

# PREPARING TO LIVE IN ANOTHER CULTURE

## What is Culture?

Culture is a complex concept to understand. One definition describes culture as a system of shared beliefs, values, customs, behaviours, and artifacts that the members of society use to cope with their world and with one another, and that are transmitted from generation to generation through learning. As a study abroad student, you are granted the unique opportunity to immerse yourself in the culture of your host country and begin to understand the varying dimensions of the host culture. Several aspects of culture are easily visible like art, dress, literature, dance, music, etc. Other aspects of culture are not immediately visible like roles related to ages, sex, class, occupation, kinship, courtship, decision making, etc. During your time abroad, you will be confronted with various cultural interactions that can cause embarrassment and frustration. Prepare yourself for your host country's culture.

Educate yourself about your host country. Begin now learn about your host country. The more informed you are about the history, politics, culture, food, religion, languages, customs, etc., the better prepared you will be for living in the host country. Some ways to begin preparing yourself include the following:

- Consult the travel books and program binders at International Information Center or at our site [http://www.tspu.edu.ru/international\\_activity/](http://www.tspu.edu.ru/international_activity/)
- Talk to people who are from your host country
- Meet international students at your University
- Contact returned study abroad students to learn about their experiences in your host country. The list of students who studied in your host country you could find at [http://www.tspu.edu.ru/international\\_activity/?ur=925](http://www.tspu.edu.ru/international_activity/?ur=925)
- Read books about your host country
- Watch films from and about your host country
- Read newspapers from your host country
- Listen to radio stations or watch TV broadcasts that focus on international news coverage
- 

Consider the following when preparing to enter another culture:

- How does the host country view time? Are locals early, late or on time for meetings?
- What role does the family play in the host culture? What role will you play in your home stay? (if you are placed in a home stay)? What are gender roles?
- How is privacy viewed? How close you should stand or sit when talking with someone you know only slightly, or know well, or to a stranger?
- How are elders viewed?

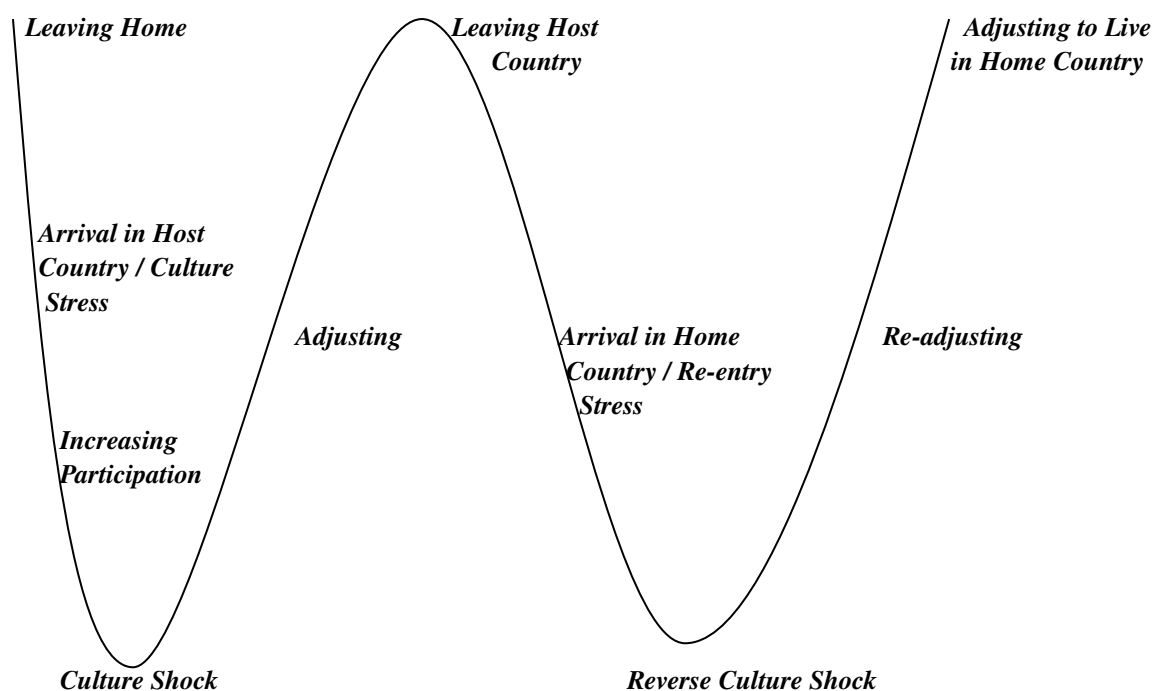
- What role does alcohol play in the society?
- What is considered dating in the host country? A relationship?
- What is the power structure of the host country? Educational structure?

