Safeguarding
and Wellbeing

REVERSE CULTURE SHOCK

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WHAT IS REVERSE CULTURE SHOCK?

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 your "when I was abroad…" stories) may result in frustration, alienation and mutual misunderstanding between study abroad students and their friends and family.

It may be difficult to readjust, and this will vary for each person, but in general, the better integrated you have become as a citizen of the study country's culture and lifestyle, it is to readjust when you return home. This is where reverse culture shock (sometimes called re-entry shock) comes into play.

STAGES OF REVERSE CULTURE SHOCK

Stage 1 - Disengagement

This begins before you leave the country where you have been studying. You begin thinking about leaving and making your preparations to return home. You also begin to realise that it's time to say goodbye to the friends you've made and the place you've called home. The business of finals, farewell parties and packing can intensify your feelings of sadness and frustration. 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 – Initial happiness

This stage typically begins soon after departure and is marked by feelings of excitement and anticipation about returning home. Much like when you first arrived in your host country, you may experience a renewed sense of enthusiasm as you look forward to reuniting with family and friends, who will also be eager to see you. The length of this phase varies, but it often ends when you realise that others may not be as interested in hearing about your experiences abroad as you expected. While people may initially listen with interest, you may find that they soon move on to other topics of conversation.

Stage 3 – Frustration

You may get 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 strange at hoe 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.

Stage 4 – Adjustment

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 the same as you left them. You have 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.

QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

- 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 and employability 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 any more that you may be able to donate?