



Australian Government



NEW COLOMBO PLAN

Connect to Australia's future - study in the region

CULTURAL AWARENESS



Part 2 Culture Shock



WHAT SHOULD I KNOW

ABOUT CULTURE SHOCK?

Photo: Phoebe Neighbour

**YOUR ABILITY TO ADAPT TO THE
LOCAL CULTURE AND CONDITIONS IS
ESSENTIAL**

Culture shock is the disorientation many people feel when moving to an unfamiliar environment. This module is designed to help you reduce the impact of culture shock. By adapting to a culture, you can overcome your culture shock and develop meaningful relationships with those around you, rather than feeling anxious and confused in your new space.

Nick

New Colombo Plan Scholar to the Nation of Brunei

“The next day after when I arrived, and it was quiet and almost eerie and I gone for this walk alone and I hadn't made any friends yet. I went back to my room and I genuinely just had a bit of a breakdown. Just in terms of like, what am I doing here, what have I done? And you know, the minimum four and a bit months that I was going to be there, I'm thinking have I just made the biggest mistake ever? And I was probably still in that for a few hours just going oh, this is not ideal. But that shock, it felt a bit doomsday-ish. I'm going to get mentally unstable if it's like this the whole time.”

“It literally came down to one of the people, the international students who was running the International Student Union, he basically reached out to me and was like we're going to play pool tonight, let's do that. And then I remember I was still kind of nervous and I hadn't made that good friends, and no-one had moved into my apartment just yet, the other international students were just coming and semester hadn't started. So, it was quiet. But literally we went at like 7 PM, and I went and hung out with this whole group of guys, had dinner at someone's house, it was really awesome. And we played pool until something like 5 in the morning. And it just dispelled any sort of shock. But it's a completely natural response to have a culture shock to something that's so unfamiliar.”

Phoebe

New Colombo Plan Scholar to Malaysia

“I would say the feelings of culture shock lasted until I was able to settle into a routine.

Being able to go to classes every week and see the same people every week, helped me to feel like I belonged there, like I was there for the right reasons. Before that, it was difficult to connect myself to anything. I had just figured out where I was living. I had met you know just a handful of people and no more, so I felt totally disconnected until I had the university structure.”

YOU CAN OVERCOME CULTURE SHOCK AND DEVELOP MEANINGFUL RELATIONSHIPS



“

You do get this sense of culture shock that everything's happening at once. You're no longer surrounded by your family and friends...

there was all these moments of fear just rushed through (me)

... this is going to be my time on exchange. It's going to be a very tough time.

”

Sam, New Colombo Plan Scholar



Photo: Sam Jackson

Sam

New Colombo Plan Scholar to Hong Kong

“I suffered from culture shock on the first night that I arrived in Hong Kong. I remember I arrived quite late and I'd had a few visa issues because I was moving between studying and working visas. So, I finally arrived at the airport and one of the first mistakes that I made that night was I decided to take the local bus back to my hostel where I was staying, instead of taking a taxi. So, here I was carrying about 50 kg of luggage on the local bus, and I arrived at about 11:30 - 12 o'clock at night. The streets were quite empty by that time. It was pouring down rain. And so, I remember I was wandering through the streets trying to find my hostel and I just couldn't find it. And I just had no idea what to do. You do get this sense of culture shock that everything's happening at once. You're no longer surrounded by your family and friends.”

“But I remember suddenly, finally, I found it about 45 minutes later, my hostel. I found the building. But then I noticed I had no idea where this room actually was. And I realised it's probably on the third floor. So, I tried to take the lift and the lift wasn't working that night. So, I had to carry about 50 kg of luggage up the stairs. And then I got to the front desk and, obviously, it was quite late, there was nobody there, so I tried to give the phone that was there a ring, somebody answered, and he spoke Cantonese, he didn't speak English. I tried to explain that here I was checking into the hostel that night. He didn't understand me and, again, I had no idea what to do. I was standing outside the hostel with 50 kg of luggage, dripping in rain. And again, there was all these moments of fear just rushed through this is going to be my time on exchange. It's going to be a very tough time.”

**ADJUSTING TO A NEW CULTURE IS
ACHIEVED IN STAGES**



THE STAGES OF ADAPTING TO A NEW CULTURE

STAGE 1: THE HONEYMOON

When you first arrive in a new country the cultural differences are interesting and everything is new and exciting. You are positive about the new cultural environment.

