distributed in a different way than what you are used to. There may be a different amount of assignments during the semester, or exams taking place throughout the semester, which requires you to organize your studies differently than at ETH Zurich. Make sure you know about your individual courses’ requirements and assignments, discuss with local students to get a better idea of the workload if needed. Keep track of any assignments that may be due and ensure that you allow sufficient time during the semester for thorough preparation. In general, start early with your exam preparation and allow sufficient time to study to avoid any additional stress.

Returning Home

After a period abroad, also returning back home can bring about some uncertainty as you may undergo a process of re-adjustment in your place of origin. Such re-entry problems are not to be underestimated as they are usually not anticipated and might therefore catch you off guard. Keep in mind that your stay abroad might have influenced your perceptions, thinking and personality. Some differences might only occur to you after your return when you are confronted with people who have not undergone the same experiences as you. You may also face stereotypes or uncertainty over your personal identity. In addition, there might have been changes in the lives of your family and friends while you were abroad that you did not witness. Your social network may be happy about your return, yet your friends also got used to your absence. They may therefore not always remember to engage you in their activities, forgetting that you may not have as active a social life as
they have shortly after your return from abroad. Do not hold it against them, but try instead to proactively get involved and reconnect with your social network.

As with your stay abroad, it is important to be patient with yourself and give yourself sufficient time to re-adjust. Furthermore, prepare yourself for some potential difficulties when returning home, i.e. do not necessarily expect everything to have remained just as you have left it. It may well be that both you and your surroundings have changed in the meantime, which may call for a reintegration which can at first be surprising and distressing. Try to actively re-establish contact to people whom you were close to before and be open for new contacts. After all, try to see your re-entry process as an intriguing part of your period abroad and try to appreciate the various experiences it brings with it.

Erasmus Student Network (ESN)

Would you like to stay in touch with international students after returning from your own period abroad? ESN is a non-profit student network that organises cultural and social events, informs and supports exchange and visiting students, and offers further services such as the tandem language exchange and the mentoring programme. You can join the ESN team, become mentor for incoming mobility students in Zurich or take part in weekly events organized by ESN – just visit www.zurich.esn.ch→, send ESN Zurich an email and they will get in touch with you!

Psychological Counselling

If you have trouble settling back in after returning from a period abroad, you may want to talk to professional counsellors. The Psychological Counselling Center of the University Zurich and ETH Zurich→ can help overcome personal difficulties, problems with studies but also with re-adjustment problems after a stay abroad. Their services are free of charge, completely confidential and available in several languages.