

Podcast series: Preparing for your Undergraduate Time Abroad

Part III – Getting Organised for Your Time Abroad (and coming home afterwards)

So in the previous podcasts, we thought about how you might feel about going on your time abroad and how you've previously reacted to periods of transition or change, as well as about the different stages of culture shock. You'll hopefully have thought about what some of the personal challenges and potentially more disturbing aspects of going overseas are likely to be for you, but you might also be wondering what might help, and what you can do practically to look after yourself when you're going through some of these more difficult periods. That's the focus of this third and final podcast in the series. Now might be a good moment to do some further reflection on what you think might help you to manage this process. Perhaps you'd like to make a note of anything you think you might find useful, whether that's things to take with you, things to do before you go or when you get there, or what you think you might find helpful emotionally. Having got your emotional suitcase down from the attic, then, it's now time to start thinking about what it is that you want to pack emotionally for the journey. You might want to pause this podcast for a moment to make a quick list of useful objects, helpful activities, or encouraging ways of thinking or reflecting on your feelings that you feel might support you as you adjust to your new overseas environment.

So, what did you come up with? Many people think of a few favourite objects they want to take with them, such as photos of loved ones and friends, one or two small mementos that remind them of home, or maybe a supply of a favourite snack or food (as long as it's legal to import it into the country you're visiting). You might also have thought of supplies or equipment to take with you for a favourite hobby or activity that will help keep you going when times get tough. These might just be a few bits and pieces to start you off with, at least until you can find something similar in your destination, or develop new tastes, interests, or maybe favourite things to eat or to do when you get there. Although not everything you want or like is necessarily going to be available in exactly the same way as it might be at home, do remember that, with the exception of some very remote or difficult environments, with some flexibility and adaptation, you're likely to be able to obtain at least the basics of whatever it is you feel you need in your destination country.

You might also want to put on your list of what to pack in your emotional suitcase ideas like keeping in touch with friends and family at home (which is, of course, easier now than ever before). You might have included talking to people from the same or a similar culture to your own about what you find strange or difficult in your destination country, as well as what you might be enjoying, or perhaps you've included using news media to keep in touch with events, trends, and experiences at home. What else did you come up with? What was in your 'emotional suitcase'? Are there any concepts, words, or phrases that you might find it helpful to keep in mind? Or things that you find it helpful to do to look after yourself, whether that be breathing exercises or going for walks in nature, going to the gym or watching the rugby, listening to podcasts or disappearing under the duvet for a long lie-in. Just a reminder here that it's important to ensure that you get enough sleep, that you eat regularly and healthily, that you take reasonably frequent exercise (unless there are medical reasons not to), and that you establish a solid basic daily routine as quickly as you're able to. This might sound boring or obvious, but there is good evidence to suggest that all of these things are likely to help your overall mood and ability to function in pretty much any context. And when you're dealing with so much novelty and so many new experiences, having a good routine will enable you to conserve your energy and thinking for the more challenging aspects of your everyday life. Regular mini-retreats, when you just switch off for a bit from your new culture, can also be very helpful for some people.

But as well as allowing yourself the occasional duvet day to retreat when you feel overwhelmed and perhaps a bit exhausted, it's important to ensure that you have consistent periods of engagement with your new culture on a regular basis - albeit perhaps, at times, short ones if things are feeling a bit much. It's all too easy to retreat and hibernate, to speak your home language and socialise only with people you know from Oxford or from your home culture, and to try to minimise the new experiences with which you have to contend. But without pushing yourself too hard, it's important to maintain some curiosity about things you might be finding challenging or difficult, to keep an open mind about your experiences, and to wonder about how and why things might be done differently in the new culture, or why what might initially have seemed familiar might now have turned out to have a subtly different, or indeed entirely different, meaning or connotation.

