LEARN TO ADJUST TO A NEW CULTURE

CAPS

THE UNIVERSITY OF SYDNEY
Adjusting to life in a new country can be challenging. The following information aims to help you overcome homesickness and rise to the challenge of studying and living in an overseas community.
The University of Sydney has a long history of receiving International Students and we acknowledge the contribution that you make both to the internationalisation of the curriculum and to the richness of the university community.

International students are also a very courageous group - making your commitment to living and studying overseas. However, even with such courage, making an adjustment to life in a new country is challenging because when you leave your home culture, you separate yourself from the people and places that you are familiar with and where your role and expectations about life are predictable.

In a new country you face a set of entirely new experiences; a new culture, language and a new learning environment.

Adjusting to these changes is a process - and involves moving from an experience known as “Culture Shock” to that of “Cultural Adjustment”. Cultural adjustment occurs when you are able to both celebrate your home culture and adapt and integrate into the Australian way of life and its study styles, language, behaviour and attitudes.

The process of moving from culture shock to cultural adjustment is not a one-way journey. You may find that at times you find yourself feeling connected and happy but that others you re-experience feeling homesick and frustrated. The move back and forward between these experiences is normal, so be patient! See figure 1.

These pages will help you understand more about this process of adjustment and highlight some strategies that can help you on your cultural adventure.
UNDERSTANDING CULTURE SHOCK

During the first weeks of your time overseas, you may feel excited about the change. However this initial excitement of the change can drop away when the new and different expectations begin to feel stressful or overly demanding.

Culture shock can be experienced by the strongest and most capable of students. You may feel like an “outsider” and be angry or frustrated by your new country - seeing it as “bad” or “wrong”. It is also common to feel really homesick - a longing to be back home where things are “normal” and “make sense”.

So, if you experience some of these feelings – don’t panic – culture shock is a common and normal part of adjusting to a study and life in a new country. The emphasis then, is not on trying to avoid having these feelings but on managing them as skillfully as you can when they arise. So, be patient and kind to yourself and use the helpful strategies outlined below.

- Keep in regular contact with people back home – send emails, write letters, use Facebook or Skype to keep in contact. There are computers with Skype (bring your own camera) available for use in the International Students Lounge.
- Do the tourist activities. Send home photographs of yourself, people and places (including the University) in Australia so that friends and family can get an understanding of your new life.
- Don’t be afraid to ask questions. When people know that you are interested in learning more about them and their way of life, (and are not out to judge them), they are often happy to share information.
- Read about our peoples and history, it could help you to understand us. Australia is a place of many cultures and languages and the history of our first Aboriginal peoples goes back over 60,000 years.
- Be observant and curious. If you seem to make mistakes like doing or saying something incorrectly, remember to be kind to yourself - you can’t possibly know everything! Try to observe what others around you do and say so that you can understand both the similarities and differences in the ways that you might deal with a similar situation in your home country. You can also read the Learn To Communicate Effectively - listening and responding skills.
- Make friends: find locals who are sympathetic and who can help you settle into your new life. One of the most common reasons people begin to feel more comfortable in a new environment is when they form a friendship with a local resident. In many ways, this local person serves as a “cultural informant”, and can help you to understand your surroundings, rather than dismiss them. They can also help you to practice your local English. Also be sure to Join groups at University and off-campus University of Sydney Union, Clubs and Societies page.
- Keep doing some things to celebrate your culture. And perhaps find a soothing regular reminder of home like a familiar tea that you can drink. Find specialty shops that stock food from your home country. Also be sure to celebrate national holidays from home and birthdays of friends and family.
- Set some goals to help you redevelop your sense of control in your life. Each goal that you achieve will increase your confidence in your coping skills. See the Blackdog Institute’s fact sheets on Appraising Change and Goal Setting.
Successful adjustment usually begins when you start to feel that the environment and the local language are becoming more familiar. Remember though that the process of moving from the experience of culture shock to cultural adjustment is not a linear journey. You may find that at times you find yourself feeling culturally connected but that at others you re-experience the feelings of disconnection or isolation. The move back and forth between these experiences is normal – don’t be surprised if you feel fine for a while and then your find yourself feeling sad, angry or frustrated about living and studying in Australia. Be patient and courageous. With time and by using the strategies discussed above and below you will be able to successfully integrate your own culture with your experience of Australian life and so make your experience both stimulating and rewarding.

STRATEGIES TO PROMOTE A “CULTURAL ADVENTURE”

– Keep things in perspective. Give yourself credit for having pushed through the initial potential obstacles and remind yourself that it is also normal at times to feel stressed – and even overwhelmed.

– Continue to engage with the challenges that arise and to get to know even more about your surroundings – the more you know and the more familiar you are with your environment the more comfortable you will feel.

– Take time to engage in exercise and other enjoyable activities (hobbies, sports, outings). Make sure that you are also eating healthily and sleeping well. Note: Be careful in experimenting with any alcohol or other drugs because you are away from your usual social supports you may put yourself more at risk.

– Think about your future: work out your personal and professional goals and make a plan to achieve them. For example: think about the ways in which your studies will enhance your future career prospects and income earning capacity.

– Learn new skills to adapt to the new learning and social environment such as getting organised, study skills at the Learning Centre and CAPS Skillshops websites.

– Continue to celebrate your own culture.