Self Reflection: While it is important for you to understand the culture you are entering, it is also important that you understand yourself. When you enter another country, you enter with a unique set of personal experiences, abilities, and challenges. It is helpful to begin exploring how the experience of being in a different culture, with its different norms and expectations, will impact the various parts of yourself.

Self-exploration may be particularly important for students whose gender, race, ethnicity, sexual identity, or ability may influence access to parts of the new culture. Studying and traveling abroad may mean leaving behind supports – physical, social, legal, emotional, psychological – which do not exist in your host country. On the other hand, it may mean living in an environment which feels much more comfortable and accepting than in your country.

## Cultural Adjustment

Much about culture is learned while in the host country. Adapting to a different culture can be exciting, frustrating, and challenging. No two students adapt at the same pace or in the same manner; however, there are several phases of cultural adaptation that people living in another culture for an extended period of time experience. Below is a diagram that illustrates the process of cultural adjustment as well as a description of the phases.



### **Phase 1: Leaving Home – Pre-departure**

- General Attitude:** Anticipation, eager, nervousness
- Events:** planning, packing, celebrating, attending orientation, good bye parties
- Emotional response:** Excitement, enthusiasm, concern about leaving family and familiar environment, desire to escape problems
- Behavioral response:** Anticipation, loss of interest in current responsibilities
- Physical response:** Tiredness, generally normal health
- Verbal response:** “I just can't wait to...”

### **Phase 2: Arriving in Host Country – Initial Euphoria**

- General Attitude:** Exhilaration, excitement
- Events:** Welcome reception, new living arrangements, new classes and teachers, exploration of sights and shops
- Emotional response:** Tourist enthusiasm, sense of adventure
- Behavioral response:** Outward curiosity about country, avoiding negative stereotypes, enthusiasm for studies and site, passive observer of culture
- Physical response:** Intestinal disturbances, minor insomnia
- Verbal response:** “Awesome! This place and these people are a lot like home!”

### **Phase 3: Increasing Participation**

- General Attitude:** Bewilderment, disenchantment, restlessness, impatience
- Events:** Classes, everyday life, responsibilities in living arrangements, unfamiliar food, language, customs
- Emotional response:** Frustration, uncertainty, irritability, loss of enthusiasm, skepticism
- Behavioral response:** Search for security in familiar activities (i.e. reading books in Russian), increased alcohol and/or food consumption
- Physical response:** Colds, headaches, tiredness
- Verbal response:** “Why do they have to do it like that? Why can't they just...”

### **Phase 4: Culture Shock**

- General Attitude:** Impatience, irritation, aggression, hostility
- Events:** Uneven work performance, confrontation with difference
- Emotional response:** Discouragement, lethargy, depression, suspicion, boredom, homesickness, anger, extreme sensitivity and irritability,

loneliness, comparing everything to home

**Behavioral response:** Avoiding contact with host nationals, excessive sleep, tearful, loss of concentration, tension/conflict with others

**Physical response:** Minor illnesses, headaches, preoccupied with personal cleanliness

**Verbal response:** “This place sucks! I hate it here!”

### **Phase 5: Adjusting – Adaptation Phase**

**General Attitude:** Adjustment and/or recovery

**Events:** Work performance improves, able to interpret cultural clues, sense of humor returns

**Emotional response:** Sense of comfort with surroundings, sense of belong in culture

**Behavioral response:** Empathy, ability to see things from perspective of host national

**Physical response:** Normal health

**Verbal response:** “Home” is home stay/residence hall/apartment, “We” includes host nationals

### **Phase 6: Arrival Home – Pre-entry Phase**

**General Attitude:** Ambivalence and state of disorientation

**Events:** Wanting to tell others about experience and finding others generally not very interested

**Emotional response:** Mixed-up, disconnected, disoriented, irritability, depression, desire to return to host country, uncertainty about “home”

**Behavioral response:** Criticism of home, friends, and home country; keen interest in foreign affairs and news; apathy

**Physical response:** Colds, headaches, exhaustion

**Verbal response:** “I never realized....”