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**GO  
ABROAD**

WITH THE  
**UNIVERSITY OF  
MANCHESTER**

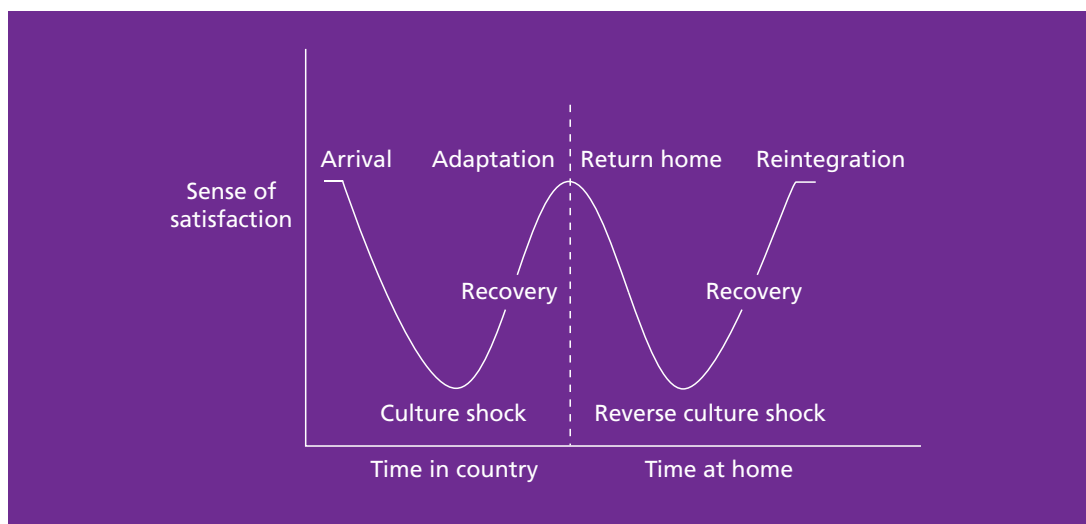
# Culture and integration



## Cultural adaptation

Whilst some students adjust to being abroad without much difficulty, many students do, to a greater or lesser extent, experience a variety of different physical and emotional symptoms as they adjust to a new lifestyle, new values, etc. So don't be surprised if you feel a bit impatient, confused, or anxious, or if you hit emotional highs and lows as you adjust – this is perfectly normal. Other natural and common symptoms you may experience include headaches, upset stomach, loss of appetite, irritation, fatigue, loneliness, feelings of inadequacy, loss of control, insecurity and panic. Such symptoms can be immediate or take several weeks to kick in. Symptoms are often worst during times of particular stress, such as after your initial arrival abroad, or during exam periods.

The pattern of highs and lows associated with culture shock are highlighted in this diagram, the W-Curve. Do note that this is a model only- not all students will necessarily follow this same pattern. Some students may skip whole stages, some may repeat some of the highs and lows several times before they feel settled abroad, and most students will have good and bad days within any particular phase. However, the W-Curve is helpful in understanding the sorts of phases you might go through as you adjust to being abroad, and also once you return home again.



**Arrival** – The first few weeks can be viewed as ‘honeymoon period’ where everything is new and exciting, with new places to discover, people to meet, and it seems like one big holiday.

**Culture Shock** – This is often followed by the period of real adjustment as you settle into your new routine. At times cultural differences may make you feel tired, frustrated or isolated. This is often a point at which you may feel homesick or at least crave familiar surroundings and practices.

**Adaptation** – You will gradually adapt to your ‘new life’, establishing new friends and developing an understanding of the way this ‘new world’ works. Ultimately you may well find that you don’t want to leave!

**Reverse culture shock** – Re-adjusting to life back in the UK can be just as difficult, and sometimes more so, than the adjustment process you go through whilst abroad. Day-to-day life may not be as exciting and stimulating as it was in a foreign country and your friends from Manchester may not be able to understand or be interested in your experiences abroad.

## Adjusting to life abroad

The following suggestions may help you with the challenges of cultural adaptation you may experience during your time abroad:

- **Familiarise yourself.** Getting to know your way around your new home, and making new friends will help you settle in, and stop you withdrawing or isolating yourself.
- **Immerse yourself** in the local society and the cultures within it. Meeting and interacting with local people, and reading and speaking the local language will help you join in with the local way of life.

- **Remember that you are not alone.** Everyone involved in a period abroad will be going through similar experiences, and talking to fellow students abroad will help you deal with your own cultural transition.