STAGE 2: CULTURE SHOCK

After some weeks or months, you may begin to experience negative feelings towards your new culture. You may feel confused and anxious. The cultural differences may become a source of irritation. You may feel homesick and question your decision to travel to the host country.

STAGE 3: ADJUSTMENT

Over time you will begin to feel more familiar with your surroundings. You will know people and the culture better. You will feel more comfortable in the new environment and slowly learn to function better under the new conditions.

STAGE 4: ADAPTATION

Eventually, your host country will begin to feel like a second home. This adjustment to your new environment will mean you can make the most of your overseas experience and build meaningful connections in your host country.

Nick

New Colombo Plan Scholar to the Nation of Brunei

“I managed culture shock through basically just immersing myself straight into the culture and the friends that I met there. Because I thought I can sit back and I'd heard negative experiences about people's exchange where they sort of sat back, let it happen when it wasn't going too well, and they'd sit in their room on Netflix all day. And things like that, but I basically said you've made your bed, you're going to sit in it now, but there were definitely still residual things. What am I going to do socially? What am I going to do this, how long I can make a good impression on this person, how will I focus? Even silly things that sound arbitrary, like how could I have fun, no one's drinking here.”

“It sounds crazy to say but yes, those are definitely still little concerns. But then those were dispelled so quickly when I started hanging out with different people and just making myself open to those experiences. So, I just went for it and tried to make as many friends as possible. While of course still keeping in contact with friends I had back in Australia. And so, I was showing them these experiences, going for walks, just keeping myself active and not letting a day go by, where, if I had a day off, I'd be doing something with someone.”



WHAT CAN YOU DO IF FRUSTRATED BY CULTURAL DIFFERENCES?

Marcus

New Colombo Plan Scholar to the Republic of Indonesia

“The best thing to do when you're frustrated with cultural differences is to breathe, is to relax, is to know that you're in a new culture, that you're out of your depth and that it's going to take time to understand things. I think also it's really important to find a joy in learning. For me, I've always been someone who has really enjoyed learning and so living in a new culture for me is like living in a library. Everything provides opportunities to learn and grow from. And so it's focussing on the things that you can learn and not getting caught up on the things that you're not understanding yet.”

“I think as well having patience and perseverance is really important in order to cross those culture boundaries. And there's so much that you can learn from other people that come from different cultures, different religions, different family systems and that there's things that you learn from them. Putting them into practice in your life can really help you to become not only a better person, but someone that you're more proud of. It'll be challenging, but you'll make incredible memories and make some really lasting friendships as well.”

ADAPTING TO A NEW



CULTURE TAKES TIME



Studying abroad is a challenge, an initiation into a new culture, and an emotional journey unlike any you may have previously taken. In this new environment it is common to experience the symptoms of culture shock.

SIGNS AND SYMPTOMS OF CULTURE SHOCK CAN OFTEN COEXIST, SO MONITOR YOUR FEELINGS



SIGNS AND SYMPTOMS OF CULTURE SHOCK

Some of the more recognisable signs and symptoms of culture shock are:

- difficult to motivate yourself
- difficulty maintaining a routine
- lack of an appetite
- eating too much
- absence of focus
- difficulty sleeping
- sleeping too much
- difficulty sustaining self-care
- preponderance of negative thoughts
- irregular mood swings
- irritability
- severe anxiety and/or depression
- continuous fear or sadness.

These signs and symptoms can often coexist, so monitor your feelings.

Sources:

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Oberg, Kalervo. "Culture Shock and the problem of Adjustment to the new cultural environments". *World Wide Classroom Consortium for International Education & Multicultural studies*. 29 Sept 2009.

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HOW DO YOU OVERCOME

CULTURE SHOCK?

By adapting to the foreign culture, you can overcome your culture shock and develop meaningful relationships with those around you, rather than feel anxious and confused in your new space.

TIP!

MAKE LOCAL FRIENDS AND ASK THEM QUESTIONS ABOUT THEIR CULTURE

Sam

New Colombo Plan Scholar to Hong Kong

“I think if you experience culture shock when arriving in your host country, it's important not to get too disheartened if things don't seem to be going right. On my first night in Hong Kong, I definitely experienced a lot of difficulties and it did seem very, very overwhelming, but it's important just to remember that you're here in your host country for, let's say, a year. You've got a lot of time just to settle in. And everything is extremely confronting when you first arrive in any country especially in Asia. So, it's really important just remain open-minded and know that things are definitely going to get to go uphill from here.”

