

Don't Burn Out on Reentry

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Don't Burn Out on Re-entry

A Guide for Malaysian U.S. University Graduates Returning Home

Re-entry and Reverse Culture Shock

Chapter One

A New Beginning

A journey of one thousand miles begins with the first step. That first step took many Malaysian students to the United States to study at universities and colleges for their bachelor, masters and doctorate degrees.



Many students entering the United States for study go through culture shock or transition during the first year in their new environment. Some find it difficult to adjust to the climate, western food and life-style on American campuses, teaching methods, and American life in general.

Almost all students experience some sadness or sense of loss at being separated from family and friends. Many however, have few problems, as they have prepared for their new experiences through MACEE's pre-departure orientation program.

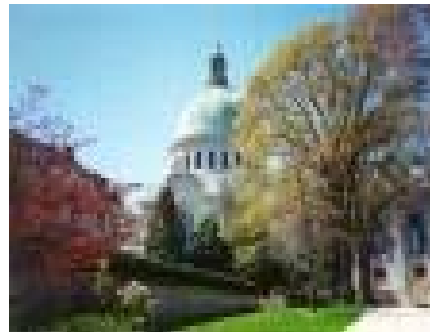
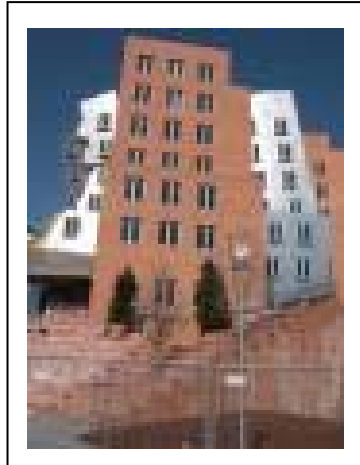
Happily, most students adjust after a few months in the U.S. New friends quickly fill the void of being away from home. Many take the opportunities to travel throughout the U.S. experiencing its different regions and states.

The diversity of American university campuses and chances to interact with the many ethnic groups in the U.S. give students a microcosmic view of the world, quite similar but also different from Malaysian culture.

Students seeking international study to broaden their understanding of global society are well rewarded. On returning home they realize that these experiences give them a better understanding of their own culture.

Students who survive this "out-bound" culture shock may not realize that they too change as they adjust to life in the United States, and these changes become the basis

for “reverse” culture or “re-entry” shock. This is especially true for students who are in the United States for periods of 4 or more years without returning to Malaysia.



Chapter Two

Returning Home

Re-entry shock differs among students. Some students return home with greater expectations than can be realized immediately. Many students find life in Malaysia rigid, authoritarian, and confining after experiencing the openness of living in the U.S.



All students go through some form of re-entry shock as soon as they arrive home. MACEE surveyed returning graduates over the past two years on their feelings upon returning to Malaysia.

These are a few of the responses:

"It was too hot. I wasn't used to the humidity and the high temperature. I took several showers a day to cool off."

"My family wasn't interested in what I wanted to say about the US."

"My friends who stayed here were more interested in what was happening in Malaysia than learning about the U.S."

"I found myself comparing everything to the U.S. People were tired of hearing about my experiences."

"People don't know how to drive in Malaysia. They don't follow the rules."

"I forgot my Bahasa Melayu."

