

Coming to a New Country (for Student Exchange Programs)

International Students – Big Expectations and Big Frustration

International students face multiple adjustment challenges when coming to a foreign country. They have to overcome language barriers and have to get used to an unfamiliar academic environment. In addition, they experience acculturation stress. They might find differences in climate, food and practical issues. It often occurs that students find it difficult to connect with others due to differences in cultural communication customs. Consequently, international students may get irritated about the local way of life; they commonly experience homesickness, and even develop feelings of dissatisfaction and frustration. Sometimes these factors even trigger mental health issues such as depression, anxiety or translate into physical and vegetative symptoms such as sleep disturbance, loss of appetite and weight loss.

Most international students experience at least some degree of culture shock as they enter Austrian universities. A mindful and accepting way of coping with transition problems could entail the following:

- Adapting to a new culture takes time and seldom comes easy: take your time with the adjustment, be patient with yourself.
- Allow yourself to feel sad about what you miss. Find a way to integrate your old life into your new life.
- Check your expectations to see how realistic they are in the new country/university/ cultural life and try to adopt a more realistic view.
- See what you can influence and what you have to accept.

Potential Common Barriers to a Successful Transition

Language Barriers Inside and Outside the University

A major acculturation stressor international students face is the language barrier. Difficulties with proficiency in the foreign language and shyness/hesitation to speak the foreign language affect students' academic performance and social integration. Language barriers can have an impact on understanding lectures, producing written assignments, on doing well in oral and written exams, and on the ability to ask questions or participate in discussions in class.

- Take a language class, preparation classes for certain subjects in German, or summer courses.
- Try to meet local students in the classroom, on campus, at your accommodation or join sport clubs in order to practice your German. Use media of the host country to familiarize yourself with the language (radio, TV, newspapers).
- Try to talk as much as you can, even if you make mistakes, don't try to be perfect.

Performance Pressure

Most international students feel considerable pressure to perform well. For those who have difficulties with German it can be a major factor for doing poorly in class, especially in classes where students are expected to comprehend lectures, speak up, contribute, write papers and take essay-style exams.

Another contributor for academic stress for international students is a mismatch between their academic expectations and the reality of university life. International students may expect to perform as well academically as they did in their home country. And there is the pressure to pass some classes successfully to get the necessary ECTS points.

- Get used to the new academic practices by asking questions; speak up in class and seek support with lecturers—after class, via e-mail, and by visiting their offices.
- Look pro-actively for support (i.e. at the Student Service Centre and find out what support is available for essay writing, research and editing or with free tutorials).
- Academic advice: try to find a person from the academic staff (professor) for initial academic advice as soon as possible. If a modification of your plan is needed, change your academic plan according to your needs.
- Consider faculty staff as partners in the learning process rather than superiors.
- Think about your goals and expectations and adapt them if necessary, especially if you find out that they are too high or unrealistic.

Social Networking and New Friends

In addition to experiencing academic stressors, international students leave their friends and family behind, and they have to establish a new social network in the new country. Cultural norms, language barriers, and the nature of social/cultural differences in the host country may be barriers for international students to develop social relationships and deeper friendships. Especially in the beginning, feelings of loneliness, homesickness and isolation are a common experience. International students might feel like outsiders. In addition, personality variables such as anxiety, shyness and introversion may stand in the way of finding new friends.

- Signing up for a peer buddy system at the university can be a good starting point.
- Talk to other international students first (as it seems easier) and to domestic students who have already made a successful transition process during their international experience.
- Try to meet local students in the classroom, on campus, at your accommodation, connect with sport clubs, and join the program for international students.
- Get involved in shared activities according to your interests – whether it's in academic clubs, social organizations, or even at part-time jobs.

- Pro-actively look for situations that give you an opportunity to get involved with other students; try asking someone in your class to be your study or exercise partner.
- Evaluate your attitudes about assimilating into the Austrian culture. Negative attitudes can prevent you from interacting with domestic students and can further alienate you from the local community and its social support and resources.
- Develop your social skills. Start with small steps. Watch how your colleagues establish contact, even greeting a classmate or getting involved in class discussions can ease things.
- Regard your stay as an opportunity to get to know a new city/country, and get into the role of a backpacker exploring the adventure of a new environment.

Keep in mind, integration is a process for the entire stay at an Austrian University. We would like to emphasize that all too often integration is seen as the sole responsibility of international students instead of a joint task of the international office, academic staff and domestic students.

As a matter of course, we encourage you to come and see one of our counsellors to talk about emerging problems early on, so feel free to contact our Counselling services (see link to homepage).

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