Here are a few more tips that have helped others to reduce the impacts of culture shock:

- learn as much as you can about the new culture before you go
- learn the local laws and restrictions
- take a course in the country's language
- be open-minded and willing to learn
- most importantly maintain a sense of humour
- maintain a healthy diet and exercise
- create a routine
- travel within the country and visit cultural events and locations
- talk to other foreign students about how they feel about the new culture
- write down all the things you notice about the new culture and try to understand the world the way the locals do
- make local friends and ask them to explain all the cultural questions you have
- get involved in the local community
- if you have someone you can trust, tell them about your issues – talking is good, you never know when someone is able to help.

Mikaylie

New Colombo Plan Scholar to the Republic of Indonesia

“The smells, and the sounds, and again, the heat, was really difficult. And I think for me, the best thing that I could do was I was really lucky because there were a couple of Australians that lived in the same house as me. Which was really nice, because I had someone to talk through these new experiences with. But I actually think the more beneficial thing that I did when I was on exchange was, I really immersed myself.”

“I think that culture shock is a shock because it's new. And so, I think one of the best things you can do is just immerse yourself in as many things as possible. Because the more friends that you make, who are local friends, the better you'll start to understand some of those things that are happening, and the more immersed you'll get, and also the more understanding you'll derive. And that I think offsets some of that culture shock.”

“Once you can understand your surroundings and your environment, and understand what's going on and why people are doing things, then that's when that culture shock starts to go away, because you start to feel secure in your environment. So things that I did, because I didn't speak any Bahasa before I left, I did ten hours of language training a week, and I really threw myself into that. And I did an internship, and I joined cultural dance groups that I was horrible at, but I just wanted to make friends and really immerse myself as much as possible. And that really helped with culture shock.”

People receiving foreign visitors often go through another psychological reaction cycle:

- The first phase is *curiosity* – somewhat like the euphoria on the side of the visitor.
- If the visitor stays and tries to function in the host culture, a second phase sets in. The hosts will evaluate the visitor by the standards of their culture, and this evaluation tends to be unfavourable.
- If regularly exposed to foreign visitors, the hosts may move into a third phase, the recognition that different kinds of people should be measured by different standards. Some will develop the ability to understand foreigners according to these foreigners' own standards.



HOW CAN YOU HELP THE LOCALS ADJUST TO FOREIGN VISITORS?

By viewing the behaviour of people from other cultures from their perspective as well as our own, we may not necessarily agree with their way of doing things, but we can accept and respect their right to do so. Instead of viewing other cultures in terms of right or wrong, we should be curious about their culture and why they operate the way they do.

With heightened awareness and curiosity, we notice differences in behaviour and communication styles, and seek to understand the deeper meanings and motivations that drive the behaviours we see. We can then use our knowledge about their culture to modify our behaviour in order to achieve more successful outcomes.

When we see the range of cultural perspectives and approaches, we can move between different cultures and worldviews, without seeing one cultural approach as dominant. The flexibility to switch between cultural positions in this way is a core intercultural competency.



Photo: Marcus McDonald

Marcus

New Colombo Plan Scholar to the Republic of Indonesia

“While I was living in Indonesia, I made it a real priority to make sure that I was adjusting my cultural norms to suit those of Indonesia. I think for anybody moving to a new country and trying to fit into a new culture, you can't just take your own culture and expect that it'll work effortlessly in a new culture. And so for me there was many things I had to change. But for me that was probably the greatest joy, was learning a new culture and learning aspects of it that I really loved and wanted to put into practice in my life. Some things were difficult, for example, what I had to wear to university. In Australia I could get away with wearing board shorts, bare feet and just a normal T-shirt to university. My friend would even wear sometimes his swimmers and his towel after he'd come in from the surf to university.”

