

Podcast series: Preparing for your Undergraduate Time Abroad

Part 1 – Reflecting on Previous Experiences of Transition and Change

This is the first of three podcasts about preparing for your time abroad as part of your undergraduate degree at the University of Oxford. You might be a language student aiming to improve your speaking and listening skills and wanting to make the most of learning about another culture. Or maybe you're going on an exchange programme to get some work or study experience in a partner institution or elsewhere overseas. Whatever your reasons for going abroad, you might have all sorts of thoughts and feelings about what lies ahead of you. The aim of this first podcast is to help you to begin to reflect on some of these ideas and emotions. In the second podcast, we'll try to anticipate some of the potential difficulties you might experience and to think about the different stages of culture shock. In the third and final podcast, you'll be encouraged to do a bit of contingency planning, with the aim of ensuring that the whole experience goes as smoothly and enjoyably as possible.

Of course, these podcasts aren't going to solve all the issues you might be thinking about before you go abroad. So if you feel that you're facing particular difficulties, then you might want to reach out to the University Counselling Service well before your departure date, to talk things through with a trained counsellor. But hopefully, just starting to explore your feelings now will be a helpful first step in addressing any worries you might have. It's the mental and emotional equivalent, if you like, of getting the suitcase down from the attic. Studying or working abroad can be a challenge but it's also a huge adventure, so with some thought and planning, you can give yourself the best chance to make the most of the opportunity this presents.

So to start off with, then, let's reflect on what you're thinking and feeling about the prospect of your time abroad. Perhaps you're excited about the opportunity to experience a different way of life, to meet new people, and to learn new things. You might feel apprehensive about missing existing friends and family, or about speaking a language in which you're perhaps not entirely fluent, at least, not just yet. You might be looking forward to travelling, or to getting to know yourself and your capabilities when faced with new, but perhaps not unwelcome, challenges. Or maybe you're feeling worried about managing day to day activities in an unfamiliar environment, all while staying in touch with loved ones and keeping up with your work. You might just be glad to get out of Oxford for a bit, but equally, you might be concerned about whether any of your friends and social networks will still be around when you get back. In short, you might be feeling a whole range of emotions before going abroad, many of which might seem a bit contradictory, but all of which are likely to influence your experiences once you get there, at least in the early stages.

It might be helpful, then, to reflect on your initial ideas and emotions about going abroad and to think about where these thoughts and feelings might be coming from. So why not start off by seeing what words, associations, images or beliefs come to mind? What do you notice about them? Are they positive or negative, or maybe a mixture of the two? Take a moment now, if you'd like to, to notice and reflect on what your reactions to the idea of going abroad might tell you about how you're feeling about being away. You might want to pause this podcast for a minute or two, to make a note of some of your ideas.

Perhaps we can be interested, as a second step, in thinking in more depth about why you might be having these particular thoughts and feelings. What do you think the reasons are for you to be thinking and feeling the way you do? So often, what we anticipate happening is based on our previous experiences – both those we remember, and those we don't. Of course, at one level, that

might seem logical – after all, if we approached everything as if it were a totally new experience, life might feel even more demanding and exhausting than perhaps it sometimes does already. We all have templates which we use to deal with new experiences, even if those templates don't necessarily always turn out to be as accurate as we might like, or are not always as relevant as they used to be, because they might be based on things that happened a long time ago.

But as you think now about how you might experience the upcoming transition of going abroad, you might want to reflect on previous periods of change in your life. Have you worked or travelled abroad before, or even just been on a foreign holiday somewhere for a week or two? If so, what were those experiences like? And if you haven't been abroad, what was it like going on holiday or away for day trips closer to home?

It's also likely you've been through some more ordinary, everyday transitions, such as moving house or changing schools. What was it like for you starting at the University of Oxford, for example, or on your first day at secondary school, or even your first day at primary school?

Depending on how old you were at the time, you might remember even earlier experiences, such as separating from your parents or carers to go to day-care, nursery, or pre-school. You're certainly not going to remember the first major transition that we all go through - that of being born. But although this might initially seem a bit far-fetched, Child and Adolescent Psychotherapist, Graham Music, amongst many others, cites robust and extensive scientific evidence that our earliest experiences can and do have an impact, at least unconsciously, on how we approach many subsequent periods of change and transition in our lives. As Psychoanalyst Adam Phillips says, however, 'The past influences everything and dictates nothing'. So it's worth bearing in mind that, however much your previous experiences of change might subtly influence how you feel about going abroad currently, with careful thought and reflection, these existing templates don't necessarily have to determine your future encounters.

