

## 7 Living Abroad

There will come a day when your pre-departure planning comes to an end. Whether you have done everything you intended to or whether you haven't, your departure day will arrive. You will turn up at the airport, probably feeling nervous and excited and, after anywhere from a few hours to a few days of travelling, will arrive in your new country. You'll have the chance to put all your plans and goals into practice, discard some of your plans in favour of new ones, and learn how to live in your new surroundings.

### Heads up

You will probably be eager to get to your new university and start to settle in. Bear in mind, though, that it is likely that you will arrive in your new country with a lot of adrenalin in your body from the excitement, as well as jet-lagged and tired from tying up loose ends over the past few days. And even if you are a seasoned traveller, arriving in a new country as a student and not a tourist can be quite different: this is, after all, where you will live your life for the next few months/years and you have probably done a lot of planning for this moment. You will also have said goodbye temporarily to friends and family. So be aware that you will probably be in a heightened state of emotion, and that this may manifest itself in feeling disoriented, overwhelmed or just exhausted when you first arrive. Be gentle with yourself, and give yourself what you need to get ready for the opportunities that are coming your way.

“ Before you leave it is stressful, when you arrive it is stressful . . . one week later you are having the time of your life and won't look back.

Kylie, who has studied abroad several times ”

## Settling in

### Arrival and customs

When you first arrive in your new country, you will have to be cleared by Customs and Immigration. If you have travelled before, you will be used to this, but remember that every country is different and has different procedures and laws.

As an international student, clearing Customs will probably be more complex than if you were entering as a tourist. You will have to show all of your documents – including passport, student visa, possibly your immunization documents and evidence of your acceptance into an institution as a student. In many places, you will also be asked to complete an Immigration and Customs declaration form. You may have to undergo an interview, where you will be questioned and have your documents reviewed. There may be fees payable at this time, which sometimes involves waiting in yet another queue. Depending on the country and the time of day, this process might be simple, or quite involved and lengthy.

### Tips for negotiating customs

It is very important that you do not make any false statements in your documentation. Be polite to customs and immigration officials, but don't be over-talkative or long-winded.

If the documentation is in a language that you are not yet comfortable with, see if it is available in your own language, or find someone who can help you so that you can be sure that you understand what you are declaring.

Never make jokes about having bombs or weapons in your luggage; customs officials are obliged to take all comments seriously.

Once you have been cleared by Customs, you will be allowed to officially enter the country, at which point local laws come into effect. You will then have to pick up your luggage, and it will probably be inspected and X-rayed. You may be asked to unpack your bags – if you are asked to do so, be polite and patient.

### *Unexpected events*

The chances are very high that, if you have prepared well, there will be no difficulty in clearing Customs and Immigration. However, if something goes wrong, it is important that you have researched beforehand what your rights are. You might be asked, for example, to have a private interview, or to be searched in detail. This may even include a strip search. It is important that you don't panic, and you will have to use your own intuition and discretion to work out what is going on. The rights that you have in this situation vary

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from country to country, but you should feel free to ask politely what the problem is, and you might be able to make a phone call if the problem does not get immediately resolved, or ask the person dealing with you to call your embassy for assistance.

**In and around the airport**

Whether you are being picked up, or finding your own way to the university or your accommodation, the first thing you should do after clearing Customs is to organize some cash, if you are not already carrying local currency. Bear in mind the following:

- Airport exchange rates are notorious for being high. Change only enough money to get you through the first day or two of your trip and organize the rest later.
- Be conscious of security – there may be pickpockets around. Don't leave your luggage unattended.
- If you have to catch public transport, try to buy something small in the airport, so that you can change your large notes; many buses and trains require exact or close-to-exact change and may not be able to handle a larger note.
- If you need to use the phone, consider buying a phone card, or make sure you have the correct change.

As you leave the airport and travel to your destination, bear in mind that your body might be exhausted or jet-lagged, as well as running on adrenalin from the nerves and excitement. All of these factors can affect your decision-making abilities so be aware that your judgement may be affected, and take extra care.

If you have to cross roads, remember that drivers might be on the opposite side of the road from what you are used to, and that you might find the traffic around you unpredictable. Be especially vigilant until you get used to it.

**The first few days**

Occasionally, you may be thrown right into your programme on arrival, especially if you are part of an organized exchange. In most cases, though, you will have a few days before your official commitments begin. During this time, there are a number of things you might do to help yourself feel more comfortable and confident in your new surroundings.

## Safety

Register with the police, if applicable. This may be mandatory for all foreign visitors, required only of visitors from certain countries, or not necessary at all. To register, you will usually have to go to the police station and show your passport and documents of student status, and might have to fill out a declaration form about your background and intentions in your new country. In some cases, you will be able to register by phone or through a hotel or other accommodation. (If you are travelling with a partner and/or children, you will all need to be present to register.)

Register with your embassy/consulate, if applicable. Most students never do this, but if you are in a place where there is political or civil unrest, letting your embassy know that you are in the country can provide an extra level of safety and protection. Phone them first to find out how to proceed.

Call home to tell your family/friends that you have arrived safely.

## Orientation

Attend any orientation workshops offered by your programme or university. It is worth attending them even if you think you already know the content – you might learn something, and it is a good way to meet people in a similar situation and staff and faculty who may be able to help you. You might also take advantage of a guided tour of your local area and/or campus to help you to orientate yourself geographically.

## Practicalities

Organize your health card, if applicable. This may include both temporary health care and applying for longer-term cover, if you have not been able to do this from home.

Open a bank account. This might be especially important if you are staying for a while. Make sure you have all your documentation with you. Be prepared for the process to take longer than you anticipate.

“ *There can be a lot of bureaucracy to battle when living outside your home country. Opening a bank account, renting a flat, obtaining a national insurance number were all more difficult for me. It was very frustrating and took a lot of patience.*

Annabelle, a Canadian student studying in the UK

If you have to buy new clothing when you arrive, you may need to do this in your first few days as well. Ask around to find out where to shop for the best prices and quality.