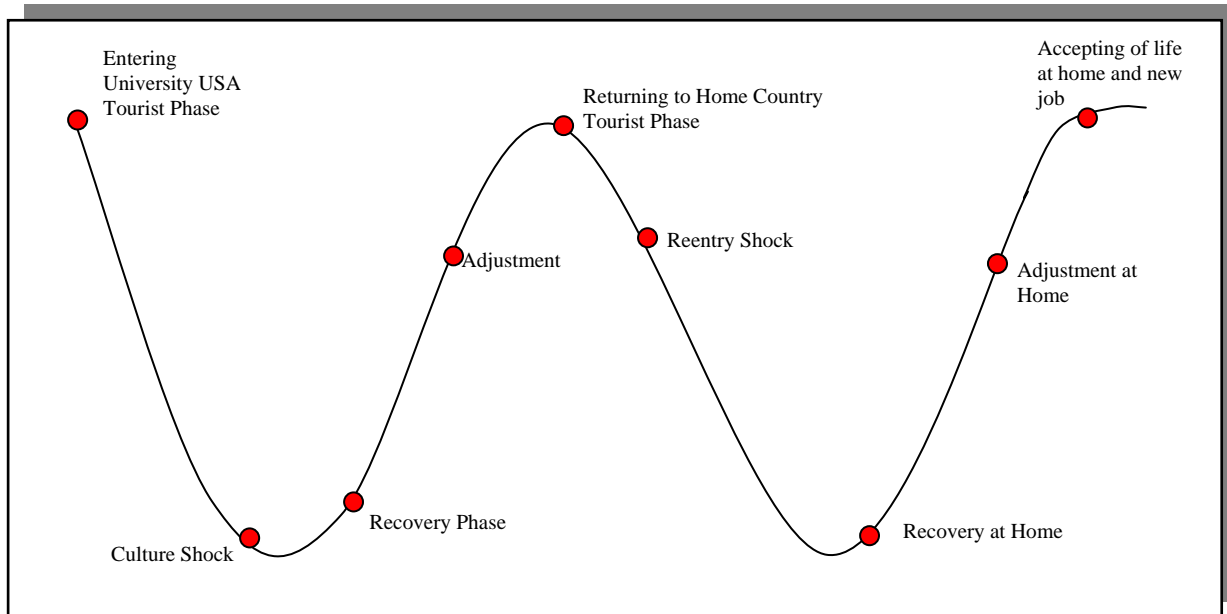
"My friends who went to school in Australia and the UK have good jobs in Malaysia and are satisfied with their progress in the work force. They have a head start on their careers whereas I will be just beginning my career."

"I want to go back to the U.S. No one understands me here."

"It took me a while to adjust to being back, but I am happy to be here and feel fortunate that I had a chance to live in another culture. It makes me realize how small this world really is."

"I had the best education in the world. My parents supported me for my university degree in the U.S. Now that I am back in Malaysia and will do my best to make my parents proud of me. I know I will have some adjustment to make but I will work at settling back into Malaysia."

Culture Shock Re-entry Curve



Unfortunately, readjusting to home after a long residence in the United States has its own special set of social and psychological processes and adjusting to these processes is often called "**reverse culture shock**" or "**re-entry transition**". In many ways, it is similar to the culture shock experienced on first entering the United States.

Just as there are varying degrees of culture shock, there are also varying degrees of reverse culture shock.

Research shows that individuals who easily adapted to their new overseas culture have a greater difficulty re-adapting to their home culture, although, there is a strong

correlation between positive expectations and successful re-adjustment.

Re-entry into Malaysian culture can be just as challenging and as frustrating as the initial experience in the United States. Returning home can be made easier once reentry shock is understood and a few simple plans are made.

It should be just as simple as the 3R's:

- **Re-settling process**
- **Resuming former routines**
- **Re-establishing relationships**



Chapter Three

Four Sequenced Responses to Re-entry Shock:

1. Excitement of Return

There is an initial thrill of being home with loved ones and "familiar" surroundings, accompanied by the pride of accomplishment in earning a prestigious degree from the U.S. The prospect of picking up your old life is an exciting opportunity yet an enervating and challenging one.

Exposure to another culture and to other ways of thinking and behaving leads to new ways of seeing one's own culture, but here many students imagine or come to expect more than can realistically happen.

In the excitement home, students often intently on themselves experiences in the U.S. everyone else to have Returning students that life has gone on that those who stayed significant as well. Returning not be blind to new changes at home.



of returning focus too and their and expect the same view. should remember in Malaysia and home have made accomplishments students should ideas and other

2. Re-establishment/Frustration

The psychological "high" of the first days or weeks at home-when everything is new again and everyone is focused on you-cannot last. As normalcy returns, the returnees often begin to experience irritation, frustration and feelings of ambivalence about the wisdom of having returned home. As initial excitement subsides, the individual begins the serious process of reestablishing oneself in the home environment.

Several common causes of frustration can be identified:

First, returnees may sense varying degrees of loss after leaving the U.S.—loss of friends, loss of the unique university learning environment, or loss of some freedoms to go, do or say what and where you please, whenever you please.