Now as a third step, perhaps we can have a think about what your more conscious motivations for going abroad might be. After all, you will either have chosen a degree that involves this time away, or you'll have opted for this subsequently. Your motivations might be academic – wanting to improve your language skills, perhaps especially in speaking and listening, or wanting to learn about a particular aspect of the culture or a period of history, say, of your destination country. Maybe your aim is to learn a specific scientific technique where there is expertise overseas, or to gain experience in a particular lab or institute. Perhaps you're motivated by the opportunity to get some work experience abroad because you're thinking of an eventual overseas career. Or you might just want to go and explore the world and have the opportunity to travel more widely in the country or region that you're visiting.

You might feel that all this thinking in advance is 'overthinking', but in fact, you really can't think too much about something, you can only think about it in more or less helpful ways. So hopefully, you'll have found giving yourself some time to notice your responses a helpful first step, and something you might want to repeat on a regular basis, to see if and how your feelings change as you approach your departure date. You might even want to do this kind of reflection on a regular basis once you reach your destination, or even throughout your time abroad.

Now what about the particular country you're going to? If you've not visited there before, or even if you have, what images, ideas, and associations come to mind? Whilst it's important, of course, not to stereotype according to nationality, race, or ethnicity as you think about this, it's inevitable that you will have some expectations or associations about the country you'll be visiting and the people

who live there. Whilst they will all be individuals with their own complex histories and experiences, you might find that there are some things that people seem to have in common in the country you're going to that seem different, from a cultural perspective, in comparison with people from your own national, ethnic, or other cultural backgrounds. So what sorts of expectations and associations do you have about the country you'll be visiting and the people who live there, and what do you think they are likely to make of you?

As you reflect on these issues, you might find it helpful to think about how, when we're abroad, we inevitably tend to see things through the lens of our own cultural experiences, and might well be quick to judge unfamiliar people and experiences as 'different', 'strange', or even 'wrong'. It's important, then, to be aware of this natural response to the unfamiliar, and to recognise that we can all sometimes locate in others aspects of ourselves or our own experiences that we find uncomfortable or unwanted in ourselves. Similarly, we might feel that others have expectations of us and who we are because of where we're from, or at least, where they might perceive us as being from. You might have already been on the receiving end of negative (or more rarely, positive) stereotyping, and feel that others have made assumptions about who you are and what you can do, based on your nationality, race or ethnicity, gender, sexuality, class, or indeed, just because you're a student at the University of Oxford. Conversely, we might also find ourselves thinking we have more in common with others than we do, or wanting to be like others because of some attribute that we feel they have that we would also like to possess. So it's worth bearing in mind how powerful and how inaccurate, at times, these projections, identifications, and unconscious phantasies can be, and how important it is to try and notice, as much as you can, your own thoughts and feelings as you encounter and relate to others. Of course, all of these factors can intersect in complex and varied ways, meaning that how we read other people and their cultures, and how they read us and our cultures, can all become pretty complicated. No wonder people often say that the first few days, weeks, and sometimes even months of living abroad can often be a bit exhausting!

At times, however, going abroad can be less about the attractions and expectations of where you're going and more about wanting to leave certain people, places, or experiences behind you. Maybe there's a particular person or group of people you feel you want to get away from, or perhaps you associate home or Oxford with a negative or traumatic experience, and you're hoping to get some distance from this, both geographically and emotionally. Or maybe there are even aspects of yourself from which you'd like to escape, and you're hoping that going abroad will offer a fresh start, a new set of people, and some other places for you to try and become a different version of yourself, or even a different kind of person.

It's true that being abroad will mean that you are likely to see some people less often, and that it will give you the chance to meet new people, visit different places, and explore various aspects of your personality. Being overseas can provide you with a chance to re-invent yourself a bit, perhaps experimenting with new behaviours and exploring who you are in new ways, or maybe being more open with others about your existing baggage. You will inevitably come back a changed person, more confident for having coped in a new culture, perhaps more aware of the strengths and weaknesses of your own cultural background, and more knowledgeable in all sorts of ways. But it's important to recognise that going abroad, in and of itself, is unlikely to change your personality at a fundamental level, to solve tricky situations, to resolve difficult relationships, to improve suddenly any long-term mental health difficulties, or to eradicate traumatic memories or experiences. After all, despite the inevitable distractions that a new and often exciting experience can provide, when you go abroad, you will in essence still be taking yourself, your thoughts and feelings, and your memories with you, wherever you go. And even the positive experiences you might have when

you're abroad are likely to be a little bit stressful initially, and might therefore exacerbate any existing difficulties you might have. So it's probably better to start working on these issues before you go abroad if you can, while you're in familiar territory, rather than waiting and hoping that your problems will just go away once you're somewhere different. We'll think in the second podcast, then, about the various emotional stages you might go through when you finally reach wherever it is you're heading, as you perhaps inevitably experience what most people refer to as 'culture shock'. We'll also go on to think in the third podcast about how you might prepare to mitigate at least some of the difficulties involved in going abroad through careful planning. I hope you've found this first podcast stimulating – please do join me for the next podcast, where we'll think further about how you might go about getting ready emotionally for your time abroad.