

Moving Between Cultures

Change is challenging

When students move to a different country to study, they find the new environment can be quite different from their home culture. There are differences in food, accommodation, lifestyle, attitudes, and behaviour. Everyday living in a different culture and using English for communication can be frustrating and confusing and can add to any feelings of homesickness.

Reacting to change

It is normal to have a wide range of reactions to your new environment. This is called “culture shock” and your experiences of it can be both positive and negative.

Negative feelings are common and can affect people at different times and in different ways. Each individual is different. Some students may be affected within the first few weeks. For others, this could occur after a longer period of time.

Living in the new culture can also affect you physically. Headaches, upset stomach, loss of appetite, trouble sleeping, and generally feeling sick can be reactions to changes in diet, the environment, and to the stress of adjusting to the new culture.

It is important to recognise that what you are experiencing is perfectly normal; it usually does not last, and there are actions you can take to reduce the impact. After you have been in Australia for a while, the culture will begin to seem more familiar.

Meeting the challenges

Firstly, recognize that living and studying in a different cultural and language environment is a challenging and extraordinary achievement.

It is always a good idea to talk to someone about what you are experiencing. Your family also may be feeling anxious because you are so far away. Try to keep in regular contact with family and friends. They will be reassured that you are okay and you will feel more at ease keeping up with the news from home.

- **Making friends and meeting people**

Take the time to talk with students and staff about how you are feeling.

Make the most of any opportunities to get to know your classmates, both Australian and international. Students often have to do assessment tasks working in groups. This can give you opportunities to meet and chat with your classmates informally. Use these situations to ask questions about the culture and also to talk about your own culture.

If you are living in accommodation with Australians, this provides more opportunities to get to know Australians and to understand the Australian way of life.

To help you adjust to the new culture, it is a good idea to continue with your hobbies and interests, and perhaps develop new ones. For example, you could find out where the local sporting groups are located, or join the Campus Choir.

- **Community / University involvement**

You might also be interested in doing some community work. This will help you become a member of the local community while you are living in Australia. You might also want to become involved with the Student Association on campus and their activities. In addition, there may be special events planned on your campus for International students. Through these experiences you will develop understanding about Australian culture and confidence to participate in the culture. International students enrich the campus community so your presence and participation is valued. Contact the Mission Engagement Officer on your campus for information about community activities.

- **Work**

If you intend to work during semester, be aware of the effect it will have on both your study and leisure time. It is suggested that students spend at least 40 hours a week (classes and independent study time) on their university studies. If too many hours are spent in paid work, this can create more stress and may create difficulties in managing your classes and study time. It is important to keep a balance between study, work, and relaxation.

- **Language**

At first, students often feel shy and lack confidence in saying what they think. There can be a difference between what is happening around you and what you are thinking and feeling. This can contribute to feelings of uncertainty which can affect your overall wellbeing, and, your studies.

It might be useful to write about your experiences in a journal as a way of developing your own voice in English. Take the opportunity to read, listen, and speak more in English apart from your academic work. Be curious about the language, especially the slang words you hear. The more you engage with English through using it and thinking about it, the more confident you will become.

Developing your confidence in using English is important; but remember, your English expression does not have to be perfect to communicate the ideas. Over time, you will develop confidence. It will happen.

- **Contacts**

There are several people International students can talk to on campus about any problems they may have. Students should contact the **International Student Adviser** on their campus for assistance with issues such as visa renewals, health care, and fees.

Student Services also provides a range of services for students.

- Academic Skills Advisers assist students to develop as effective learners
- Counsellors assist students with any personal and emotional concerns and stresses
- Disability Advisers assist students with disabilities or ongoing health problems
- Mission Engagement Facilitators assist international students in adjusting to the campus community.



For further information:

- Contact the Academic Skills Adviser on your campus
- Visit our web pages on myACU.

Print the Pamphlet Series

Last revision:
December 2006