**Transport**

Get to know your local transport system. How will you get to the campus? What routes go to the local shops or other facilities? How early and late does public transport run – on weekdays? on weekends? Find out about the most efficient and cost-effective way of using public transport. Can you buy a transit pass? Are there student discounts available? Should you buy tickets ahead of time or when you get on? How do transfers work, if applicable. (You might need one of your passport photos for your transit pass.)

**University**

Follow the instructions you have received from your university as to how to register your arrival. Organize your

- student card
- library card
- computer access
- sports facilities card
- other relevant documents.

Pay any fees you need to pay. Get receipts.

If you have not yet chosen your university courses/subjects, do this as soon as you can. Find out how to register in the subjects you want and do this. Find out if you have to sign up for tutorials, or laboratories, and do this – remember that these may be separate from lectures. Make sure there are no clashes in your timetable.

When you have received confirmation of your enrolment, buy the relevant textbooks, stationery and equipment.

Get to know the libraries around you. Which catalogue system do they use? What are their opening hours? Will you use one library in particular, or will you need access to several different ones. Are there computer facilities you can use for word processing, internet? What are the restrictions? If applicable, find out whether there are libraries in the community which have resources in your home language, if you need them (these may be part of the university, or may belong to a community organization).

**Socializing**

Take the time, in your first few days, to introduce yourself to those around you, including your roommates, neighbours, programme organizer, departmental staff and so on. You may find yourself doing a lot of 'extroverting' in your first few days – if this is exhausting for you, make sure you also give yourself time to yourself to rejuvenate.

## Housing

You may have to do an inspection of your new housing, and report its current condition. It's important that you do this accurately and promptly – if there is damage when you leave, it will be assumed that you caused it unless you reported it in the initial inspection, and you will have to pay for it.

When you arrive in your 'permanent' accommodation, or if you are staying in temporary accommodation for more than a day or two, unpack and try to personalize your space. Putting up some photographs or favourite pictures on the wall, and perhaps having your favourite blanket on your bed, can help you to feel more settled.

### TIP

If you are staying in temporary accommodation, don't forget that you will have to update your address when you know what your permanent address will be. You will need to tell the university, your service providers (phone, internet and so on), the police and embassy (if applicable), banks and, of course, your family.

Depending on your housing situation, you may have to organize a telephone account, an email account, rent payments and so on. Try to avoid signing up for services without shopping around; other students especially will be able to offer suggestions about convenient and affordable service providers. You may have to wait for some services to take effect.

You may have to buy furniture. The university may be able to give you advice about how to get the kind of furniture you need. Don't forget about second-hand furniture from other students.

### Heads up

Many students report that dealing with bureaucracy in their new country is the most challenging aspect of their experiences abroad. Sometimes, you will just have to patient and keep trying until you are successful; sometimes you may have to enlist the help of the appropriate person at your new university to help you. These problems can be exacerbated by language problems, so enlisting the help of a local can sometimes be the only solution. Try to be patient.

### *Rubbish and recycling*

Find out what is expected of you in terms of disposing of rubbish and/or recycling. Many countries have fines for littering and strict guidelines for

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disposing of waste. You may have to pay to have your rubbish removed. There may be recycling plants or systems you can take advantage of, which you will need to know how to use.

*Laundry*

Find out where you can do laundry. How do you pay? You might be able to get a pre-bought card, which can save you money, or you might need coins of a particular denomination. Planning this in advance can save you hours of wandering around shops asking for change every time you do your laundry. Check whether there are dryers available.

**TIP**

Many students report that backpacks make an excellent temporary laundry basket.

**● Culture shock**

At some point after arriving, possibly almost immediately, you are likely to experience culture shock. This is the term given to the feelings associated with learning to adjust to new culture, lifestyle, climate, food, and expectations. If you are working in a different language, it might be even more challenging, but culture shock can be just as significant without the language challenges.

Important things to remember about culture shock:

It can affect even very experienced travellers.

It is a normal and necessary part of an experience abroad.

It is not a sign of weakness.

It will probably subside with time.

It is sometimes sudden and unexpected, but more frequently sets in slowly, perhaps without you even realizing it is happening.

There are various stages of culture shock. You may experience all or some of these stages, possibly in different sequences.

It is common to feel excitement, possibly even euphoria when you first arrive in a country. This may last several weeks. At some point, though, it is likely that the novelty of your new surroundings will wear off and you may find yourself feeling sad or frustrated with the differences in your new country. Sometimes, this can manifest itself in depression or mood swings. It is important to remember that you will adjust, although perhaps only partially, and that this is a normal part of the process.

“*The first month will be great, the second and the third can be hard because it is no longer exciting. You may get lonely or even bored. If you can get through these feelings, you will have a great experience.*

Chantal, a Swiss student on exchange”

One of the defining characteristics of culture shock is that the small, everyday things you take for granted become a big deal. This can leave you feeling exhausted and stressed, without really knowing why. For example, going into a supermarket and being faced by different colours and different brands can leave you overwhelmed, but it is easy to dismiss your feelings as being silly ('I just went shopping! What's the big deal?') If drivers drive on the other side of the road in your new country, you will find yourself having to override your instinct whenever you drive or even cross the road, which can leave you physically and mentally exhausted. It is important not to underestimate how difficult these small things are in a different place, and how much stress they can put on you and your relationships.

You may be suffering from culture shock if you:

- Feel extreme homesickness.
- Feel depressed.
- Have difficulty concentrating.
- Find small things overwhelming and seemingly impossible.
- Find that your self-esteem has gone down and you have lost your confidence.
- Are tired and/or having difficulty sleeping.
- Find that you have lost your sense of humour.
- Feel frustrated or hostile towards your hosts or host university or country.
- Find yourself avoiding new situations, including socializing.
- Develop unusual health concerns or physical problems.
- Are having fights or disturbances in your relationships.

