

Cultures & Customs

Cultures and customs all over the world are distinctive and unique to each country. Many factors – including, but not limited to, environmental, social, economic, technological, political, religious, artistic, and/or educational – help contribute and shape this diversity. By learning and distinguishing between different cultures and customs, students will be well-prepared for adapting in new environments.

Some things to remember:

- To succeed in your new environment, you will need to be resourceful, broad-minded, willing to learn from your mistakes, and determined to stay
- Learn about and respect local customs and cultures
- Be ready to experience some level of cultural adjustment as you transition to a new culture

Pre-departure

Before Leaving

Before leaving, students should consider the potential differences at each individual destination they are planning to travel to in order to be prepared for all facets of culture. Be aware that attitudes towards individual differences including gender, homosexuality, religion, and race may not be the same in all countries. Discrimination may exist in your host culture that you are not familiar with.

For information on cultural do's and don'ts in different countries, visit the Country Insights tab on the [Centre for Intercultural Learning](http://www.intercultures.ca/cil-cai/countryinsights-apercuspays-eng.asp) <<http://www.intercultures.ca/cil-cai/countryinsights-apercuspays-eng.asp>> website. For additional information on travelling as a woman and/or about LGBTQIA issues, please review the 'YOU Abroad' tab.

At Destination Country

Culture Shock

For students studying abroad, the transition of adjusting to your host culture may take some time. Students might experience culture shock and feel frustrated as laws, customs and gestures once taken for granted may no longer apply. For a better understanding of the transitions and symptoms of culture shock, and possible strategies for minimizing it, take a look at the Glogster below (click to expand):

Culture Shock Glogster

<<http://www.glogster.com/studentlearning/culture-shock/g-6ku9dpadekg9sm9p8sgana0>>

Culture shock is described as the process of adjusting to another culture. For students studying abroad, the transition of adjusting to your host culture may not be as seamless and may also take some time. Laws, customs and gestures once taken for granted may no longer apply. Your values may be challenged or you may experience prejudices. You may no longer have the opportunity to converse in your native language or may find yourself singled out for your Canadian accent and expressions. Because of these factors, students may often feel frustrated, but by better understanding culture shock, it may help in your adjustment at your host destination.

Symptoms: Learning to recognize the culture shock symptoms may help in coping. Symptoms can appear on their own or in combination with others. If these feelings continue to persist for two weeks or more it is important to speak to your program supervisor or contact the Go Global office. The signs of culture shock include:

- Too much sleep or insomnia
- Eating too much or no appetite
- Frequent minor illnesses
- Frequent upset stomach/headaches
- Loneliness or sadness
- Homesickness, idealizing home
- Feeling helpless and dependent
- Irritability and even hostility
- Social withdrawal
- Excessive concern for health/security
- The smallest problems seem overwhelming
- Feeling like you have no control in your life
- Crying
- Negative stereotyping of your host country people
- Questioning your decision to move to this place
- Overwhelming sense of homesickness

Stages of Transition:

Honeymoon – In this settling-in stage, you may experience exhilaration, anticipation, nervousness and excitement. Everything you see or do may be seen in a positive light because most people are fascinated by the new culture. This can last a few days, weeks or even months.

Hostility – After passing through the ‘honeymoon’ stage, it may become more apparent the difference between the old culture that you are used to compared with the new culture you are now living in. The excitement you had before may now turn to frustration as people don’t understand you. You may also be having trouble understanding others.

Acceptance – This stage begins when you start to appreciate and accept your new surroundings. The new environment no longer feels all that new and things become more normal as routines develop.

Your sense of humour returns and you feel more balanced. The minor mistakes and misunderstandings that would have frustrated you before make you smile or laugh now.

Adaption – Eventually, you begin to feel at home in your new environment and find greater satisfaction – personally and academically.