## Intercultural Communication



Some resources and possible reading that you might find useful in preparing yourself culturally for your time abroad include:

- **'Understanding Ways' by Kerry O'Sullivan.** If you only read one book to prepare you for your time abroad, make it this one! An invaluable insight into cultural adaptation.
- The film **'Cold Water' by Noriko Ogami** is about cross-cultural adaptation and the culture shock that 12 foreign students experience when travelling to the U.S. As they share their experiences and explore their sense of disorientation in a new environment, insights from both sides of the cultural divide come to light.
- **Alan Cornes'** book entitled **'Culture From the Inside Out: Travel and Meet Yourself'** guides you through a personal journey of considering how your own characteristics will affect your integration in a new environment.
- Watch **'Cold Fever'**. An Icelandic English-language film that follows a young Japanese man on his travels across Iceland, as he struggles with the language barrier and to make sense of the 'strange' people he meets along the way. It was jokingly promoted as the best Icelandic-Japanese road movie of 1995!
- **'The Exchange Student Survival Kit' by Bettina Hansel.** Aimed at US students undertaking homestays abroad, but contains some good tips that will be relevant to you

- **Craig Storti** has written several engaging and accessible books designed to prepare readers for the effects of culture shock, such as **'The Art of Crossing Cultures and Cross-Cultural Dialogues: 74 Brief Encounters with Cultural Difference'**, and **'Figuring Foreigners Out'**.
- For a more academic exploration of cultural difference, the following books may be of interest:
  - **Basic Concepts of Intercultural Communication** by **Milton J. Bennet**
  - **Intercultural Communication** – an advanced resource book by **Holliday, Kullman & Hyde**
  - **Studying Abroad/Learning Abroad** by **J. Daniel Hess**
  - **Stephen Clarke's series** of semi-autobiographical books about his relocation to Paris (**A Year in the Merde, Merde Actually** and **Merde Happens**) take a light-hearted look at cultural adaptation ideal for someone travelling to France, but are suitable for anyone moving to a new country.
- Watching films and reading novels set in your destination country will give you a flavour of the culture you are about to become a part of, particularly if this involves immersing yourself in a different language.

## Diversity and Identity



Cultural attitudes can differ vastly from country to country (and indeed these attitudes will not be uniform even within one country) – it's all part of what makes the world such a naturally interesting and diverse place. Being introduced to new customs and traditions will be an exciting part of your time abroad.

However, bear in mind that the UK is a comparatively liberal society, and that you may encounter attitudes abroad that are more conservative than you are used to.

Think about your own outlook and habits, and consider how they might be met in your host country. For example:

- **Alcohol** – do you know the legal drinking age for your host country, and the regulations for consuming alcohol in public places?
- **Smoking** – if you are a smoker, do you know the details of any smoking bans in operation in your host country?
- **Race, Ethnicity and Nationality** – Remember that by the very nature of being a foreigner, you are automatically a minority in your host country. This is likely to attract the attention of local residents, and will predominantly be a reflection of friendly and good-natured interest. However, it is best to avoid being overly conspicuous and to steer clear of any confrontational situations.

**Things to consider:**

- How is my ethnic group perceived in my host country?
- How should I react if I find something to be offensive?
- Is the person curious or do they have bad intentions?
- Am I used to being part of the majority at home but will be a minority abroad? Or vice versa
- Who should I contact if I do face racial or discriminatory incidents?
- **Religion and Spiritual Life** – Religion plays a role in many cultures around the world. Whether you practise a religion or not, going abroad exposes you to different belief systems, which gives you an opportunity to learn more about your host country's culture. Do your best to understand the majority religion being practised in your host country, especially if it is one you are largely unfamiliar with. It is a good idea to research religion in your host country before

you go abroad. Maybe you're used to being part of the religious majority at home, but will be part of the religious minority abroad. If you are planning to practise your religion abroad, ask locals or your host institution staff where you can worship.

You'll also want to find out what degree of religious tolerance there is in your host country.

As an example, since 2004, French law states that 'conspicuous signs' of religious belonging are banned in state schools, which goes for pupils and staff alike, as well as at university. Many support networks exist, including the 'Etudiants Musulmans de France' (EMF) and the 'Ligue Nationale des Musulmans de France' (LNMF), who help bring mutual understanding and awareness of more traditional Muslim practices in Higher Education.

### **Things to consider:**

- What is the dominant religion in my host country?
- Will I be part of the religious majority or minority abroad?
- Are there any laws regarding religion? Is there a separation between religion and government?
- How tolerant is the host country of other religions? What about atheists and agnostics?
- Is it safe for me to wear religious symbols or clothing?
- What are ways I can respect the religion in my host country and participate in cultural events, even if I don't practise that religion?
- **Gender** – take into account local attitudes towards dress and behaviour, perhaps particularly so if you are female. Be sensible and realistic about whether you should walk anywhere alone at night, or how it will be perceived if you wear a short skirt, or have bare shoulders.