“*The cultural differences sometimes show up when you least expect it. The things that might seem the most natural to you could be weird or even rude to people from other cultures.*

Jakob, in Hungary”

**Heads up**

The 'curve' associated with culture shock is well documented because it is such a common experience. If you see it out, it will get better, although you may not believe that until you have gone through the curve.

**Negotiating culture shock**

Time will help, but there are also a number of things you can do to mitigate the effects of culture shock.

- Gather as much information about your new country as you can. You will be faced with surprises, but you can also prepare yourself for what will come. Being prepared will help to make those situations less stressful, and may give you some guidance as to how to behave in a particular situation. Especially, be aware of the dos and don'ts of a culture. Ask questions in your first few weeks to find out what is acceptable and what is not.
- Be aware of your new country's attitudes towards people from your home country.
- Make new friends in your new country. Ask them about appropriate behaviour.
- Don't be afraid to talk about how you are feeling. The International Student Centre may provide opportunities to share your emotions with other international students. Try to keep these conversations positive – keep the focus on how you are feeling and how you can cope, rather than on all the shortcomings of your new country.

*You can look forward to great experiences – but prepare yourself to be lonely too. Once in a while you feel down and cry a little, but that's part of the experience. When you think back, you only remember the good stuff.*

Christopher, who has studied abroad three times

- Contact your family and friends back home.
- Try to understand the reasons behind the things you see around you. This will help to counteract the sense of their strangeness and unfamiliarity, and may make them less confusing or threatening.

**Heads up**

We know family members back at home who have been so concerned that their loved one is suffering from culture shock and/or homesickness they have offered to pay for them to fly home again! This is rarely a useful solution, even if it is tempting at times. If you can make it through, things will improve and you will learn about yourself in the process. If you give up, your self-esteem and confidence might be affected and you might not want to take the risk next time. (With longer programmes, by all means go home for a holiday, but it is a good idea to wait until your initial period of adjustment is over.)

- Be positive about your new country, and try to avoid constantly comparing your new country with your own.
- Keep a journal to record your feelings.
- Exercise and get plenty of sleep (more about this in 'Staying Healthy').

**TIP**

As soon as you can, try to establish a positive routine for yourself. Make sure you include in your routine things that make you feel happy, energetic and strong. Try to stick to your routine even on days when you are feeling sad or overwhelmed. Having a routine will help you to feel grounded, as well as helping you to be more productive once you have study commitments to get through.

- Take breaks – read a book in your own language, watch a favourite movie, or talk to others who speak your language or who come from your own country. Be aware though, of not letting this become a crutch which prevents you from having to adjust to your new culture.
- Keep your long-term goals in mind. If you remember that this process is part of who you want to be and who you want to become, you will find the short-term challenges easier to cope with.

**TIP**

If you are in a longer programme, especially at the post-graduate level, you may find the effects of culture shock lingering long after you are over the initial adjustment phase. If you find that you are physically or mentally suffering from culture shock over a significant period of time, you may need to seek help from a doctor or a counsellor.

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*Remember that just because somebody does something in a different way does not make it wrong and it doesn't make it right . . . it is just the way it is. Go into another country with an open mind and learn something from your experience.*

Nira, a US student in Sweden

**Social conduct**

Culture shock affects every bodily sense. You will be experiencing new smells, new sights, new sounds, new tastes and new tactile experiences. But one of the most challenging aspects of culture shock is that you have to adjust to new rules of social conduct.

There is no definitive list of dos and don'ts for adjusting to a new set of guidelines for social conduct. Like all communication, what is deemed

**Heads up**

One of the most frustrating things students report about being abroad is being faced with stereotypes and inaccurate representations of their home country. For example, we have been struck by the number of Canadians who genuinely seem to think that kangaroos hop down the main streets of Sydney (we tell them that the kangaroos are treated the same way as all the bears walking down the streets of Toronto . . .). You will rapidly work out your own ways of dealing with these kinds of stereotyped questions. It can be fun to work out where the stereotypes are coming from (for example, a famous movie or book). Be patient and maintain your sense of humour. On more serious issues (politics, cultural assumptions about beliefs or social structures), you may feel the need to 'defend' your country. Be clear that you are speaking only for yourself and that you do not represent an entire nation. Try to avoid giving more information than the situation demands, or you might be perceived as socially awkward. It can help to remember that the person you are talking to is probably not trying to be offensive or rude. If you need to give vent to your feelings, do so in your journal. Be aware of your own tendency to stereotype and be willing to have your beliefs about your new country challenged.

appropriate is contextual and shifts according to who you are talking to and what you are saying. However, the following are some things to be aware of.

### *Greetings*

Learn the appropriate ways of addressing people for the place you are in. There may be different greetings for different levels of authority, job type, gender, and so on. If you are overly casual, you may offend. Make sure you understand the differences between addressing the people you know and those who are unfamiliar to you.

### *Language*

Try to use local phrases even if you do not speak the language properly. You may be invited to speak your own language, but your effort to use your new language will usually be appreciated. Remember that some languages differentiate between informal and formal address. Expect to make mistakes, and don't be afraid to take risks. Try to avoid using slang expressions or clichés, as these can often be misunderstood.

### *Physical contact*

You may find that expectations around appropriate physical contact are different from what you are used to, and you may feel uncomfortable. Remember that this discomfort goes both ways – the person you are talking to may also be uncomfortable. You may also have to adjust to different levels of physical distance when having a conversation, and you may find that people will change how they are positioned when they are talking to you. For example, in some cultures, it may be inappropriate to stand when someone else is sitting, or to be at a higher level than the person you are conversing with. Take cues from the people around you.

