

Culture shock and cultural adjustment

The concept of 'culture shock' is most relevant to international students, coming to live in the UK from a different country or culture. However, it can also be useful for UK students to be aware of the 'cultural adjustment' that coming to university might entail. For example, if no one from your family has ever been to university before, or you come from a different part of the country than the majority of other students here, then you might feel as if, in some ways, you've come to live in a 'foreign country'.

As well as the physical environment we are used to from home, we are also used to the 'cultural' environment - the social practices, beliefs and ways of communicating of our home community (family, extended network, home town, country). Within this home environment there are all sorts of signs or cues with which we orient ourselves to the situations of daily life - things like words, gestures, facial expressions and customs.

Moving to a new country or just to a new place, like university, inevitably means that a lot of the familiar cues and ties are missing. The importance given to study, work and leisure; the values people strive for; or the symbols of status, for example, might all be different from those you are used to and have taken for granted in the past. You might even experience subtle or overt prejudice based on accent, dress, religion or ethnicity. All of these factors can result in 'culture shock' - where it feels as if all your familiar props have been knocked away from you, and you have to try to deal with daily situations without the familiar cues and signs that can usually guide your decisions and choices. This is very likely to give rise to lots of uncomfortable feelings, such as frustration and anxiety.

It can be useful to recognise that there are several 'stages' of feeling associated with culture shock:

1. The 'honeymoon' period, when you feel excited about the new experience, and fascinated and delighted by being in the new culture. This can last for a few hours, days, weeks or months.
2. The 'disintegration' period is likely to come when you start to feel disoriented by not understanding some of the new signs and cues of the new culture. Values and information can conflict with your own, and you may find lectures difficult to understand and methods of studying different from what you are used to. You can start to doubt your abilities and feel insecure. This is the most difficult time and you may feel depressed.
3. In the 'reintegration' period you may start to feel hostile towards the new place and culture and recognise all the negative things about it, at the same time realising the validity and strength of the place and culture you have left behind. This is quite a healthy reaction as you are reconnecting with what you value about yourself and your own culture.
4. The 'autonomy' stage is when you start to feel more at home and have become more practised at asserting yourself within your own and the new culture.

Different people will experience this process in different ways. Not everyone will go through every stage; some will switch between stages or experience aspects of some or all of them at once. It is important to realise that everyone coming into a new environment suffers from culture shock to some extent.