



## ‘Culture Shock’ – How to Deal with the Challenges of Studying Abroad

### A Guide for Incoming Exchange and Visiting Students

Studying abroad may mean a dive into the unknown: you meet new people, learn a new language, encounter a new academic system and deal with cultural differences. This can certainly be fun and is a valuable part of your study abroad experience, yet dealing with so much change can also be challenging at times. This guide helps you prevent, recognize and cope with ‘culture shock’.

#### ‘Culture Shock’ in a Nutshell

- ❑ ‘Culture Shock’ is a perfectly natural reaction to a different environment and can usually be overcome with time. The distress you may initially feel is only one element of an on-going learning and adaptation process that is triggered when you encounter difference.
  - ❑ Be patient with yourself: Give yourself plenty of time, as coming to terms with unfamiliar surroundings takes time for everyone and may easily take some months.
  - ❑ You can facilitate the acculturation process by various means which mostly boil down to taking action on your own instead of secluding yourself from others in frustration. Do not wait passively for things to happen and for friends to find you – become active and get involved.
  - ❑ If things get really bad and you feel you need support, know where you can turn to. There are many people who are there for you in times of need, may it be friends, ESN mentors or professional counsellors, so rest assured you will always find someone with an open ear for your troubles.
  - ❑ Once you have overcome the initial confusion and disorientation that an immersion into a new culture brings about, you can congratulate yourself: you are now ready and able to cope with difference and find your way, even in a formerly strange and unfamiliar place, including different customs, attitudes, language, food, etc.!
- Nonetheless you should bear in mind that cultures can be compared to an iceberg, and while you have learned to cope with the part that can be seen above the surface, there may be many more subtleties that you may not even have realized or come across yet. So when continuing your interaction with this meanwhile not so unfamiliar culture, remember that there may still be more that you do not know yet and that you will continue to learn as time passes.

# Services and Offers that can provide support

There are various institutions and offers that can support you in becoming comfortable in your new environment during your stay in Zurich. While this is by no means a complete list of all the offers that are available, here are some useful services we would particularly like to point out:

## ESN Mentoring

The [Erasmus Student Network \(ESN\)](#) → is a non-profit student network that organizes cultural and social events, informs and supports exchange and visiting students and offers further services such as [the tandem language exchange](#) → and [the mentoring programme](#) →. All exchange and visiting students can ask for a mentor from ESN. A mentor is a local student who can support you upon arrival, show you around Zurich, answer your questions and support you in case of trouble.

[zurich.esn.ch/w/mentoring](http://zurich.esn.ch/w/mentoring) →

## Academic Sports Association Zurich (ASVZ)

If you feel like sweating off any distress you may feel and taking your mind off things, ASVZ is a good way to do so as they offer an enormous range of sports most of which are available to you free of charge. Being physically active can be useful in times of distress, and participating in sportive activities is also a good way to meet new people with similar interests. You can also actively search for people to do sports with via the ASVZ "Community" service online.

[www.asvz.ethz.ch](http://www.asvz.ethz.ch) →

## Nightline Zurich

This is a telephone hotline run by student volunteers and is available Monday to Friday from 8pm to midnight during the semester. You can call them for help with administrative matters, questions regarding life in Zurich and at the university in general or if you want to get something off your chest. All conversations remain confidential. Contact: +41 44 633 77 77

[www.nightline.ch](http://www.nightline.ch) →

## Psychological Counseling

The Psychological Counseling Center of the University of Zurich and ETH Zurich can help overcome personal difficulties and problems with studies but also offers [professional counseling specifically for international students](#) → having difficulties with settling in. Their services are free of charge, completely confidential and available in several languages.

[www.pbs.uzh.ch](http://www.pbs.uzh.ch) →

## Student Organizations

You can get involved in various student organizations which may not only enrich your leisure time but also give you the opportunity to meet other students. In addition to [culture, music](#) → and sports, you can become involved in the [VSETH Student Union](#) → or in one of the [department associations](#) →. For some countries, there are also [international student associations](#) →.

# What is 'Culture Shock'?

Without maybe realizing it, each one of us grows up with many attitudes and cultural patterns that we do not usually question since they just seem so natural to us and those that surround us. It is only when we interact with people whose worldviews, values, attitudes or social behaviour differ from our own that we may realize that there is no such thing as an objective reality – a realisation that may be very unsettling as everything we took for granted may suddenly be questioned.