### *Negotiating prices*

Be attuned to whether it is socially acceptable to negotiate over the price when you are making a purchase. In some places, this is a necessary part of the process; in others it might be insulting to the seller. It is often all right to politely suggest that the price is a little more than you were hoping to pay, and then take your cue from the seller as to whether this can be changed.

### *Subtext*

When you are trying to cope in a second language, or even if you are working in your native language, you may not be attuned to the subtleties of language such as subtext and euphemism. It may seem that someone is saying one thing on the surface but actually means something entirely differ-

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ent. Don't assume that the people around you are doing this to make you feel left out – their meanings are probably just taken for granted.

*Dating*

The unspoken rules of dating and sexual conduct differ enormously between countries. Be aware that your behaviour might be misinterpreted as a result of different cultural 'signals'. The expectations surrounding how a date might proceed, and who pays for what, might be different. Rules surrounding appropriate physical and sexual contact might also be confusing. Be clear about what you want and be assertive if you feel that your boundaries are not being respected.

*Taking photographs and other recording*

Avoid photographing people without permission. Some people – such as street performers – may demand some form of payment if you want to take a photograph. Respect this. Be aware that some buildings or artefacts may have religious or cultural significance and it may be offensive to take photographs. Copyright protections might also limit what you are allowed to record; this is often true in museums, art galleries and theatres. Err on the side of caution and people will usually tell you if you have made a mistake. Always obey signs that specifically ask you not to take photographs – and don't try to cheat by taking photographs with your phone or other unobtrusive technologies.

*Time and clocks*

You may have to adjust to different expectations around time and punctuality. In some places, you are expected to meet someone or turn up at a party at exactly the time mentioned, or even early, while in other places, this is a rough guide only and most people will be much later. Public transport systems may also be affected by these assumptions.

*Drugs and alcohol*

Laws about who is allowed to drink and when differ enormously in different parts of the world. You also need to be aware that, beyond the legal restrictions, different cultures have different attitudes towards what is appropriate behaviour and usage.

*Conversation*

Casual conversation is often full of cultural and local references, which can make you feel very left out. You will have to choose whether you ask about them as they come up, or go along with it and figure it out later. You will

**Heads up**

Many students report feeling that they lose some of their identity when they are studying abroad, at least initially. You may find that you are not as confident as normal, or that things you are usually good at are an effort. Most notably, students often report that their sense of humour gets lost for a while – this can be because of language challenges or simply because your sense of humour is culturally specific. It might also be because you are stressed and absorbing a lot of newness. It will come back.

often be able to find some friends you trust who will happily fill you in. Making friends can be a crucial part of overcoming culture shock, too, so it is worth taking the time to understand what they are talking about.

*Dress codes and fashion*

You will quickly get a sense of what people around you are wearing, and whether your own dress codes are appropriate. You may need to ask for some guidance on what to wear on particular occasions, especially if you are unsure just what is meant by phrases such as ‘formal’ or ‘informal’, which are often very specific to certain social groups or contexts. Many dress codes will be culturally specific, so research how your dress code might be perceived.

*Politics*

If you are unsure of your environment, expressing your political beliefs may serve to alienate you despite your best intentions. What you feel comfortable talking about will depend on your context, including how long you are in your new country. If you do offer political opinions, make it clear that you are offering only your own perspective and that you do not speak on behalf of your entire country or community. Bear in mind that, in some places, you can be arrested for expressing certain political beliefs. Be clear about what those issues might be before you arrive. You might find a discernible difference, too, between what you feel comfortable discussing in the context of the classroom and what goes on in social settings.

*Gender issues*

The ways in which particular genders are treated and expected to behave may vary enormously from your home country. Sometimes you will find

gender roles very well defined and in other places expectations around gender will be more subtle. You may be accorded more, or less, freedom than you are used to. Ask appropriate people at your university for guidance about what is expected of you. Differences you might encounter include: who has authority and how this authority is exerted; expectations around social behaviour; assumptions about interests and hobbies; acceptable conduct around personal space and body-boundary issues; what kinds of friendships and relationships are socially acceptable; expectations around levels of education and potential career paths; assumptions about parenting roles and so on. Bear in mind that gender rules may or may not be applied to 'foreigners' in the same ways as to locals. In some cases, your new country will afford you a freedom you are not used to – take some time to figure out what these freedoms are, rather than assuming them.

### Heads up

Culture shock can be significantly exacerbated if you face some of the additional challenges we discuss later, including having a disability, identifying as lesbian, gay, bisexual or trans, or facing discrimination based on your race, skin colour, ethnicity or religion. Read our discussion of these in 'Additional Challenges'.

*As a girl from a traditional family, sometimes I couldn't 'relax' enough. Some of my friends and housemates from other cultures told me that I was too conservative. I wanted to stay true to my upbringing and to what my parents had taught me, but I wanted to be able to make friends and have fun too. It was hard to work it all out. These kinds of cultural challenges were quite difficult.*

Fatima, a Malaysian student, living in student accommodation in Ireland

### Foreign laws

When you are in another country, the laws of that country apply to you. Make sure you are aware of them. Even if you break the law unintentionally, you are still responsible for your actions.

### *Housing*

When you travel abroad, you are likely to experience culture shock in relation to your housing and accommodation. You may be staying in a form of accommodation that you are unfamiliar with, but even if you are staying in a very similar style of housing to what you are used to, it will probably be very different. If you are sharing with other students, you are likely to find that language and culture differences affect a variety of different concerns, from study habits, to meal arrangements to personal hygiene, to furniture choices to meal times.

### *Conflict resolution*

You will probably also encounter differences in the way people resolve conflict, especially when you are sharing housing. Patience and strong communication are probably the best tools you can use to counteract these problems.