In other words, whilst it's important to ensure that you are physically safe, and that you take local advice on where you can and can't go, what you can and can't wear, and what constitute acceptable and unacceptable ways of behaving and interacting in your destination culture, it's also important to get out and about and to explore your new environment as much as you can. Above all, whilst it is fine to spend some time keeping in touch with family and friends from home and talking with people from your own culture who might also be living locally, do try to get to know people from the new culture, too, perhaps by finding a social club or society that enables you to continue with an existing hobby or sport, or by taking up a new one, or even just by going to the same place at the same time on a regular basis, such as a local library, café, or restaurant (again checking, particularly if going alone, that it is safe and socially acceptable to do this in your destination culture). Most people are creatures of habit, so if you go to the same place regularly enough, you're bound to start recognising people and they you, and at the very least, it might give you a chance to observe local customs and habits as you yourself become a familiar part of the environment. It's not just that all this is likely to help with language learning, it's also a good way to find out more about the country in which you're living.

Although this might sound a bit contradictory, at the same time, you might want to be wary, at least initially, of trying to immerse yourself too quickly in new activities, experiences, or relationships, at least until you've found your feet a bit. You might remember your first term at Oxford and some of the pressure you might have felt to socialise, make close friends, or even start a new romantic relationship. For some people, this works well, but others feel, on looking back, that although they felt lonely initially, it might have been a better idea to take things a bit more slowly. So it's important to reflect on what works for you, to think about your motivations, and to make sure that you're looking after yourself emotionally at a time when you might be feeling a bit more vulnerable than usual. It's also worth remembering that your time abroad is a marathon, not a sprint, so not trying to do too much too soon, whilst nevertheless being courageous enough to explore, are very much the order of the day.

So what else can you do to prepare for your time abroad? Some practical tips to bear in mind include the following.

1. Sort out the paperwork well in advance – this might be completing forms for your Department about where you want to go and what you want to do; applying for funding and completing your risk assessment; arranging visas and travel insurance; organising internships, courses, employment or travel plans; ensuring that you will have access to any medication or ongoing treatment that you might need, and securing somewhere to live at an affordable rent. Whatever it is, doing any paper work or administrative tasks well before the deadline is probably going to be helpful. Have you thought about things like banking arrangements, mobile phone costs, whether your favourite apps will work once you're

abroad, what sort of adaptor you'll need, and financial arrangements, especially if you're planning on working, for example? Your Department is likely to have substantial experience of what's required, so do remember to ask their advice, make yourself a check list if you haven't been given one, and work methodically through your list of things to do step by step, well in advance.

2. Don't assume that everything will work in the same way as it does in the UK – this is for the most part unlikely. From electric plugs to what gets sold in which shops, there are going to be at least some differences – have you packed enough adaptors to ensure you can use the tech you might want to take with you, do you know who to contact if you have IT issues? You might expect to find washing up liquid in the supermarket and eventually find it at the pharmacy, or realise that your favourite brand of breakfast cereal or chocolate simply doesn't exist where you're going. Such matters are seldom insurmountable, and at worst, a minor inconvenience, but do you know if any medication that you need is licensed and available in your destination country, and will you need any vaccinations before you go? If so, how many months in advance should you get these organised? Try to prioritise the important things rather than getting caught up with the minor issues and if need be, remember to discuss any medical difficulties or questions (with regards to both mental and physical health) with your own GP or Consultant well in advance of going abroad, to ensure you will have ongoing access to any treatment or medication you might need. And do ensure that your travel insurance will cover this and any other likely health issues you anticipate experiencing, as well as covering any emergencies.
3. Check in advance with your College and with your Department what is expected of you academically during your time abroad. How much contact will be appropriate with your Oxford tutors and when? What work will be expected of you and when and how will this be submitted? Which courses, if any, will you be following locally, and how will these be assessed? Will any local courses or assessments count towards your degree here?
4. Check with your College Welfare Team and Department what access you will have to any pastoral support that you might need from them. In the unlikely event that you have to come back to the UK permanently during your time abroad, who will you need to contact to arrange this, and what might the consequences be for your degree?
5. Before you go, ensure you make a list of useful phone numbers and websites and that you take several copies of this with you. If you think you're going to need ongoing therapy while you're abroad, it is well worth looking into what might be available locally, again well in advance, perhaps contacting a UK regulatory authority such as the British Association of Counselling and Psychotherapy or the UK Council for Psychotherapy or the Royal College of Psychiatrists to ask their advice about how to find a reputable counsellor, therapist, psychologist or psychiatrist overseas. If you do decide to use a UK professional working online while you're abroad, it is particularly important that you ensure that they have appropriate insurance, that they have the correct permissions to work in the jurisdiction in which you'll be residing, and that you have a written undertaking from them about these and similar issues.
6. Once you've arrived at your destination, make sure that you register with a local GP, or if this isn't possible, that you know how to get medical assistance, should you need it. And make a note of the contact numbers for local emergency services, as well as your Embassy or Consulate.

