

# 20 Reverse culture shock

International students expect to feel lost and out of place when they arrive in a new country. Many are surprised to find they also feel lost and out of place when they return home. This feeling is “reverse culture shock,” sometimes called “re-entry shock.”

## **Will I experience reverse culture shock?**

Here are some of the challenges returning international students often face. Read this list and think about which might apply to you.

### **Loss of independence**

Many students miss the freedom and independence they had during their time abroad.

- Young students who have been living as independent adults abroad find themselves back under their parents’ supervision. This can feel like going back to being a child.
- Older students with their own families may also find returning home hard. If they studied abroad without their spouse and children, they can find it hard to get used to living as a family again. If their spouse and children came abroad with them, the whole family may be experiencing reverse culture shock.
- Students of any age who studied in a more relaxed society can find it hard to return to a more rigid society.

### **Not feeling able to share your experiences**

Returned international students look forward to telling their friends and family about their experiences. However, you may find that:

- Your family and friends don't seem as interested in your experiences as you expected. They don't know the places and people in your stories! Often they're more interested in telling you what's been happening at home.
- People don't understand the stories you tell because they haven't visited the same country or studied abroad themselves.
- Depending on how long you've been away and how often you spoke your first language, you may find that you need to get used to speaking your local dialect again.

### **Feeling left out and different**

Things will have changed while you were abroad. Your family and friends will have become used to you being away. People you were close to may have had significant life changes when you weren't there: starting new jobs, getting married, having children, losing someone they love. Your country may have changed, too.

Most importantly, studying overseas will have changed you. Your friends and family will expect you to be the way you were when you left. They may not approve of the changes they see in you, and may say that your attitudes, dress, and behavior have become "too Westernized."

All these things can make you feel strange and left out when you first get back. It can take time to rebuild relationships. It helps to remember that you've built new relationships, too. Stay in touch with the friends you made abroad. They'll be experiencing reverse culture shock too, and will understand what you're feeling.

### **Missing where you studied**

After living in another country, most students look at their home differently. Often they're more critical of home than they were before they left. You may start feeling homesick for the country where you did your studies!

Issues international students often struggle with when they get home include:

- how authority figures (teachers, parents, managers) behave;
- how men and women relate to one another;
- local conditions: traffic, weather, politics, crowds;
- how society judges people.

Be careful how you talk about the comparisons you make. People at home may not appreciate hearing about what was “better” in the other country and they won’t want to hear you criticizing your home country.

### **Career pressure**

Sending a student abroad is expensive. Returned students often say they feel under pressure to get a high-paying job and “justify” the cost of their studies. They may also find that not all local employers value their international qualification as highly as they hoped.

## **How to minimize reverse culture shock**

Reverse culture shock improves over time. You grew used to living in a new country; you will get used to being home again. Here are some ideas for reducing reverse culture shock.

### **Reconnecting with people at home**

Don’t assume relationships will go back to the way they were when you arrive home.

- Get back in touch with people a few months before your return and tell them when you’re coming home. Ask them what’s been happening in their lives, and tell them what’s been happening with you. This can help you feel less “out of the loop” when you get home, and prepares everyone for the changes they’ll see.
- Find out what’s happening in your country: read news websites based in your home country.

- Accept that people who have not lived in the country you studied in or studied abroad may not be able to relate to your experiences.

### **Stay in touch with people you met abroad**

The people who will understand your study abroad experience best will be those who shared it! Fellow returned international students can be a great source of support.

- Get in touch with the good friends you made overseas. Chat to them through social media, call them, and arrange to meet them in person if you can.

### **Seek out new connections and experiences**

New friends and activities can help a lot with culture shock. Any new friends you make will get to know you as you are now, not as you used to be.

- Does your institution have an alumni society in your home country? If so, contact them. They may be able to connect you with other students who studied in the same country.
- Take up something new: join a club, take up a new sport, look for an online community that caters to one of your interests. If you pursued a new interest overseas, find somewhere to pursue it in your home country.
- Don't forget your English! Find places and people to practice speaking English with, both in person and online. Finding expatriate clubs for English-speakers in your country is a great place to look.

### **Career building**

Building your career can help you feel you're making progress in life.

- Seek advice. Contact your institution's career and alumni offices, talk to people already working in the field you hope to enter.

- Work on your job-seeking skills. Make sure you're confident about writing application letters, putting together an attractive résumé or CV, presenting yourself at a job interview. Remember this process might be different in your home country from the way it was abroad. Check locally based career websites and advisors.
- Research employers you might like to work for. Go to career fairs, read their websites, contact them, and ask what they're looking for.
- Don't be afraid to start small. Look at internships and voluntary positions: these show you are proactive and can give you valuable references and experience. Take a position at a small organization: your work there may help you get a position at a bigger company later.

### **And finally ...**

Studying in a new country is one of the most exciting and rewarding things a student can do. Whether you're just setting out or getting to the end of your experience, we would like to wish you all the very best. You'll take home not just a qualification, but a new and richer outlook on life and the world.