“Whereas in Indonesia it was expected that you'd wear a nice button-up shirt, you would wear a pair of nice slacks or jeans and a pair of nice shoes. And although for me it was like, oh, man, what an effort, it was cool because it showed that they treated their education with respect. I think as well I really had to change the way that, not my personality, but the way that I made jokes and was a bit blunt or sarcastic at times. In the Aussie culture it's very normal to just be pretty upfront, to call a spade a spade, but in Indonesia it's quite different. They really focus on being polite within their conversation, non-confrontational. There was often times where I was cracking jokes and my Indonesian friends wouldn't get it and then they'd be like, okay, okay. And then I would have to say Saya hanya bergurau which means I'm joking and then they'd still kind of not laugh or not get it. And so there was times where I guess I would say the wrong thing or try and be funny and it didn't really work out that way. Thankfully I had some incredible friends, local friends that were able to very gently and kindly pull me up when I had done something wrong. Something I often got confused about and wrong in Indonesia was my use of words. Learning a new language can be tough and often words can sound very similar, but have completely different meanings.”

Marcus continued:

“For example, the word Kepala means head and the word Kelapa means coconut. And so I at times got headaches and I would say to my friends or even to my teacher Saya punya sakit kelapa and they would all erupt in laughter because I actually said I have a sore coconut. And so I was thankful to have people to pull me up on that and I guess be able to learn from mistakes in a humorous way is important. And so I often was learning through making mistakes and I'm thankful that I had people to pull me up on it.”

“Another example of making a big mistake in Indonesia was having a female friend in my room to work on a group project. Because Indonesia has a very conservative culture, you're not actually supposed to be alone in a room with a person of the opposite sex unless you're married.”

“And so, my landlord afterwards asked if I could have a meeting with her and the other residents and she gave me a firm and stern talking to about how I was not supposed to have a female inside my room. To which obviously I responded, yes, I will not do that again. But that was a culturally learning moment for me. In Australia that would be such a normal thing, that would be seen as okay. But in Indonesia it's seen as disrespectful to the landlord and mainly because of the honour-shame culture. It could be seen by the neighbours of us acting inappropriately. And so the landlord wanted to make sure that we knew that in a gentle but firm way so that we wouldn't make the same mistake again, and I didn't make the same mistake again.”



THE LOCAL POPULACE IS BEST SUITED TO HELP YOU UNDERSTAND CULTURAL DIFFERENCES

Immerse yourself and you will learn that while it's important to understand the traditional culture, you will see that all countries are diverse. Observing and listening before you act will help you to build relationships in local communities. Always remember that the local populace is best suited to help your understanding of cultural differences – here are some of them to give you advice.

Fitri

Australia Awards Scholar from the Republic of Indonesia

“My tips are you have to open your mind because our culture is very different from any others cultures in the world. And the second one be very polite because Indonesia is very age based like you address people based on their age. So if you meet older people then you say "Pak" or "ibu" for a woman. "Pak" for a man and then dress modestly because we didn't like wear very shorts dress or skirts but it doesn't mean you have to wear hijab but just, just closed up not really open outfit. You have to learn a little bit of Bahasa because Indonesian not really speaking English. So, it's better for you to learn like good morning what is in Bahasa. The last thing is to be tolerant like tolerate other people daily life like as a Muslim we pray five times a day and you will hear the call for prayer five times a day every day even as early as 4 o'clock in the morning.”

Fitri suggests that you learn to speak the local language at a colloquial conversational level. Always be polite and tolerant of the local customs – remember you are a visitor. It's very hard to separate religion and culture because the culture is derived from religion. Be prepared to accommodate some of the religious observances of your host country, for example, dress modestly in a Muslim country.



“It's very hard to separate the religion and culture because the culture itself derive from religion, like for example in Aceh it's 95% Muslim and in Bali it's 95% of Hinduism. The first thing in the morning for Muslim we do predawn praying and for the Hinduism people maybe they do like they put some kind of like plates that consist of flowers and everything for their prayer. So, it's really, we can't separate those two.”

Khunkham

Australia Awards Scholar from the Republic of the Union of Myanmar

“So, it is understood in my culture that you cannot display part of your body especially the private parts so if you display is also a kind insult so I would recommend that if you come here please wear clothes that cover your body. If an Australian or people from anywhere come to my country and if you find our culture a bit like frustrated, I think there is no way you can do because there is a saying "when in Rome do as Romans do". If you go to the pagoda you are expected to take off your shoes even your socks. if you don't if you don't take off there is an insult to the community so even though I understand that there are some aspects of cultures that people might find very frustrating but I think you might have to read before you come to my country and you'll have to maybe at least have a guide especially to preview with the dos and don'ts of the culture in the country so that make you won't commit any offences something like that that's my suggestion.”