**TIP**

There are many housing difficulties which you will need to learn to negotiate and which are just part of your experience studying abroad. However, if you find that your housing situation puts you in a dangerous or unsafe position, don't be afraid to pursue other options. Advisors at your university will usually be available to help you with this. Emergency housing is sometimes available.

## ● **Building community**

One of the things that will probably be important to your capacity to adjust to your new home will be the ability to build community. This involves not only making friends, but also having social contact and getting to know the people in your area, even if they are not necessarily friends. Community is not just something that happens. When you are abroad, you will probably have to make the conscious effort to get to know people and build community. The following offers you some ideas about how you might do this.

“ *You meet lots of people but become close to only a few of them. Having good friends is essential, but rushing to become close to people is not the solution.*

Amy, a post-graduate student in France ”

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Building community is not just about making friends. It's also about feeling as if you belong, and know the local area. Take the time to introduce yourself to local shop assistants, for example, or the staff in a local coffee shop. You may never say much more to them than a few words of polite conversation, but being recognized can help to make you feel like you belong.

Take every opportunity to find out about events on campus. At the beginning of the school year or term, there may be some kind of fair which will give you information about all the student groups on campus. See what's around, join a few things you are interested in, and sign up for some email lists.

**Heads up**

Many student groups these days will have listservs, email lists or online forums, which you can sign up to. Getting onto them can be an important way of finding out about upcoming events, and getting involved in discussions, so make sure you sign up.

Check out student notice boards in the library, in common eating areas, in your department, in your college or residence, as well as bulletin boards in the local shopping centre, community centre, church and so on to find out what is going on.

Choose some events that seem interesting. Make the effort to go and chat to people. Go to departmental parties or events, even if you don't know anyone.

**Heads up**

Get involved with social activities as soon as you can – many students report that friendships are formed quickly and that it is easy to be left behind if you wait too long to get to know people.

Try to attend some regular events. Often, you might not get to know someone until you have both been going to the same event several times. There is something about seeing someone over and over which tends to open up the possibility of friendship.

Be open to a diverse group of friends and people to have fun with. Try not to restrict yourself to people from your home country or people who speak your language.

*Don't just hang out with other exchange students, although it might be tempting. Take the opportunity to get to know the locals. You'll want people to visit when you go back for a holiday!*

Zivon, from St Petersburg, studying in Buenos Aires

Make the effort to talk to a classmate in a break during lectures or before a tutorial. Invite people to share meals with you.

Get to know people in the wider community. Find out about community events that interest you and attend them regularly. It can be great to meet people who are not students – it gives you a break from thinking about your studies, as well as helping you to meet more locals.

#### Heads up

Don't be afraid to let people know that you are new to town. People often enjoy sharing their home town with visitors, and might offer to show you things you would never find on your own.

Take advantage of trips and excursions organized by your international student centre, or residency – these are often great ways to explore your local area and meet people, and are often reasonably affordable.

Volunteer for an organization you care about in your new community –

#### Heads up

If you are an introvert, it can be very exhausting having to be sociable a lot of the time. You may find that you need to 'extrovert' more than you are used to. Make sure you give yourself time to yourself to rejuvenate, but try not to let yourself get isolated. You could tell yourself that you will go to a party, for example, for one hour and then see how you feel. You might stay longer, and you might not, but you are at least making contact with those around you.

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this can be a terrific way to stay active, get to know people and learn about your new environment, as well as helping to keep your self-esteem high.

It takes time to build community and even longer to make friends. You may not make a huge number of very close friends, but it shouldn't take too long before you start to feel a bit more relaxed in your new environment. Make sure you keep up the attempt to socialize beyond the first few weeks and make it a priority for your whole study abroad.

### ● Academic adjustment

University cultures differ not only from country to country but also between universities. In order to adjust to a different university culture and make the most of your time abroad, there are a number of things that you need to be aware of. Knowing the right questions to ask can be most of the battle. Some of the questions will be specific to your particular discipline or field of study.

#### Student participation

Is your study based on lectures, tutorials, practicals, lab work? Each of these has different expectations regarding student participation. Lectures, for example, often ask students to listen and take notes, whereas a tutorial might demand active participation and discussion. Find out when it is appropriate to ask questions, and to discuss.

Are you expected to be active or passive as a student? Are you expected to quietly take notes, or can you ask questions? Are you responsible for your own learning or are you led through the process more directly?

What kinds of participation are expected? Students who are used to being silent and taking notes are often shocked by some universities' cultures of rigorous debate and questioning. If you are used to discussion, it can be hard to adapt to a more reserved educational atmosphere.

Should you raise your hand before you speak? Some teachers encourage open debate; others regulate discussion in various ways. The students will often determine what goes on in the classroom in this regard.

**TIP** Even if your destination university seems very similar to your own, it is worth checking basic guidelines for conduct.

#### Teacher/student relations

How are you expected to treat your teachers? Find out what you should call them. In some places, teachers are called Professor or Doctor, while in other

places it is more appropriate to use first names. There may be a difference between how you are expected to interact with senior faculty and with more junior members.

Is it appropriate to email or phone your teachers? Do they hold office hours? Do you need an appointment? When are you allowed to talk to them? (Tip: Make sure you use appropriate email communication. This usually involves fairly formal language, and a clear, precise style.)

What are appropriate modes of conduct towards teachers? For example, in some countries, it is impolite not to offer teachers expensive gifts or tokens of appreciation. In other countries, this might be highly inappropriate (or just unnecessary).

**TIP**

If you want to continue some of your traditions in a context where they might not be understood, explain why you are doing it and what it means to you. For example, we know a number of students from Hong Kong and China who like to give their professors little gifts, and find that explaining this cultural tradition to their western professors helps them to avoid any misunderstandings.

Is it OK to argue with your teachers? In some universities, it is a sign of respect to agree with your teacher's every statement; in other universities, it is expected that you will engage and argue with your teachers, and your teachers may make provocative and controversial statements to get you thinking.