'Culture Shock' is a normal and logical reaction when someone encounters differences in another cultural environment. It may show very differently in each individual, as everyone reacts in a different manner to any given situation. In general however, 'Culture Shock' could best be described as a mix of emotions resulting from the sudden change that occurs when a person leaves everything that is familiar behind and moves to an unfamiliar place. In the new place, a lot may be strange at first, ranging from people, language, food or climate to subtleties like communication style, humour or every day behaviour. As a foreign student spending one or two semesters at ETH Zurich as an exchange or visiting student, you will not only have to deal with challenging studies in a differing academic system, but will also encounter a foreign culture while at the same time being away from your friends and family. It is therefore only normal that people may react to this sudden change with disorientation, confusion, anxiety or even frustration in some cases.

The good news however is that 'Culture Shock' is only one phase in an on-going acculturation and learning process which eventually allows you to feel comfortable and get along in two (or more) cultures. The initial reaction to your strange surroundings is entirely natural and is a signal that you consciously and/or subconsciously realize the differences around you compared to what you are used to. With time passing you will slowly learn to come to terms with your new situation and environment, and with even more time spent in the new place you will most probably even start to like and enjoy the immersion in a different life. On no account does this mean that you will stop being who you are and adopt an entirely new identity, have to become like people in your host university's country or like and approve of everything new you encounter. But your stay may broaden your horizon and open your eyes for difference as you may realize that things can be done in entirely different ways. Most importantly, you will, after all, develop the ability to tolerate differences and cope with it while finding your very own way of living in another place and still maintaining your identity.



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## Recognising 'Culture Shock'

Contact across cultures is inherently stressful as you suddenly find yourself in a place where you do not know anyone, the social customs and interactions as well as the language may be unfamiliar and basic concepts and assumptions that you thought to be universal suddenly do not necessarily hold true anymore in the new environment. Knowing about the existence of 'Culture Shock' and the fact that it is a natural reaction to stress is the first step to minimise the effect of acculturation difficulties, yet you should also know about potential signs that may indicate 'Culture Shock' so you are able to recognize it when it hits you or a friend of yours.

Everyone reacts differently to stress, therefore the symptoms of 'Culture Shock' may vary from person to person. There may be physical reactions as well as emotional reactions. Physical reactions could be allergies, aches and pains, unsettled health, insomnia or excessive sleepiness, overeating or the loss of appetite, and many more. Emotional reactions among others may include loneliness, homesickness, loss of self-confidence, mood changes, disorientation, anxiety, insecurity, depression, etc. There may also be further effects that may concern attitudes and social behaviour, such as an over-identification and idealisation of your home culture, development of fatalistic stereotypes concerning your host culture, social withdrawal and self-seclusion, depreciation and refusal of everything unfamiliar, incapability to solve even the most simple problems, and others.

In general, we believe that you know yourself best and should therefore be able to realize when something unusual is going on with you. Keep in mind that it is perfectly normal to react to a change of cultural surroundings, yet you may want to look out for any changes in your mental and/or physical well-being so you can take proactive steps at an early stage when needed. Also if you notice that a friend of yours is showing strong indications of a 'Culture Shock' you may want to talk to him or her about it and offer emotional support or point out other ways to get additional assistance.

## Prevention and Coping in General

**Here are some handy tips in order to prevent or rather minimise the effects of 'Culture Shock' and how to cope with it:**

### Thorough preparation

Before you go, inform yourself about the place you will be going to for example by reading books, looking up information on the internet, talking to students or other people who have already been to that place, etc. This helps you get a better idea of the place you are going to, to develop more realistic expectations and it may prepare you for what you will probably encounter.

### Learn Language Basics

If you get a chance, try to learn some of the language before you go so you are able to say small basic things like "hello" and "thank you". Especially if you plan to stay longer, language is a key factor in settling in, but also for shorter stays language is important in connecting you to local people. Remember: It is not about speaking the language perfectly or understanding everything, but much more about making an effort, showing interest and making yourself understood in everyday situations. Language courses are available at the Language Centre of the University of Zurich and ETH Zurich.

[www.sprachenzentrum.uzh.ch](http://www.sprachenzentrum.uzh.ch) →

### Know and accept 'Culture Shock'

If you notice signs of a 'Culture Shock' in yourself, do not worry but keep in mind instead that it is a natural reaction and part of a learning process with a positive outcome. Do not give up, rather give yourself time and be patient with yourself. Be aware that there are ways to mitigate the symptoms and facilitate the acculturation process, and if things get worse, know where you can turn to. Try to see 'Culture Shock' as part of your experience while abroad – encountering acculturation difficulties can be seen as proof that you are really deeply diving into a new culture and undergoing a learning process that will eventually leave you with new skills, attitudes and a broadened horizon.

