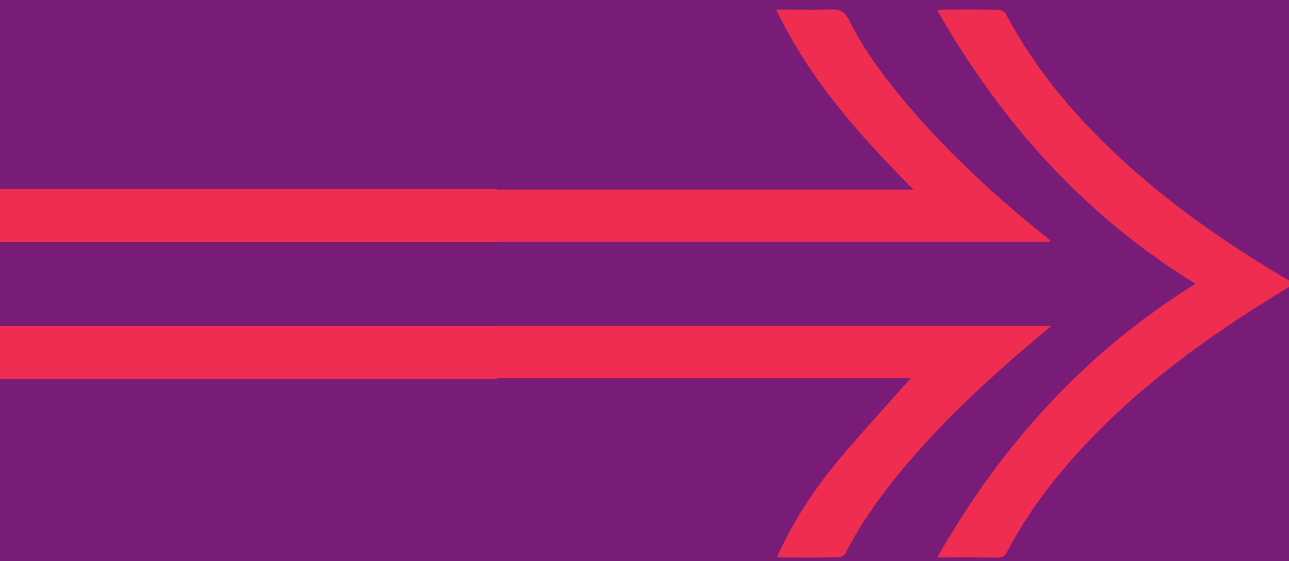




REVERSE CULTURE SHOCK



DEFINING REVERSE CULTURE SHOCK

So what is reverse culture shock? First, let's examine the process of returning home. There are usually two elements that characterise a study abroad student's return home:

- An idealised view of home
- The expectation of total familiarity (that nothing at home has changed while you have been away)

Often students expect to be able to pick up exactly where they left off. A problem arises when reality doesn't meet these expectations. Home may fall short of what you had envisioned, and things may have changed. For example, your friends and family have their own lives and several events may have occurred since you've been away. This is part of why home may now feel so 'foreign'.

Feelings you may experience

The inconsistency between expectations and reality, plus a possible lack of interest on the part of family and friends (nobody seems to really care about all of your "when I was abroad..." stories may result in frustration, feelings of alienation and mutual misunderstandings between study abroad students and their friends and family. Of course, the difficulty of readjustment will vary for different individuals, but, in general, the better integrated you have become as a citizen of the study country's culture and lifestyle, the harder it is to readjust when you return home. This is where reverse culture shock (sometimes called re-entry shock) comes in to play.

Stages of reverse culture shock

Reverse culture shock is usually described in four stages:

- Disengagement
- Initial euphoria
- Irritability and hostility
- Readjustment and adaptation

Stage 1 begins before you leave the country where you have been studying. You begin thinking about leaving and making your preparations for your return home. You also begin to realise that it's time to say good-bye to the friends you've made and to the place you've come to call home. The hustle and bustle of finals, farewell parties and packing can intensify your feelings of sadness and frustration. You already miss the friends you've made, and you are reluctant to leave. On the other hand, you may make your last few days fly by so fast that you don't have time to reflect on your emotions and experiences.

Stage 2 usually begins shortly before departure and it is characterised by feelings of excitement and anticipation – even euphoria – about returning home. This is very similar to the initial feelings of fascination and excitement you may have experienced when you first entered the country where you would be spending the next few years studying. You will be looking forward to seeing your family and friends again and they are also going to be happy to see you. The length of this stage varies, and often ends with the realization that most people are not as interested in your experiences in the country of your choice as you had hoped. They will politely listen to your stories for a while, but you may find that soon they are ready to move on to the next topic of conversation.

This is often one of the transitions to Stage 3. You may experience feelings of frustration, anger, alienation, loneliness, disorientation and helplessness and not understand exactly why. You might quickly become irritated or critical of others and of the culture of your country. Depression, feeling like a stranger at home and the longing to go back abroad are also not uncommon reactions. You may also feel less independent than you were in the country where you had been living. Most people are then able to move onto Stage 4, which is a gradual readjustment to life at home. Things will start to seem a little more normal again, and you will probably fall back into some old routines, but things won't be exactly the same as how you left them. You have most likely developed new attitudes, beliefs, habits, as well as personal and professional goals, and you will see things differently now. The important thing is to try to incorporate the positive aspects of your international experience with the positive aspects of your life at home.

Relevant questions

Reverse culture shock is usually described in four stages:

- Would you like to return abroad, and what is the best way for you to be able to return?
- What do you want to do abroad– study, research, work, volunteer, intern, travel?
- Who do you have to contact to begin the process of going abroad again?
- What careers are you considering that might be related to your study abroad experience?
- Does your university's Careers Advice Service offer any special services for students considering employment abroad?
- What accomplishments from your time abroad could you include in your CV?
- When coming home, is there anything you don't need anymore that you may be able to donate?

Checklist

- I have arranged for course registration while abroad.
- I have taken care of forms and applied for scholarships at my home campus while abroad.
- I have thought of ways to add an international component to my studies at home.
- I will try to find ways to integrate my study abroad experience with my world at home.
- I have begun looking at ways to use my study abroad experience to build my resume.
- I know that there are resources for finding other study, internship, volunteer, and work experiences abroad.



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