

Culture shock: How to deal with the challenges of studying abroad

A guide for outgoing exchange students



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1 In a nutshell

Studying abroad 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 helps you prevent, recognize and cope with culture shock¹.

- 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 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, ESN 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 immersion into a new culture brings about, you can congratulate yourself: you are now ready and able to cope with differences 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.

2 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 realise 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

¹ Even though the term culture shock is sometimes controversial in academia, we have decided to use the term for the sake of comprehensibility. In our experience, the term has already found its way into colloquial language.

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 ETH 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 realise 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, must 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 to difference as you may realise that things can be done in entirely different ways. Most importantly, you will, after all, develop the ability to tolerate differences and cope with them while finding your very own way of living in another place and still maintaining your identity.

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3 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 include allergies, aches and pains, unsettled health, insomnia, 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



No matter how beautiful, unfamiliar sights might be not as enjoyable because of culture shock.

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 simplest problems, and others.

In general, we believe that you know yourself best and should therefore be able to realise 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.

4 Prevention and coping

Here are some tips to prevent or rather minimise the effects of culture shock and how to cope with it.

4.1 Thorough preparation

Before you leave your home, inform yourself about the place you will be going to (by reading books, looking up information on the internet, talking to students or other people who have already been to that place, etc.). This will give you a better idea of the place you are going to, help you develop realistic expectations and may prepare you for what you will probably encounter.

4.2 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". Language is a key factor for settling in and connecting with local people. 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.

► [See the courses and services offered by the Language Center of the University of Zurich and ETH](#)

4.3 Recognition and acceptance of culture shock

Keep in mind that culture shock is a natural reaction and part of a learning process with a positive outcome. Give yourself time and be patient with yourself. Be aware that there are ways to mitigate the symptoms and facilitate the acculturation process, and that support is available if you need it. Regard culture shock as part of your experience while abroad: Encountering acculturation difficulties can be seen as proof that you are deeply diving into a new culture and undergoing a learning process that will eventually leave you with new skills, attitudes, and a broadened horizon.

4.4 Familiar items

Surround yourself with familiar things in your new environment (speaking your own language, eating familiar food, watching your favourite TV show, etc.). This is certainly not an encouragement to shut yourself off from the new environment yet keeping some familiar items around you while dealing with the unknown can really help.

4.5 Social contact

Make sure you maintain a network of people you 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 in 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 care about and trust that counts.

4.6 Contact with 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 with local students might be limited. They might not try to actively establish new contacts or simply already have a busy schedule with their studies and extracurricular activities. It is therefore quite normal for exchange students to find themselves spending a lot of time with each other – 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. Volunteering in an organization or by joining a club of your interest, may it be sports, cinema or music is a good way to get in touch with locals.

4.7 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.



Working can help you cope. Working out in a group might be an easy way to meet other students or locals.

4.8 Open-mindedness instead of stereotyping

Classifying and categorizing reality helps us deal with a complex world: simplifying it to make it more graspable. However, stereotyping people and cultures can have a detrimental effect. It leads to over-generalizations, might close your eyes to internal differences and does not allow a genuine understanding of cultures and people. This could take a learning opportunity away from you.

Keep an open mind, observe without categorizing and do not judge people's behaviour by the norms you might use in your home country. Also, try not to criticise everything about the new culture you are to encounter and refrain from idealising your home. If things frustrate or annoy you about the foreign culture, try to keep your sense of humour as the ability to laugh things off can be very useful. Be curious, tolerate differences and respect others.

4.9 Journalling

Some people recommend keeping a personal journal where you can write about your stay abroad, your reasons for going, your expectations, your experiences, ups and downs, lessons learnt and more. This can help with recognising potential signs of a culture shock. Also, this journal might become one of the most valued memories of your stay abroad and your university time in retrospect.

5 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:

5.1 Inform yourself

Attend all orientation or registration events offered, study the information carefully that you receive and read up further details online. This will help you learn about services on offer, locations and organisational and administrative matters. You can only use the resources you know about so invest some time to learn where to find what information. Take advantage of the resources of your host university.

5.2 Brace yourself for differences

Depending on what kind of academic environment you are used to, studying a semester or two abroad will confront you with more or fewer differences in various aspects. Prepare yourself for some aspects that will most probably be new and unfamiliar to you, e.g., 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. Regard it as a learning experience, as part of your mobility studies.

5.3 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. Think of this change as a 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.

5.4 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 number of assignments during the semester, or exams taking place throughout the semester, which requires you to organise your studies differently than at ETH. Make sure you know about your individual courses' requirements and assignments and discuss them 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.



Your examination might look like this – or completely different. Find out beforehand so you know what to prepare for.

6 Returning home

This 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. 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 will be happy about your return, yet your friends also got used to your absence. They might therefore not always remember to engage you in their activities. 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. Actively re-establish contact with people whom you were close to before, be open to new contacts, see your re-entry process as an intriguing part of your period abroad and appreciate the various experiences it brings with it.

Would you like to stay in touch with international students after returning from your own period abroad? The Erasmus Student Network (ESN) is a non-profit student network that organizes cultural and social events, informs and supports exchange students and offers further services like the buddy system. You can join the ESN team, become a buddy for incoming exchange students in Zurich or take part in weekly events organized by ESN.

▶ [Open ESN's website to learn more and get engaged](#)

If you have trouble settling back in after returning from a period abroad, you may want to talk to professional counsellors. The Psychological Counseling Services of the University Zurich and ETH 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.

▶ [Contact the Psychological Counseling Services](#)

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