## Familiar Items

If you feel the stress of the new environment it may in some cases help to surround yourself with familiar things – may this be by speaking your own language, eating familiar food, reading your favourite newspaper, etc. This is certainly not an encouragement to totally shut yourself off from the new environment, yet keeping some familiar items around you while dealing with the unknown at the same time can really help.

## Social Contact

Make sure you maintain a network of people you love, trust and can talk to. Keep in touch with your friends and family at home by phone, email, social media, blogs, etc., while also surrounding yourself with people whose company you enjoy at the new place. It does not matter whether they are locals, people from your home country or other countries, it is having people around you that you really care about and trust in that counts.

## Contact to Locals

If you do not easily get in touch with local students, do not let this bother you too much. Due to your short stay of often just a few months, it is normal that contact to local students may not be too much, especially as they find themselves in a totally different situation than you with their existing network of friends and family and leisure activities firmly in place. They may therefore not try to actively establish new contacts or simply already have a very busy schedule with studies and extracurricular activities. If they do not approach you this has nothing to do with you but with the different situations you are in. It is therefore quite normal for exchange and visiting students to find themselves surrounded by many friends from various countries other than the host university's – which is also an enriching experience. If you nonetheless wish to have more contact with local students you will in most cases need to be the one to take initiative by engaging local students in a conversation, suggesting a joint leisure activity or the like. A good way to get in touch with local students or local people in general can also be by volunteering in an organization or by joining a club of your interest, may it be sports, cinema or music.



“Be curious, try to tolerate differences and respect others.”

## Physical Health

Being physically active and doing the things you like or discovering new activities may help. Note that there is a large offer of both indoor and outdoor sports activities available from the [Academic Sports Association Zurich \(ASVZ\)](#) → – yet also keep in mind that any kind of activity may be good for you, it does not necessarily have to be sports if you are not into it. Also, make sure you eat a well-balanced, healthy diet and get enough sleep. Lots of caffeine or excessive alcohol consumption may further increase already existing anxiety, therefore you may want to think about reducing your consumption.

## Avoid Stereotyping, Keep an Open Attitude

Classifying and categorizing reality as we see it is a natural process of the human mind as it helps us to simplify a complex world to make it graspable. However, stereotyping people and cultures can have a detrimental effect as it may lead to overgeneralizations and may therefore close your eyes for internal differences while not leading to a genuine understanding of the culture and people. Try to keep an open mind, observe without judging and try not to judge people's behaviour by the norms you might use in your home country as you would then only close yourself off from a learning opportunity. Also, try not to criticise everything about the new culture you are to encounter and refrain from idealising home. If things frustrate or annoy you, try to keep your sense of humour as the ability to laugh things off can be very useful. Be curious, try to tolerate differences and respect others.

## Keeping a Journal

Some people recommend keeping a personal journal where you can put down in writing everything about your stay abroad, from your reasons to go abroad, your expectations before arrival, to the experiences you make, difficulties you encounter and lessons learnt. This can help recognize potential signs of a 'Culture Shock' but at the same time may become one of the most-valued memories of your stay abroad in retrospect.

# Tips for Coping with a Different Academic Environment

**An academic stay abroad also brings about an unfamiliar academic environment which may differ in many ways from that you are used to. Here is some advice that might be useful:**

## Get Yourself Informed

Information is key, therefore make sure you attend any orientation or registration events offered, study the information that you receive carefully and read up further details online. This will help you learn about services on offer, locations and organisational and administrative matters. Furthermore, being informed enables you to make use of the resources available and to get an idea of where to look for information you might be looking for later on. A lot of useful information about living in Zurich and studying at ETH Zurich can also be found in the [International Student Handbook](#) →, while specific information for exchange and visiting students may be found on the website of the [Student Exchange Office](#) →.

## Brace Yourself for Difference

Depending on what kind of academic environment you are used to, studying a semester or two at ETH Zurich will confront you with more or less differences in various aspects. Prepare yourself for some aspects will most probably be new and unfamiliar to you, may it be in teaching or learning styles, communication and interaction with peers and lecturers, types of examination, content, didactic methods etc. Some of these differences you will encounter may be bigger, others smaller; some you might enjoy, others you might dislike – which is perfectly fine. In any case, try to experience these differences with an open mind and see them as an opportunity to immerse in a different academic system. Do not reject and judge everything unfamiliar to you, but see it as a learning experience that is part of your exchange or visiting studies.



“[...] give yourself time and be patient with yourself.”