Coping Strategies:

Try using the following strategies to combat culture shock:

- Expect it. It is normal, even to the most seasoned travellers.
- Know yourself, your values and your expectations. Recognize that the people you meet abroad may not share your values or expectations
- Talk to other international students or to staff about your adjustment.
- Access the support of your Go Global advisor or UBC program advisor as needed.
- Record and share your experience through various online tools (blogs, Facebook, MySpace, etc.)
- Focus on developing a sense of humour, warmth towards others, strong sense of self, tolerance for ambiguity, flexibility, and a non-judgmental attitude.
- Work to establish a new network of friends, but remember that this takes time.
- Try to minimize your isolation. Before you leave home, make arrangements to keep in touch with family and friends in order to ease your loneliness.
- Join a club or volunteer. This will also allow you to meet local people and learn more about the local culture and language.
- Devote some energy to maintaining your sense of personal identity: subscribe to a publication from home, take some of your favourite music, and pack clothes that are suitable for the environment but also comfortably familiar.
- Don't dwell on the negatives.

Returning Home

Re-entry

As students return from their study abroad experience, their expectations and/or idealized view on familiar surroundings may differ from reality. This incongruence is called reverse culture shock, and students may have to re-adapt to their home surroundings again. To learn more about the 4 stages of reverse culture shock and suggestions to counteract it, please view the Glogster below (click to expand):

Reverse Culture Shock Glogster

<<http://www.glogster.com/studentlearning/reverse-culture-shock/g-6ku93rq8dh9hrabka2nkja0>>

Returning students have adapted to an entirely new culture, but may also have to face the challenges of coming back home. You may not have been aware of the changes you have made after your study abroad term and you may find that your friends and family may have changed as well. It may be difficult

to express your feelings or find it difficult for others to relate to what you have experienced. Similar to culture shock, you will have to make adjustments to reacquaint yourself with your home surroundings.

Reverse culture shock is usually described in four stages:

Disengagement – As you prepare to leave the country of your study abroad experience, you begin to realize that it's time to say good-bye and you are moving away from your overseas experience and friends. The last few days can pass by too quickly for you to have time to reflect on your emotions and experiences.

Initial Euphoria – Shortly after having arrived back in your own country, you and your friends and family are equally excited to seeing each other again. Returning students may suddenly and/or painfully realize that most people are not as interested in your experiences abroad and are ready to move on onto other topics of discussion.

Irritability and hostility – Feelings of frustration, anger, alienation, loneliness, disorientation, and helplessness may arise, and you may not understand why. You may even feel like an outsider – a foreigner in your own country.

Readjustment and adaption – As you gradually adjust to life at home, things will start to become more normal again. You may still have some difficulty filtering out the foreign vocabulary you have adjusted to while abroad, but the shock of the difference in culture will eventually subside.

Suggestions to Counteract Re-entry/Reverse Culture Shock

Understanding that reverse culture shock involves an adjustment process similar to when you first arrived at your host country will help in readjusting at home. Some suggestions include:

- Communicating and sharing your feelings with friends and family members
- Reflecting on your experiences abroad by creating a photo or scrapbook, or writing in a journal
- Participating in future study abroad events to share your experience
- Helping other students who want to study abroad
- Consider post-graduate international options
- Working (<http://www.workingabroad.com/>) or volunteering abroad (<http://www.goabroad.com/volunteer-abroad>)

YOU Abroad

YOU Abroad (*Slide Presentation*)

<<http://www.slideshare.net/SafetyAbroad/you-abroad-booklet?ref=http://safety-abroad-global2.sites.olt.ubc.ca/cultures-customs/>>

Representing UBC

As a student of UBC, you represent yourself, the University, British Columbia, and Canada while abroad. It is crucial that you are aware of and abide by any relevant local laws and customs so you can care for your welfare and safety, as well as that of your classmates.

In the event of a violation of regulations, you may be subject to disciplinary measures from the University. If you are involved in illegal activities while abroad, you are subject to your destination country's laws and could face the judicial system. The Canadian government may not be able to help you in all cases.

Clothing

While you are packing, it is a good idea to think about what is considered appropriate to wear in your destination country. Think about the culture of your country and the places you might visit. For example, religious sites may require certain body parts to be covered depending on your gender or age. Take into consideration factors such as the seasons and the climate in your location, national and local customs, and even social functions you plan to attend.

