

Culture SHOOK!

How to support your student's transition at AUP



Culture Shock: (Noun) the feeling of the feeling of disorientation experienced by someone when they are suddenly subjected to an unfamiliar culture, way of life, or set of attitudes.

Moving overseas can be a thrilling experience. Exploring unfamiliar territory, meeting new people and trying different things. It can also be a difficult and overwhelming time, particularly if you're a first-time university student who has never lived away from home before.

While some adapt easily, for others it can take time to adjust to the culture of a new country. This guide will help you understand what they are experiencing and understanding the different stages, and how to handle things.

Culture shock can be caused by a range of things, both big and small, such as difficult language barriers, getting lost in a new city or making a cultural faux pas because local customs are different from one's home country. Culture shock can lead to symptoms such as confusion, anxiety, frustration, loneliness, and homesickness. Even physical symptoms such as insomnia as a result of time zone changes, or colds and stomach bugs due to unfamiliar foods and bacteria can occur.

Culture Shock Stages

Culture shock is widely recognized by four different stages to the process – honeymoon, negotiation/frustration, adjustment and adaptation:

1. Honeymoon Stage

This first stage is overwhelmingly positive. Students are extremely enthusiastic and excited about the new language, people, food and surroundings. At this stage, the move seems like the greatest decision they've ever made. It's an exciting adventure they never want to end.

During this phase, students are quick to identify similarities between the new culture and their own, and they will find the locals hospitable and friendly. They may even find things that would be a nuisance back home, such as traffic jams or lines at the grocery store, amusing and charming in this new location.

To note: On short trips such as vacations, the honeymoon stage may last throughout the whole experience. On longer stays abroad, the honeymoon phase will sooner or later fade away.

2. Negotiation/Frustration Stage

The negotiation or frustration stage is characterized by annoyance and anxiety. This usually hits around the six-week mark, although it can be earlier or later depending on the individual. As the excitement gradually disappears, students are continually faced with difficulties or uncomfortable situations that may offend or make them feel disconnected. The locals might not be so friendly anymore and new living experiences may be the cause of feelings of confusion, discontent, sadness, and even anger.

Students may experience feelings of fatigue from not understanding the local language, navigating new living arrangements, and are tired of miscommunications that may be happening frequently. They may be exhausted by having someone in their living space all the time or they could feel alone in their space, not having lived by themselves before. Small things, such as missing the bus or being unable to find a favorite food in local restaurants, may trigger frustration. At this point, students might start to think that moving abroad was the biggest mistake of their life and the feeling of homesickness might be overwhelming. Students will also start to miss their friends and family back home and idealize the life they had there. This is often when physical symptoms can appear, and students may experience minor health ailments such as headaches or stomach trouble as a result of the transition.

3. Adjustment Stage

Finally, frustrations begin to diminish as students begin to get their bearings and become more familiar and comfortable with the people, language and general culture around them. It becomes easier to navigate in these new environments and they establish friends and other communities of support and can better recognize the local languages. This is also the stage where routine sets in.

Students will experience some difficulties at every stage but by this phase they are able to handle them in a more rational and measured way.

4. Adaptation Stage

Acceptance doesn't mean that students completely understand the culture and behaviors around them, it means that they realize that complete understanding is not necessary in order to function and thrive in these new surroundings

Students no longer feel isolated and lonely and are used to their new daily activities and friends. While they may never get back to the heightened euphoria felt during the honeymoon stage, they have now gained a sense of belonging and finally feel at home in their new environment. Adaptation can happen anywhere in the process, there is no set time. For some students, it's after their first semester, for others, their first year. It is important to know that your student will find a level of adaptation at their own pace.



Don't let culture shock scare you or your student! Embrace every moment of it, as it will shape their experience and mold their character.

Bonus: Re-entry Shock

I note that re-entry or reverse culture shock can happen once your student returns home after living abroad for an extended period.

They may quickly realize that things are very different from when they left and feel like they no longer fit as easily as before because family, friends and even their hometown have changed while they were away. Their university experience abroad may also look very different from their friends', and they may find it difficult to compare experiences.

Students might also find that newly learned customs and traditions are not applicable in their home country, and then they have to go through the whole process of adjustment and adaptation all over again!

Even though it can be one of the most difficult parts of moving abroad for your students' studies, culture shock is just as fundamental to the experience as people, food, and scenery. There is no recipe for culture shock prevention, but every individual is affected by cultural contrasts in different ways.

How to deal with Culture Shock

Here are some ways you can help your student best deal with culture shock:

1. Remember that this is normal

Most students go through this regardless of where they choose to attend university. Culture shock is not a sign that anything is wrong. It is part of the university experience and eventually, everyone will be able to look back on this process with fond memories.

Your student has the opportunity to live in a different part of the world and experience cultures and traditions – both the good and the bad are all part of the adventure.

2. Keep an open mind and open communication

One of the most effective ways of dealing with culture shock is to keep an open mind and welcome the surprising experiences as they arise. Keeping communication channels open will help you understand and encourage your student as they navigate this time. Open communication channels can also be tricky, with the immediacy of texting, it is tempting for parents and family members to jump to their students' aid to clear all obstacles. By asking questions and encouraging your student to consider solutions, you'll help them to critically think through problems and find solutions for themselves.

Consider a weekly check-in with your student. Perhaps set a time on Sunday and plan to spend at least 30 minutes via FaceTime or Zoom connecting and chatting about your week. This check-in will help you both with transitions, new events, and staying in touch with each other.

3. Explore

Encourage your student to avoid hiding away too much. It's important to get out there and explore even if it feels uncomfortable at first.

They should feel free to live the tourist life. Museums offer free entry for students and with their Metro pass, getting around the city with a camera is easy. Encourage them to look up places to visit on Pinterest or travel blogs. Exploring can also be as easy as turning down a new street on the way home.

They might even discover a faster route to get to work, find a new hangout spot, or snap a fantastic photo to share with friends and family back home.

4. Get Involved

Encourage your student to get involved and to say yes as much as possible. Accept invitations to events, eat at new places, offer to help a new friend and discover their new home's cultures and traditions for themselves. Of course, encourage them to use common sense, and to stay safe and healthy.

Students can explore their interests through extracurricular activities such as clubs, sports, cultural study trips and student leadership. Find a club or group to get involved with. Whether that be learning how to speak French with a French/English group, to finding people who love cinema, to participating in Vivre or SGA, keeping themselves busy with something new and exciting will help them to overcome culture shock.



Learn more about how your student can get involved at aup.edu/student-life/get-involved