*In Australia, I called all of my university teachers by their first name, but in North America, I had to find out on an individual-by-individual basis what to call my teachers. Some were fine with being called by their first names; others were offended. It was also a huge shock to me that even post-graduate students raised their hands in class before speaking and waited to be called on, rather than regulating their own discussion.*

**Author insight:** Anna

**Assessment**

How are you being assessed? Is success based on memorizing large amounts of information and reproducing this in an exam or are you expected to synthesize, analyse and offer your own opinions? What is the grading scheme you are being assessed with? How does it work?

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*When I first arrived in Paris, I had to figure out everything by myself; to speak to each teacher to find out how many pages I had to write and what was expected – there were no standards for that. It was a great challenge to have to write two big essays in French at a high level; I had never handed in a paper in French before. But I worked really hard, studied at the Pompidou library and had a Russian friend who studied linguistics correct my papers. (I took her out for a night of free Danish beer afterwards.)*

Ingrid, studying in Paris

What are the different genres you are being asked to work in? An essay is different from a report. An oral presentation has different rules from written work. Are you expected to make use of technology (for example, graphics, powerpoint presentations, computer software)?

*The main challenge I had was to learn how to write 15-page research papers on literature in a language that wasn't my native language, and to actively take part in classes: the teaching methods were very different from back home. It turned out to be extremely gratifying and valuable in the end.*

Jaqueline, studying in Canada

**Ideas and research**

What is your university's attitude towards using other people's ideas without referencing your sources? In some universities, it is regarded as commonplace to use other people's ideas in your papers, but in many universities, this would be regarded as plagiarism (and therefore a form of cheating). Penalties for plagiarism can be very high – so make sure you know exactly what that means in your university.

What level of research is expected? This will often be made clear by your teachers but there might be assumptions made of which you are not aware. You might find yourself spending hours researching your topic in the library only to find that you were supposed to discuss your own ideas, or you might write a personal essay when you are expected to integrate extensive secondary sources.

## Deadlines

What is the attitude towards deadlines in your programme? In some places, deadlines are a rough guide only, while in others you will be penalized for handing work in late. If you have to hand in work late due to a personal emergency, or health issues, find out whether you can get an extension or special consideration, and what you need by way of documentation. Don't make assumptions either way.

## Getting help

Where can you go to ask questions? Familiarize yourself with the 'chain of command'. Who is the first person to go to for help? Who should you go to if there is still a problem?

What campus resources can help you academically? Are there tutors available for you to talk to? Writing centres? Faculty advisors who can help? Peer counselling? Workshops on developing academic skills? Is there help available for students who are working in a second language?

### TIP

Don't be afraid to ask, if you are unsure. Your colleagues and teachers will usually be happy to lead you in the right direction.

Many of these expectations are likely to vary from class to class or discipline to discipline, as well as culturally. You will get a very rapid sense of the culture you are working in. Sometimes you will make mistakes; that's fine. Just remember that there *are* differences, and that these can take a while to get used to.

*“ In my own university, I had teachers and people I could ask when I was making decisions about what classes to take, or how to do the work. Before I left for New Zealand, I planned everything beforehand, but then things changed and I had to make new decisions. I missed being able to get help from the usual places. It was probably good for me, but I still found it hard.*

Judith, a South African student studying  
environmental science in New Zealand

**Heads up**

You may find your academic work more challenging while you are abroad, and your grades may suffer as a result, along with your self-esteem. This is partly because you will be under more stress than usual as you deal with cultural adjustment and so you might not produce your best work. You might also be struggling with language differences, as well as a different set of expectations. It can take time to adjust to the new system.

If you find that these challenges start to affect your self-esteem, make sure you get involved in activities outside the classroom that can help you to feel good about yourself. Stay in touch with family and friends who can remind you of your strengths and what they love about you. You might also consider getting in touch again with your referees – they believed in you and supported you so they may be good people to remind you of your potential. Don't be embarrassed to talk to your supporters if you are struggling – they may have helpful advice, and many will have gone through similar situations and will be able to relate to your experiences. You might also consider talking to a learning counsellor at your university if possible, who may be able to offer you both practical and emotional help with dealing with your academic challenges. Bear in mind, too, that the students around you have had a lot longer than you to get used to the expectations and possibly the language. Be patient and give yourself time to adjust, and find ways of valuing yourself that aren't linked just to your academic work. There are so many things you can learn from studying abroad – enjoy them and allow yourself to grow and change as you go. And you may find that studying abroad gives you the chance to excel in new ways and with new opportunities.

*The language was a challenge to me. In the beginning I was really worried and I was so afraid to speak during seminars and classes. It was also quite a challenge to write academic English. But it was a great challenge, and I enjoyed seeing how I improved, month by month.*

Sara, a Scandinavian student studying in the UK

## ● Practicalities

### Driving a car

Some countries will allow you to drive using your home driving licence for a designated period of time. Beyond this time, you will probably need to get an international licence. If you are in a longer programme and can prove residency, it might be possible to apply for a local licence. This may involve re-sitting the driving test.

A few things you need to know:

- The country you are in may drive on the other side of the road from what you are used to. This can be quite disorientating.
- The local road rules and etiquette might be very different. Take time to familiarize yourself with the official rules of the road AND talk to a local about particular habits which you need to know about.
- Make sure you know what age you must be to drive, rent a car and so on – regulations differ from country to country.
- If you do intend to drive a car, make sure you have the relevant insurance. Insurance you hold at home might not be sufficient.
- If you are travelling with children, make sure that you have adequate seat belt and safety provisions that conform to local and international standards.
- Remember that culture shock and jet lag can leave you tired and disorientated, which may affect your safety on the road.

