

Am I Different Now?

- 5 questions for study abroad returnees

We hope that your time abroad has been a very enriching and unforgettable experience! Coming back from an extended time abroad may bring about questions on several issues. Exchange students stay abroad is shorter, programme-orientated and somewhat sheltered, which makes exchange students' lives very different from and much easier than that of other migrants (i.e. workers and refugees). Besides, people usually hold positive ideas on exchange students, which makes them societally well accepted. Now that you're back to your "normal life", you may feel that it is sometimes boring and not as thrilling as before you went abroad - now you're like everybody else again. This document has been written in order to help you reflect on some of the questions you may be asking yourself.

Why do I feel I've changed so much?

That is how we usually feel after spending some time abroad. Yet, let's reflect on this for a while. Of course you have become different! It's easy to forget that people change all the time - also your family and friends have gone through all kinds of changes (even though they haven't ventured to go to another country). One thing is for sure - you have almost certainly seen new things and learnt a lot about other people abroad.

Remember also that the way people feel about themselves changes according to who they are talking to, where they are, what they have shared with the people they communicate with - whether they are in their home country or abroad. What the study abroad experience actually may have changed in you is the way you see your "imagined community" (your country) and people from other nations. Your time abroad has probably taught you that people are not just 'cultural dopes', instead they have their very own special characteristics that change according to contexts and people (identities). Give yourself some time to reflect on what has changed in and about you and also other people.

Why don't people seem to be that eager to listen to my exciting experiences abroad or see my photos?

The thing about spending an extended amount of time abroad is that, for people who haven't shared the experiences with you (i.e. been there with you), it's very difficult to imagine the places, sounds, faces, words uttered, etc. Even photos do not usually do the trick - especially if you want people to go through the thousands of photos that you have taken in the host country. When you see that people are getting bored, why not stop and save your words for people who may be more interested, such as potential exchange students interested in the host country you visited, future tourists to the places or locals whom you meet in your own country? The best option, of course, would be to take your friends and family to some of the places, which were part of your daily life in the host country - then you would be able to explain every single detail.



Photo: Vesa-Matti Väara

Have I become a representative of the country where I stayed?

Nation-states, national cultures and identities are imagined and imaginary. You cannot have become a representative of your host country since there are probably millions of very different and diverse people living in that country. Who could be the reference point that covers ALL these people? You may have the impression that you have become German, Brazilian or French, but it's only an impression, and you should avoid trying to present yourself as a clichéd representative of the host country. Saying things like "*I am always late now because that's the way everybody was in Spain*" is the kind of stereotyping you should avoid, because it will most probably only irritate the people around you. Besides, you won't be doing any favor to the nationals of the host country.

Should I spice up my stories when I tell people about my stay abroad or about the local people?

That's not advisable. Remember that because you stayed in the host country for a certain period of time, you will be THE witness that people will listen to. Weigh your words before you talk about the host country – and even better when you talk about its inhabitants. People are all different and a comment such as “Americans are like this, and they all do that” may do a lot of harm to the reputation of every single citizen of these countries that the people who listen to you may meet at some point in their lives. Try to be as open-minded as possible and even though people around you may want juicy homogenizing details on the locals, remember not to recourse to false stereotyping or ‘othering’.



Photo: Kirsi Korpela

Have a look at the following documents, they may help you to reflect on your time abroad and understand what is happening to you as a returnee:

Byram, M. & Feng, A. 2006. *Living to Study Abroad*. Clevedon: Multilingual Matters Ltd.

Dervin, F. (2006). In Amador, C.; Limon, D.; Soriano, G.; Way, C. *Enhancing the Erasmus Experience: Papers on student mobility*. Atrio: Granada.

Klapisch, C. (2002). *The Spanish apartment* (Film).

Klapisch, C. (2005). *The Russian Dolls* (sequel to the Spanish Apartment, 5 years later).

Murphy-Lejeune, E. (2002). *Student mobility and narrative in Europe*. London: Routledge.

I find it hard to readapt. Should I move to the host country?

That would not necessary be the right solution. First of all, your life in the host country wouldn't be the same, because you wouldn't be an exchange student anymore and almost all your friends have probably moved back to their home country. You also need to finish your studies at your home institution before you consider moving again. If you have to write your final thesis, see if you can write on a topic linked to the host country. In any case, start planning your future by setting yourself goals. There are many things you can do that may help you readapt. You can keep a diary, a weblog, or a podcast on your experiences abroad and ask the friends you've made in the host country to contribute to it (it will be interesting to go back to it after some years), you can help out foreign students or immigrants and join or form international “tribes” in your home country.

Internationalize your life at home!

- ⇒ Volunteer as a tutor to new international students
- ⇒ Join international associations
- ⇒ Learn new languages and keep up with the ones you already know
- ⇒ Include international courses in your studies