## Communication and Interaction

Depending on the individual course and lecturer, you might be asked to voice your opinion and explain your line of thought, rather than repeating theories that are in the book. Do not hesitate to express your views and thoughts in class; discussing various approaches is considered to be extremely valuable and beneficial and is therefore actively encouraged. Also, try to interact and engage actively with your fellow students and lecturers - they appreciate your contribution and any new perspective. Should you need further clarification in class, feel free to ask questions openly. In fact, others might appreciate your initiative a lot as they may have had just the same question in mind. In case you encounter any difficulties in coping with a course's content or pace do not wait too long but take action. You may want

to ask your fellow students for further explanations or approach the lecturer or tutor. If you think you need to change courses entirely make sure you get in contact with your department of enrolment.

## Managing your Workload and Exams

Studying in a different academic system may mean that the workload is distributed in a different way than what you are used to. There may not be many mandatory assignments during the semester, or they are not graded, yet this does not mean that it is not necessary to keep up with the pace of the course. In fact, you are expected to continuously build up on previously gained knowledge and skills, all of which will eventually be put to a test in the final exam. Do not only start studying once the course has finished but rather try to look into the subject matter already during the on-going course so you can also ask questions that may come up. Exams at ETH Zurich often make up the majority – if not all – of your grade, so take them seriously. Be aware that ETH Zurich has three different types of [performance assessment](#) →; the modes of your exams can be checked in the [course catalogue](#) → and in 'myStudies' →, the web application for students. Especially oral examinations are new for most exchange and visiting students, and while many are at first slightly worried about them, experience has shown that most consider it an extremely positive experience in retrospect. Exams can surely be perceived as stressful, even more so in a different academic system, but with thorough preparation and effective time-management they are certainly feasible. Therefore, start early with your exam preparation and allow sufficient time to study to avoid any additional stress.

## Punctuality

Being punctual for any classes, appointments and meetings is of high relevance in Switzerland and being late may be considered rude. Therefore, avoid being late by always allowing sufficient time, especially if you depend on public transport. Should you nonetheless be late make sure you apologise. Furthermore, make sure you are aware of all academic schedules and deadlines for project work, theses, essays etc. so you can plan ahead accordingly. Any assignments handed in late may not be considered.

## Campus

ETH Zurich has two main locations, Campus 'Zentrum' and Campus 'Hönggerberg' (Science City). Even though these locations are called 'campus' they might differ from the campuses you may be used to. The two locations

are indeed a cluster of buildings and infrastructure of ETH Zurich, yet there is no secluded campus where the entire university with all its related buildings such as libraries, sports centre, cafeteria, lecture halls, student residences, shops, etc. are found in one place which is only populated by university staff and students. On the contrary, ETH Zurich is located right within the town of Zurich, with many buildings being spread over different places. Consequently, students do not usually live directly on campus but instead somewhere in the city and thus interact regularly with the local non-academic population. Hence, if you are used to living on-campus you may need to get used to commuting to your classes during your stay at ETH Zurich, therefore allowing more time for your trip to university. On the other hand you will benefit from being in touch with the local population and may get a better insight into their daily life and what is going on outside the university.

[www.ethz.ch/en/campus.html](http://www.ethz.ch/en/campus.html) →



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## Returning Home

After a period abroad, also returning back home can bring about some uncertainty as you may undergo a process of re-adjustment in your place of origin. Such re-entry problems are not to be underestimated as they are usually not anticipated and might therefore catch you off guard. Keep in mind that your stay abroad might have influenced your perceptions, thinking and personality. Some differences might only occur to you after your return when you are confronted with people who have not undergone the same experiences as you. You may also face stereotypes or uncertainty over your personal identity. In addition, there might have been changes in the lives of your family and friends while you were abroad that you did not witness. Your social network may be happy about your return, yet your friends also got used to your absence. They may therefore not always remember to engage you in their activities, forgetting that you may not have as active a social life as they have shortly after your return from abroad. Do not hold it against them, but try instead to proactively get involved and reconnect with your social network.

As with your stay abroad, it is important to be patient with yourself and give yourself sufficient time to re-adjust. Furthermore, prepare yourself for some potential difficulties when returning home, i.e. do not necessarily expect everything to have remained just as you have left it. It may well be that both you and your surroundings have changed in the meantime, which may call for a reintegration which can at first be surprising and distressing. Try to actively re-establish contact to people whom you were close to before and be open for new contacts. After all, try to see your re-entry process as an intriguing part of your period abroad and try to appreciate the various experiences it brings with it.

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