### Riding a bike

If you plan to ride a bike, or if you find that everyone around you owns a bike, ask round to find out where you can buy an affordable one. Find out:

- Are there bike paths you can use?
- What are the laws about helmets, bike lights, reflective gear?
- Where can you go to get help with your bike if you have a problem?
- What precautions can you take to prevent your bike being stolen? (It's worth investing in good locks if bike theft is a common problem, as it is on many campuses.)

### Finding the things you need

Linguistic difficulties aside, it can be very challenging to find the things you need in a new country. There are often different kinds of shops, so you won't

always know exactly where to look for what you need. In addition, there will be things available that you can't get at home, and other things that you might take for granted but that just aren't available in your new country.

The best way we have found of coping with this is to ask questions and to give yourself lots of time. Remember, too, that shopping might be a completely exhausting undertaking for a while until you get used to it, so try not to attempt too much at once and give yourself a break when you need to. Become familiar with the opening and closing times of the shops and restaurants around you, as these may be different from what you are used to.

*The best thing, and the most challenging thing, is that everyday life is suddenly exotic – even grocery shopping.*

Sam, an undergraduate living off-campus in the UK

### ● Money revisited

Hopefully, you have arrived in your new country with a detailed plan of how much money you have available to you and what your expenses will be. It is important to revisit this budget and see whether it works in practice. One way of doing this is to keep a detailed record of everything you spend over your first few weeks. Make sure you include every detail – even just very small things such as a few pages of photocopying or the cost of running your clothes through a washing machine. Don't forget to include the cost of phone calls home. After a few weeks, compare what you have spent with your budget and make whatever changes you need to make. Revisit your budget periodically throughout your study abroad.

**TIP** When you first arrive in a new country, you might be tempted to buy all sorts of new things and spend your money. Remember that you are here for a while and you have to make your money last. If there are things you really want to buy to take home with you, there will be time to do that later on. For now, be careful with your money until you work out what you can afford.

### Tips for saving money

As well as a budget for the whole of your trip, create weekly and/or monthly budgets. Stick to them!

Be aware of currency exchange rates. If you are continually changing money from your home currency to your new currency, but aren't taking into

account the fees you are paying, in your budget, you may have less money than you think you do.

Take advantage of student discount and special rates, for meals, entrance fees, attractions and so on. Sometimes, for example, museums may offer free or reduced-price-entry on particular days or at certain times, and the international student card might give you access to a variety of discounts.

Try to reduce costs by preparing your own food. It is often cheaper to take your own lunch, for example, than to eat in a café or restaurant. Eating places on campus may be cheaper than others, and your university may have special food plans which you can take advantage of. You might also split costs with a roommate or friend. Eating as a group can be an excellent way of saving money, dividing cooking responsibilities and making friends.

Take advantage of free community entertainment. Universities will often run free or cheap events for students.

Try to avoid convenience stores or specialized stores; often the same goods are available at cheaper prices in markets or supermarkets. Ask around to find out where other people shop.

Don't carry large amounts of cash around with you, and have a back-up source of money in case your credit cards, bank cards and so on are stolen or lost. Use credit cards sparingly – it can be very easy to load up a credit card without realizing how much money you are spending.

Many countries will offer return of sales taxes on particular goods when you leave the country. Find out whether this is possible in your new country. You will need to retain the receipts in order to claim the tax back.

If/when you travel, stay in youth hostels and student accommodation rather than the more expensive bed and breakfasts and hotels.

Hang out with other people who have similar financial situations as your own, to avoid being in situations where you are expected to spend a lot more money than you can afford.

Join university and local clubs and organizations which can help you to socialize and meet new people without over-spending.

**TIP**

Many phone companies will ask for an expensive security deposit if you want to be able to make international phone calls. There are many ways around this, including using service providers who allow you to pay-as-you-go, or phone cards which require a security number and offer reduced rates. If you have access to a computer with internet access, email or computer-generated phone calls can also be much cheaper than regular phone calls. Ask around and see what options are available to you.

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Find cheap ways of contacting your family and friends back at home – international phone cards, email, or online call programmes can be much cheaper than regular phone bills. Mobile/cell phones are rarely budget options.

**Heads up**

In some countries, such as Singapore, Israel and the UK, among others, you have to pay for a licence to own or to use a TV. In other places, especially North America or cities with high-density housing, you might have to pay for cable television in order to get any reception. Both of these things make watching television a much more expensive form of entertainment than it might be elsewhere.

**● Balancing study with work and travel****Heads up**

We know many students who had many great intentions of travelling while they were studying abroad, but found that they did not have the time, money or energy to do so. Perhaps they didn't budget thoroughly enough, or had unexpected financial challenges along the way. Often, their attempts to earn more money in order to allow them to travel or to deal with unexpected costs left them with no time to get away. In addition, the stresses of dealing with culture shock while trying to study in another country often leave students with no emotional or mental resources or energy left to negotiate yet more travelling or more cultural shock. Planning ahead might help you to mitigate this, but your plans might need to change; try to be kind to yourself if you have less energy, time or money than you had hoped.

Balancing study with work and travel can offer multiple benefits:

- Having a job is not only helpful for your budget, but can also help you to learn a language faster, to get to know more local people,

and to learn more about the place you are in, and help to overcome feelings of isolation and loneliness.

- You might make some friends.
- Having a job can also help you to feel more grounded, and less vulnerable to problems you might face in your study or in your housing situation.
- Travelling can help you to understand the place you are in at a much deeper level, you might make friends along the way, which can keep your stress levels down and your excitement levels up, and travelling can even help you to negotiate financial problems, as well as giving you some relaxation time.
- Both having a job and travelling can also boost your self-esteem and your confidence, which may help you to cope better with your university work.