There might be other things that you need to get organised for yourself before you go, depending on your requirements and preferences. But it's all about recognising that, whilst not

everything can be anticipated or sorted out in advance, some sensible planning for the things you do know are likely to be an issue for you is likely to be helpful. So hopefully, you can think things through with regards to any predictable difficulties of life abroad that you might face without getting unduly anxious, leaving you more time, energy, and headspace, to deal with any more unpredictable problems that might crop up.

Finally, although this might seem a long way off right now, it's important to think at some point during your time abroad, if not before you go, about coming back to the UK or wherever home might be once you've completed your time away. Is it going to be possible, desirable, or indeed necessary for you to make a trip home before that? If so, is this something that's going to be affordable for you, and are you likely to find it reassuring or disruptive? Will it help you to feel more settled overseas, or do you think it might upset the new routine that you've managed to establish? Whether or not you decide to take a trip home during your time abroad, once you get back home more permanently, there are likely to be some adjustments to be made both for you and for your nearest and dearest. Even if you've had a life changing experience, for your family and friends, it might be that things have been carrying on pretty much the same as ever. So although they might be interested in your experiences abroad, it probably won't always be possible to convey to them quite how important these experiences might have been for you. It might even be the case that some of your friends or family could be a bit jealous of all the travelling you've done, the friends you've made, or new found language skills, and they might feel they've missed out a bit. Equally, however, you might have missed out on some important family, friendship group, or cultural events back home, so it is important to recognise that there could be different views, and that you will have changed to some extent in ways which you might like but which your loved ones might initially find challenging, and perhaps vice versa.

Whilst many people enjoy their time abroad and find it is a life changing experience, you might feel, as you contemplate coming home, that your time abroad hasn't been the experience you'd originally been hoping for, and you might find it irritating and perhaps undermining if people you know and love all seem to assume that you've had the time of your life when you might feel you didn't really enjoy it that much. It's okay if you feel it wasn't all it was cracked up to be – it might still have been a developmental experience for you, even if you found it challenging at times, and you might still have gained some useful experiences and learned a lot, not least about yourself. Hopefully, if you do feel like this, it won't have put you off going abroad again at some point, and maybe next time, you'll have a different experience, using some of what you learned this time around. Hopefully, though, you'll feel you've had a positive enough experience to want to repeat it some time in the future and to encourage others to do the same.

On a more practical note, as you think through what it will be like to come back to the UK or to go back home after your time abroad, do you need to arrange accommodation in advance for when you come back, or sort out who you're going to be living with before you go? Do you need to arrange a summer job or internship, or are there other practical arrangements you might need to make, in order to ease your transition back into your home culture? Have you been in touch with the University Careers Service or made use of their many useful resources to plan your next steps, and have you been able to reflect on how you might build on what you have learned during your time abroad in thinking about the future? Although it might feel like a long way off right now, reflecting on what it is going to be like to unpack your 'emotional suitcase' when you get home can be a helpful thing to do in advance – what is it you want to come back with in the way of skills, ideas, personal development experiences and new relationships, and -

whilst bearing in mind what we said at the start about going abroad not necessarily transforming aspects of yourself you might not like - who is it you'd like to be when you come back?

As with most things, when it comes to going home, it might be a question of taking the time to reflect beforehand about your time abroad and what kind of re-entry process you might anticipate. And as ever, it's important to try and take things one step at a time on your return, too. You might even find yourself experiencing some aspects of what is known as 'reverse culture shock', the process of perhaps initially finding some things about your home culture strange and possibly also irritating, feeling that you've missed out or no longer fit in, and with a sense of yearning for the places, friends, and experiences that you'll have left behind.

So, whilst there's plenty to think about when preparing for your time abroad, by listening to this series of podcasts, you've already taken the first steps towards what will hopefully be an exciting and important new experience in your life. Have a think about what you need to do to prepare for it, and do get in touch with the University Counselling Service if you feel it would be helpful to think things through in a bit more detail on a one to one basis before you go.