The following information is extracted from Australian Government, Department of Immigration and Citizenship

HOW DO WE GREET PEOPLE?
When meeting someone for the first time, it is usual to shake the person’s right hand with your right hand. People who do not know each other generally do not kiss or hug when meeting. Many Australians look at the eyes of the people they are talking with. They consider this a sign of respect, and an indication that they are listening. Do not stare at the person for a long time. You can address a new acquaintance using their title and family name. You may use their first name when they ask you to or if they use it in their introduction. In the workplace and among friends, most Australians tend to be informal and call each other by their first names.

WHAT ARE THE CLOTHING CUSTOMS?
The types of clothing that people wear reflect the diversity in our society just as much as the variation in climate. There are no laws or rules on clothing, but you must wear certain clothing for work situations. Most workplaces have dress standards. Outside of the work situation, clothing is an individual choice; many people dress for comfort, for the social situation or the weather. Clubs, movie theatres and other places require patrons to be in neat, clean clothes and appropriate footwear. Many Australians live close to the beach and the sea. On hot days, they may wear little clothing on the beach and surrounds. This does not mean that people who dress to go to the beach or swimming have low moral standards. It means that this is what we accept on and near beaches. People from other countries can choose to wear their national dress. They may be religious or customary items and include monks’ robe, a burqa, a hijab or a turban. As a tolerant society with people from many different cultures, the wearing of traditional clothing as part of cultural beliefs and practices is encouraged.
WHAT IS CONSIDERED POLITE BEHAVIOUR?

‘Please’ and ‘thank you’ are words that are very helpful when dealing with other people, and buying goods or services. When asked if you would like something, like a cup of tea, it is polite to say, ‘Yes please’, or just ‘please’ if you would like it, or ‘no, thank you’ if you do not. When you receive something, it is polite to thank the person by saying ‘thank you’. Australians tend to think that people who do not say ‘please’ or ‘thank you’ are being rude. Using these words will help in building a good relationship.

Sometimes an issue or topic that is sensitive for you may come up in conversation. Not to talk at all may seem rude to others. It is more polite to say ‘sorry, it is too hard to explain’ than to ignore a question.

WHAT ARE SOME COMMON AUSTRALIAN WORD USAGES?

Much common word usage or ‘slang’ may seem strange to people new to Australia. Slang words start from many different sources. Some words are shortened versions of longer words. Many were expressions already used by migrants who came from the north of England. If you are unsure what an expression means, it is all right to ask the person who said it to explain. Some common expressions are:

“Bring a plate” when you are invited to a party and asked to ‘bring a plate’, this means to bring a dish of food to share with your host and other guests. Take the food to the party in any type of dish, not only a plate, and it is usually ready to serve. This is common for communal gatherings such as for school, work or a club. If you are unsure what to bring, you can ask the host.

“BYO” when an invitation to a party says ‘BYO’, this means ‘Bring Your Own’ drink. If you do not drink alcohol, it is acceptable to bring juice, soft drink or soda, or water. Some restaurants are BYO. You can bring your own wine to these, although there is usually a charge for providing and cleaning glasses called ‘corkage’.

“Arvo” This is short for afternoon. ‘Drop by this arvo,’ means please come and visit this afternoon.

“Fortnight” This term describes a two-week period.

“Barbeque, BBQ, barbie” outdoor cooking, usually of meat over a grill or hotplate using gas or coals. The host serves the meat with salads and bread rolls. It is common for a guest, when invited to a BBQ, to ask if they should bring anything.

“Australians often say, ‘Excuse me’ to get a person’s attention and ‘sorry’ if we bump into them. We also say, ‘Excuse me’ or ‘pardon me’ if we burp or belch in public or a person’s home. You should always try to be on time for meetings and other visits. If you realise you are going to be late, try to contact the person to let them know. This is very important for visits to professionals, as you may be charged money for being late or if you miss the appointment without letting them know before.

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“Snag” The raw type sausages usually cooked at a BBQ. They can be made of pork, beef or chicken.

“Chook” The term chook means a chicken, usually a hen.

“Cuppa” A cup of tea or coffee ‘Drop by this arvo for a cuppa’ means please come and visit this afternoon for a cup of tea or coffee.

“Loo or dunny” These are slang terms for toilet. If you are a guest in someone’s house for the first time, it is usually polite to ask permission to use his or her toilet. ‘May I use your toilet please?’ Some people ask, ‘Where’s the loo?’

“To be crook” to be sick or ill.

“Flat out” busy.

“Shout” to buy someone a drink. At a bar or a pub when a group of friends meet, it is usual for each person to ‘shout a round’, meaning buy everybody a drink. Each person takes a turn at buying a ‘round’. It is also acceptable to say that you do not drink (alcohol) by saying that you are a ‘teetotaller’. This also means you are not obliged to shout.

“Bloke” a man. Sometimes if you ask for help, you may get an answer to ‘see that bloke over there’.

“How ya goin’?” ‘How are you going?’ means how are you, or how do you do? It does not mean what form of transport are you taking. Sometimes it can sound like ‘ow-ya-goin-mate’
Adjusting to life in a new country can be challenging. Be patient with yourself and the environment, be open to the challenges and remember that part of the reason you came to the University of Sydney is to experience a different way of living and studying!

**INDIVIDUAL ASSISTANCE**

If, after accessing the resources on our website and on the internet, you need further information and help in learning ways to adjust to this new culture, please make an appointment with one of the counsellors at CAPS, or consult your doctor for advice.