Sexual harassment

Sexual harassment is uninvited and unwanted sexual attention given by a person who knows or should know that it is unwelcome. It can be direct or implied, obvious or subtle, and is against the law in Canada. Most Canadian universities have a harassment/discrimination office with advisors who are trained to deal with sexual harassment issues.

Other cultures may deal with harassment differently and may not have the same policies or procedures. If you find yourself in a situation in which you feel harassed, contact Go Global or your host organization.

For what to do in cases on [Sexual Assault](http://students.ubc.ca/livewell/topics/sexual-assault) <<http://students.ubc.ca/livewell/topics/sexual-assault>> while abroad, visit the Assistance tab on the [Emergencies Learning Module](#).

Gender

Gender roles vary from culture to culture. Keep in mind that different societies may have different gender expectations than what you are used to. This could include many aspects of culture, such as clothing and behaviour. To learn more about how gender could impact your travel, take a look at "[Her Own Way](http://travel.gc.ca/travelling/publications/her-own-way)," <<http://travel.gc.ca/travelling/publications/her-own-way>> the Government of Canada's publication on women's safe travels.

While you should be prepared for potential differences, if you ever feel like your safety or health are at risk, don't be afraid to talk to someone about it for support.

LGBTQIA

LGBTQIA is an acronym for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and transsexual, questioning and queer, intersex and asexual. Beliefs and laws relating to LGBTQIA can vary drastically, with some countries even

considering such activity illegal. The [International Lesbian and Gay Association](http://ilga.org) <http://ilga.org > collects and summarizes information on local laws pertaining to LGBTQIA issues for many countries. Please note that these are summaries and do not account for all people's beliefs and reaction within a culture or country.

For additional information and support as you prepare to travel, please visit UBC's [Live Well, Learn Well](#) resources.

Quicklinks

[Centre for Intercultural Learning](http://www.intercultures.ca/cil-cai/countryinsights-apercuspays-eng.asp) <http://www.intercultures.ca/cil-cai/countryinsights-apercuspays-eng.asp>

Provides an insight and resourceful information on different countries and their cultures.

[Global Affairs: Canadians Travelling and Living Abroad](http://travel.gc.ca/) <http://travel.gc.ca/>

Provides up-to-date destination information on safety and security, and local laws and customs.

[Coping with Culture Shock](http://travel.gc.ca/travelling/living-abroad/culture-shock) <http://travel.gc.ca/travelling/living-abroad/culture-shock>

Provides suggestions on feeling more at ease in a new environment.

[Culture Crossing](http://www.culturecrossing.net/index.php) <http://www.culturecrossing.net/index.php>

[Michigan State University: Study Abroad](http://studyabroad.isp.msu.edu/people/studentsofcolor/before_onsite_return.html)

<http://studyabroad.isp.msu.edu/people/studentsofcolor/before_onsite_return.html>

What do you think?

What are the attitudes towards dress in your host country? Is it appropriate to wear short sleeved shirts in your host country?

- Yes
Great! You already know a little bit about the cultures and customs of your destination country. Check out the other resources on this page to learn even more.
- No
Great! You already know a little bit about the cultures and customs of your destination country. Check out the other resources on this page to learn even more.
- I don't know
Think ahead. You may want to familiarize yourself with your country's local customs and cultures. Start by checking out the Laws & Cultures tab on the [Global Affairs Country Travel Report](#) <http://travel.gc.ca/travelling/advisories> for your country.

Is homosexual activity a criminal offence at your host country?

- Yes

Great! You already know a little bit about the cultures and customs of your destination country. You can also learn more by visiting the [Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans and Intersex Association](http://ilga.org/) <<http://ilga.org/>>.

- No

Great! You already know a little bit about the cultures and customs of your destination country. You can also learn more by visiting the [Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans and Intersex Association](http://ilga.org/).

- I don't know

Think ahead. You may want to familiarize yourself with your country's local customs and cultures. Start by checking out the Laws & Cultures tab on the [Global Affairs Country Travel Report](http://travel.gc.ca/travelling/advisories) <<http://travel.gc.ca/travelling/advisories>> for your country. You can also learn more by visiting the [Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans and Intersex Association](http://ilga.org/).