Khunham Kaung tells us to research the 'dos and don'ts' of the culture before travelling to another country. If you still find the culture a bit frustrating then you should apply the saying 'when in Rome do as Romans do'. You will also benefit from being open minded.

Peniana

Australia Awards Scholar from the Republic of Fiji

“Oh, for someone that is going to Fiji, I would tell them, to be openminded but also for them to keep in mind that Fijian culture is very, we're very respectful and we're very conservative. For example, in Fiji, a common thing that foreigners tend to not know at the beginning is when you enter a Fijian household, it is considered respectful for you to take off your shoes. It's very disrespectful to enter a house with your shoes on. But when we come to foreign countries, foreigners really don't think much of it. You're allowed to wear your shoes inside. In Fiji, that's very disrespectful.

Another way is foreigners usually show respect by making eye-contact when we're talking. In Fiji, that's very disrespectful. If you show your respect to someone, you bow your head. You're not supposed to make eye-contact with them. And they'll consider it disrespectful from your side. And if you make eye-contact with leaders, it can be considered disrespectful and sort of a challenge, in a way.

Fiji time is always a popular saying. That's what we tell foreigners, what we tell tourists. When you're in Fiji, you're on Fiji time. But there's pros and cons to that. When you're in Fiji, you can relax. But probably the disadvantage to that is that Fijians will almost always be late. Even now, when we're in Australia, and I meet with my relatives, and we'll say the function starts at eight, the relatives will come at ten or 12. And then we're just like, oh, you've lived in Australia for so long, but you're always on Fiji time.”



“f you're frustrated in Fiji, any Fijian would recommend for you just to have a cup of kava, sit around the grog bowl and just relax, be on Fiji time. If you make at least one Fijian friend, you go over to their house on Sunday, I guarantee in like a week or two you're considered family. That's just how Fijians are. We're naturally welcoming, naturally friendly, and we won't disappoint. You'll have a good time in Fiji.”

Peniana tells us how important it is to observe the local customs. For example, foreigners usually show respect by making eye-contact when we're talking. In Fiji, that's very disrespectful. If you show your respect to someone, you bow your head. You're not supposed to make eye-contact with them. And they'll consider it disrespectful from your side. You should research the 'dos and don'ts' of the culture before travelling to Fiji.

LET'S REVIEW

Culture shock is the disorientation many people feel when moving to an unfamiliar environment.

When moving to a new country, you may encounter a new climate, language, foods and social customs. While this may be exciting at first, you may also experience feelings of stress, homesickness or helplessness before you are able to function effectively in the new environment.

The good news is that you can manage the impact of culture shock and enjoy living and working in an unfamiliar environment.

Your ability to adapt to a local culture and conditions will contribute to a more successful academic, social, and professional life. There are a number of stages people often go through when adapting to a new culture.

Stage 1: When you first arrive in a new country the cultural differences are interesting and everything is new and exciting. You are positive about the new cultural environment.

Stage 2: After some weeks or months, you may begin to experience negative feelings towards your new culture. You may feel confused and anxious. The cultural differences may become a source of irritation. You may feel homesick and question your decision to travel to the host country.

Stage 3: Over time you will begin to feel more familiar with your surroundings. You will know people and the culture better. You will feel more comfortable in the new environment and slowly learn to function better under the new conditions.

Stage 4: Eventually, your host country will begin to feel like a second home. This adjustment to your new environment will mean you can make the most of your overseas experience and build meaningful connections in your host country.

Immerse yourself and you will learn that while it's important to understand the traditional culture you will see that all countries are diverse. Observing and listening before you act will help you to build relationships in local communities.

Always remember that the local populace is best suited to help your understanding of cultural differences.

By viewing the behaviour of people from other cultures from their perspective as well as our own, we may not necessarily agree with their way of doing things, but we can accept and respect their right to do so. Instead of viewing other cultures in terms of right or wrong, we should be curious about their culture and why they operate the way they do.

When we see the range of cultural perspectives and approaches, we can move between different cultures and worldviews, without seeing one cultural approach as dominant. The flexibility to switch between cultural positions in this way is a core intercultural competency.

CONGRATULATIONS

YOU HAVE COMPLETED PART 2 – CULTURE SHOCK