

What is Culture shock?

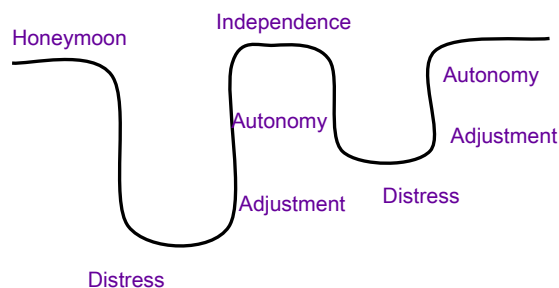
Culture shock is caused by the stress of being in a new culture. It is a completely normal consequence of being in a totally new environment, meeting many new people, and having to adapt to new foods, customs, language and academic life.

Even if you have planned and prepared for your period of study abroad, the effects of the changes you have to make in adjusting to life in the UK might still take you by surprise. Culture shock can affect anyone, not just international students, although different people experience it in greater or lesser degrees.

In the early stages of culture shock, some of the following feelings are common:

- Homesickness
- Headaches or stomach aches
- Easily tired
- Loneliness or a sense of hopelessness
- Distrust of people
- Withdrawal from people and activities
- Lowered work performance
- Anger, or anxiety and suspicion

See the 'W-Curve' diagram below for a profile of the different phases of culture shock. You may experience these partially or fully, or even experience different parts of the curve several times over.



The *Honeymoon Phase* is usually experienced when you first arrive in a new culture. Differences are exciting and intriguing. The *Distress Phase* may be noticeable after a few days or weeks. Those initially exciting cultural differences may now cause you to feel insecure or confused, as you struggle to understand the rules of the new culture you find yourself in. At this stage, you may find you miss your family and home support structure the most.

Next, in the *Adjustment Phase*, you may find you feel irritated, or frustrated with the cultural differences you come across in daily life: perhaps with the learning and teaching environment, or in your relationships with staff or other students, or with your accommodation. You will probably find you make comparisons with your home culture and decide you prefer home! Don't worry this is completely normal and is just part of the Integration process. You are probably consciously or unconsciously assessing your own cultural values and trying to make sense of them.

In the *Autonomy Phase*, you have by now probably worked out how to operate in your new cultural environment - how to satisfactorily interact with people and make friends, where to shop, eat and socialise, as well as to understand and cope with your new learning environment. You are most likely now learning to accept the differences between your home culture and those of UK culture and to feel more relaxed.

The *Independence Phase* brings with it the feeling of self-assurance and more complete understanding. Differences and similarities are valued and important and you feel confident about handling most or all situations.

What can I do about culture shock?

Although culture shock is uncomfortable, it is a normal part of the adjustment process. There are however a number of ways to help reduce its impact:

- Be aware of the symptoms. Once you realise you are experiencing culture shock you can take steps to deal with it. Remember your feelings are normal and many other students around you - both UK and non-UK will be feeling the same way you are.
- Try to find out information about different aspects of the culture which puzzle you or seem strange. Don't be afraid to ask questions.
 - ⇒ Behaviour which may seem rude to you may not be intended as rude.
 - ⇒ Polite customs are different in each culture so when situations do not seem to make any sense remember that people may be following social rules which are unknown to you.
- Exercise, drinking plenty of water and eating well helps to reduce stress.
- Relax - we all misunderstand things from time to time, so don't feel bad if this happens to you. Just try and move on and try to think of it as a learning experience.
- What do you miss most which was enjoyable in your own country? Look for ways to meet these desires (perhaps join a Society—details are available from the Students' Union).
- Develop friendships with both UK students and students from your own country. At times the friendships with culturally different people may seem hard to maintain but can be a good way of understanding other cultures. It is also important to spend time with people from a similar culture so you can support and assure each other during any difficult times.

- Make sure you have a few familiar things around you, such as photographs, posters or ornaments. This can be very comforting, specially in the first few days and weeks. Ask your family to send you some things if you didn't bring anything with you.
- Find a local supplier of food which is familiar to you. Ask other students where they shop, or contact Student Support Services or the Students' Union (LUSU) for advice. Eating a nutritious and balanced diet will help you stay healthy.
- For some students linking with a faith community will put you in touch with a familiar setting, whether it is a church, mosque, synagogue or temple. Enquire at the Chaplaincy Centre as the first point of contact for religious provision on campus, or contact Student Support Services.

Finally, remember that most people will experience culture shock in one form or another. Don't feel that it is a sign that you have made a mistake, or that you are not coping. The symptoms will pass before too long and you will probably find that it has been a useful learning experience for you, whether you intend to return to your home country or stay for some time in the UK.

Where can I go if I need help?

If you are struggling with feelings of culture shock, or are experiencing some of the above symptoms, you can make an appointment to speak to the **International Student Adviser**, in Student Support Services. We can listen to you with understanding of your situation.

Alternatively you could talk to your **tutor** in your academic department, or a **college secretary** or **porter**; anyone approachable and friendly will understand about the stress you are experiencing. The University wants to create an environment where all students and staff respect each other and we want you to have a successful and happy stay here.

If you need further advice please contact the International Student Advisory Services, in Student Support Services.

Our website:

<http://www.lancs.ac.uk/depts/studentsupport/international/>

Address:

Student Support Services
Room A21, A Floor
University House

Telephone:

5-92010 or 5-94619

Email:

international.support@lancaster.ac.uk or
j.raper@lancaster.ac.uk

FEEDBACK: We welcome your comments and suggestions on our services. You can submit this online at:-

<http://www.lancs.ac.uk/users/studentsupport/feedback>

This leaflet was last updated in September 2007

Please let us know if you would prefer this leaflet in an alternative format



Student Support Services

How to deal with Culture Shock

International