*I found my study abroad really expensive. The UK cost much more than I anticipated. I worked out that if I spent my winter break – when I had no classes – in the Czech Republic, I could travel and also save some money, since Eastern Europe is cheaper. I flew with a budget airline and stayed in youth hostels. I also found someone else from my university who wanted to travel. I didn't really know him very well before we left, but we ended up becoming friends.*

Mike, a student from New Zealand studying in the UK

### ● Coping with holidays

One of the challenges facing international students is often what to do with university holidays. During holidays, local students may leave campus and return home to be with family. As an international student, you might be left on campus with nothing to do but imagine the fun your friends are having with their family, and getting terribly homesick for your own life at home. These can be times of terrible depression and disillusionment for international students.

Try to plan in advance what you might do. For example, find out what locals do to celebrate. Are there public festivities you can go to (perhaps with some friends)? Are there rituals and traditions that are public events that you can be part of?

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If many of your friends will be going to spend time with their families, are there other international students you could get together with? Even if you don't know them well, you might still have fun, and maybe make some new friends. Between you, you could cook a meal. If it is a holiday that is celebrated widely around the world, you could each cook something from your own culture that marks the occasion, and share it.

**Heads up**

If it is a holiday you celebrate at home, don't expect it to be the same as it is at home. You will probably only exacerbate your homesickness if it does not match up to your memories. Take the opportunity to create something new.

- Are there any resources on campus for international students during holidays?
- Could you volunteer your time to a local organization during the holiday (spend time with children in a hospital, or elderly people in a retirement home, or help out in a homeless shelter)?
- Could you take advantage of the holiday to go travelling (taking into account that the holiday might be celebrated across the whole country, and therefore limit your travel options)?

**TIP**

Try to avoid the temptation to use holidays as a chance to 'catch up' with work; you may be setting yourself up for isolation and loneliness. Plan a way to have some fun, even if you can't be with your family.

### ● **Changes at home**

It can be particularly challenging to be abroad when important events or changes are happening at home. You may feel alone and may find that your experience of culture shock is made worse when you are emotionally vulnerable. Try to find support, from a friend or a professional counsellor who can help you through the situation. Find ways to have frequent contact with those back home, and make sure they know that you are thinking about them.

You might face pressure from family or friends to return home before your programme ends, which you may or may not be able or willing to do. Try to think through the implications of your choices; you may need to get help doing this if you are very emotional. Try to weigh up the pros and cons of

returning permanently, returning for a short period or staying. Whether you stay or leave, seek help from an appropriate staff member on campus, who can help you to make arrangements, for example helping you to contact your teachers for extensions on your academic work. You may be able to access emergency funding from your university if needed. If a member of your family dies while you are abroad, you may be able to request a bereavement fare for the flight home – this can be cheaper than the normal fare (although often a student fare is still cheaper). Your travel insurance might pay for a return trip home in this scenario.

### ● **Setting goals**

Most students report that their time abroad went much more quickly than they anticipated. Try to keep a clear vision of your goals. If there are particular things you want to do or places you want to see, do them as you go, and plan how to fit them in. Remember that you might not get another chance soon to do some of the things that are unique to your area. Don't leave everything for a few weeks before you fly home again. You might need to come up with a detailed plan for each weekend, or holiday, so that you don't keep putting things off and never actually getting to them. When you arrive, it will feel like you have a long time to fulfil your goals, but the time will pass quickly once you are involved in studying, building community and your new life.

### ● **Maintaining flexibility**

In the first few chapters of this book, you probably noticed that we emphasized careful planning and meticulous organization. At some point or other, though, almost inevitably, your good intentions will fly out of the window because you will face unexpected challenges. Whether this is because the housing you accepted triggers off an allergy and makes you sick, or your passport is stolen, or a crucial course is suddenly made unavailable the year you need to do it, at some point (or several) you will need to adjust your plans and muddle your way through whatever challenges are thrown at you. This is part of the experience. You can and will cope, although you may have days where you wonder how it will be possible. It is one of the joys of studying abroad – you simply cannot plan for every eventuality and you will have to take a deep breath and improvise. You will bring together whatever resources you have to work through whatever challenges are thrown your way. And it will make a great story when you get home again.

*I had to become completely self-sufficient since I was basically on my own, and learned a lot from this. At one point, my passport was stolen a day before I was leaving on a trip. I had to figure out exactly who to talk to and what to do by myself, and had only part of a day to do it. I managed to get a replacement passport in time for my flight. I learned a lot from that experience.*

Sally, a US student in Europe

*Be aware that you can never be prepared for everything, and you will eventually be thrown on your own resources at some point – whether those resources are financial, emotional or psychological.*

Jessica, an English student who went to Canada to do her PhD, and decided to stay

Your time abroad will go quickly, so make sure you take advantage of every opportunity that comes your way, and learn everything you can. To make sure you can do this, you will need to look after your health and to stay safe, the topic of our next chapter.

### Further resources

- Craig Storti, *Figuring Foreigners Out: A Practical Guide* (Intercultural Press, 1999).  
A guide for business people on working across cultures, but useful for anyone dealing with cross-cultural communication. Storti's other books might also be useful.
- *Culture Shock! Country Guides* (Graphic Arts Books).  
[www.gacpc.com/culture\\_shock/cs.htm](http://www.gacpc.com/culture_shock/cs.htm)  
An excellent series of books offering advice on negotiating the local customs and etiquette of countries worldwide.
- The 'Living Abroad' series (Avalon Travel Publishing).  
<http://www.travelmatters.com/livingabroadin.html>  
A series of books offering comprehensive advice on living abroad in countries worldwide.

- The 'Live and Work' series (Globe Pequot).  
[www.globepequot.com](http://www.globepequot.com)  
A series of books offering comprehensive advice on living and working in countries worldwide.
- H. Ned Seelye and Alan Seelye-James, *Culture Clash: Managing in a Multicultural World* (McGraw-Hill, 1995).  
Offers discussion of negotiating cultural difference. Aimed at business people, but nonetheless useful for those studying abroad.