- **Sexuality and LGBTQ+ Students** – Different countries and cultures can have varying laws, social norms, and attitudes towards sexual orientation and gender identity. Expressing your sexuality in an unfamiliar society requires sensitivity and an awareness that Western attitudes are not necessarily acceptable everywhere. Take your cue from the behaviour of local residents, and consider the following:
- How would public displays of affection particularly between same-sex couples, such as kissing or holding hands, be perceived in your host country?
- Are there any laws affecting sexual activity in any of the countries to which you are travelling? Singapore, for example, criminalises consensual private adult homosexual acts, as well as some heterosexual sex.
- What are the LGBTQ+ legal rights (both past and present) in your host country? Are there any active protections against discrimination based on sexual orientation or gender identity? Check [www.qrd.org/qrd/orgs/glb-campus.worldwide](http://www.qrd.org/qrd/orgs/glb-campus.worldwide) for an international listing of student LGB organisations, and [www.fridae.asia](http://www.fridae.asia) is a specific LGBT portal for the whole of East Asia.
- Is there an active LGBTQ+ community in the location of my placement? Does the host university provide gender inclusive facilities, i.e. gender-neutral bathrooms or LGBTQ+ friendly housing?
- Is it safe to be transgender in my host country?
- Will it be safe for me to come out whilst I am abroad?





**Useful websites:**

<https://www.gov.uk/guidance/lesbian-gay-bisexual-and-transgender-foreign-travel-advice>

<https://ilga.org/maps-sexual-orientation-laws>

<https://ilga.org/state-sponsored-homophobia-report>

<https://www.stonewall.org.uk/global-workplace-briefings>

It is wise to observe the manners and behaviour of local residents, be sensitive to local customs, and express yourself appropriately and respectfully. Make sure that you investigate and abide by any relevant laws and legislation for your destination country.

In previous years incidents were reported by students of discrimination on the grounds of ethnicity whilst in France, Italy and Mexico, but you should be aware that such incidents could potentially occur in any country.

## Tips for Integration

The feedback we receive from former study and work abroad students indicates that it is much more rewarding, both academically and personally, to integrate into local society and this should be your aim. Integration won't necessarily be easy but it is a realistic and achievable goal.

entirely of international and exchange students and, in non-English speaking countries, English-speaking expatriates. If you are a languages student, you could go down this route and have a great time but as the common language is very often English, development of your foreign language skills will be severely limited.

It is, however, natural that many of the early friendships you form will be with other international newcomers to your city as you will immediately have things in common (adapting to a new country and culture, setting yourself up with accommodation, figuring out the transport system, struggling with the language etc.). Also, they will probably be more open to forming new friendships.

Study abroad students should take part in the welcome events, trips and social programmes organised by their host university and international student societies such as **AEGEE** (the National Union of Students in Europe), **ESIB** (the European Union of Students in Europe) and **ESN** (Erasmus+ Students Network). These societies are intended to help students to discover their local culture and to familiarise them with the country in which they have come to live. However, note that international societies generally attract very few local students so regular social events can end up leading to further English-speaking friendships!

The key to your success in integrating is likely to be striking up friendships with locals with whom you share a common interest. You will almost certainly have to be more 'active' in making friends than perhaps you would be at home as most locals will already have established friendship groups. Wherever possible, you should live with locals (sometimes this is made more difficult by the fact that certain universities choose to house international students in the same halls and flats).

Get involved in social activities outside your study or work placement. Try and go to activities on your own or maybe with one person that you already know. Do it soon after you have arrived as friendships are often formed in the first few weeks of an activity or group.

Previously, Manchester students studying and working abroad have met local people by:

- joining a sports club
- taking up some local part-time work or volunteering
- enrolling on an adult education class at a local college
- joining a dance class
- joining a choir
- joining a film discussion group
- joining a university club or society
- getting involved with political groups
- advertising for a conversation or language exchange partner (many universities have special schemes which help you with this but you can also advertise on university noticeboards. Be careful to arrange to meet up with that person in a busy public place such as a caf , rather than your house/their house!).

If you are working, you might find it more difficult to find out about clubs, societies and social groups. However, a quick search online and through social media should help you to find out about the various groups in your area.

It is absolutely normal to feel uncomfortable when you are in a situation outside of your usual country and culture and meeting lots of new people, but remember, if you are friendly and smiley and chatty, people will generally warm to you. If you are in a non-English speaking country, don't worry too much about making mistakes in your new language, or getting it wrong, or people not understanding you – all of that is BOUND to happen until you find your feet. The ability to laugh at yourself and not take yourself too seriously is invaluable in these circumstances! If you remain quiet, then people

might think you come across as unfriendly or uninterested, so might not even make the effort. Do make the effort to talk to a coursemate during a break or to ask your workmate about their weekend when you have a spare moment – a good tip is to focus on asking the other person lots of questions about themselves. Most people enjoy the opportunity to talk about themselves to an interested audience, and that takes the pressure off you a bit as well!

Don't place all of the emphasis on making new friends. Little things like being recognised by the checkout assistant in your local supermarket can help you feel as though you belong, so make the effort to smile and make polite conversation. You might even want to let acquaintances know that you are new to the city.

Explore your host city – visit the museums and galleries, or take a book or magazine and go and sit and have a coffee in a nice café.

Integration is an ongoing process, so don't limit your attempts at it to the first month following your arrival, and make every effort to avoid the English-speaking international student trap!



*“ Studying abroad is more than a life-changing experience; it is a person-changing experience. The world is so big and so important, the least we can do is spend a little time exploring and learning from it.”*

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