Second, friends and relatives typically show less and less interest in your U.S. experiences and ideas as time goes on.

Third, that romantic notion of the perfect job just waiting at home often becomes a realistic struggle through the job search process.

Your education may have changed and matured you, but reentry rather frustratingly requires that you do some readjusting to meet life in Malaysia as it is.

3. Sense of Control

Returning students respond to this frustration in different ways but many attempts to establish a sense of control over this frustrating environment by blaming relatives, friends, and even society for a situation that suddenly has transitioned from graduation success to frustrating failure.



Usually, however the problem has arisen from unrealistic expectations for success upon return and lack of planning for readjustment to their home cultural environment.

Criticizing others for their lack of understanding and sympathy or blaming society for various difficulties are common responses that can become debilitating, so some awareness and caution are important. For some individuals, the inability to change this frustrating environment becomes an overwhelming excuse to withdraw from society and in a few cases a more extreme reaction to this frustration and conflict is to reject Malaysian culture and society and attempt to go abroad again, perhaps prematurely.

The most productive approach for handling this frustration is to (1) assume that you will experience it, but (2) be tolerant and understanding of the needs of others and the complexities of every situation.

Essentially focus on understanding rather than blame, and do not allow short-term frustrations to inhibit the long term success to be engendered from your study abroad.

4. Re-adaptation

Re-adaptation starts when returnees begin to realize that, while they may not be able to change their own culture, they can attempt to understand and respond to it in light of new knowledge about themselves and their environment. A slow (and sometimes painstaking) process of re-adaptation is begun, where the returnee learns to develop the ability to listen, to be aware of subtle messages and interpret and respond to them. Recognizing early symptoms of reentry frustration and quick steps to turn frustration and excuses into understanding positive action will greatly ease and speed readjustment.

Research literature indicates that there are several variables that may affect the degree of difficulty that individuals might face when re-integrating back into the home culture.

- **Gender**

Females raised in patriarchal environments may experience more difficulty and conflicts as they try to cope with different cultural and environmental norms.

- **Age and academic level**

Older students and professionals who are well established in their fields may experience less re-entry difficulty, as they are better able to selectively integrate the new culture experiences with their own personal, religious and cultural beliefs.

Younger students especially those having left home as teenagers quite ready to discover and explore new attitudes and ideas, may likely "adopt" the host culture and thereby

find their feelings of alienation increased when returning home.

- **Previous cross-cultural experience**

Individuals with several prior experiences of living abroad may have less trouble adjusting on return and are better able to manage re-acculturation problems.

- **Length of stay**

The longer the length of stay in the United States the greater the degree of interaction and empathy with American culture which may make the re-entry process more difficult.

- **Readiness to return home**

Some research suggests that students who strongly desire to return home after their studies are more likely to be motivated to "re-socialize", while those with more desire to stay abroad are more likely to be feeling alienated upon return.

Individuals with the healthiest re-entry experience are those who are moderately looking forward to returning home .

- **Changes in the home environment**

Subtle or dramatic changes in family relationships, political, economic, environmental or social situations may cause psychological stress and re-entry problems.

Conversely, if the home environment is largely unchanged the family will better understand the returnee's situation.

- **Job Opportunities upon return**

Graduates who have difficulty securing employment after returning may experience more stressful re-entry than those who are able to quickly secure any job.

- **Individual awareness and preparation**

Being aware of the potential for adjustment problems and preparing for them are critical in easing the re-entry process. Students who are able to anticipate possible difficulties are more likely to shorten the re-entry adjustment period.

- **Support groups**

A strong and active university alumni association in Malaysia helps in easing the re-entry process. Many universities have alumni associations in Malaysia, and if your university does not already have one, a very good reentry project may be to organize an alumni association. Contact MACEE for information on alumni groups.

- **Similarity in the home and host culture**

The greater the differences between the host culture and the home culture, the greater the acculturation problems of the student. For example, students from Baling, Kemah, may encounter more difficulty re-adjusting than students from Kuala Lumpur. Those students from urban life styles adapt in both directions more quickly and easily than a rural situation.



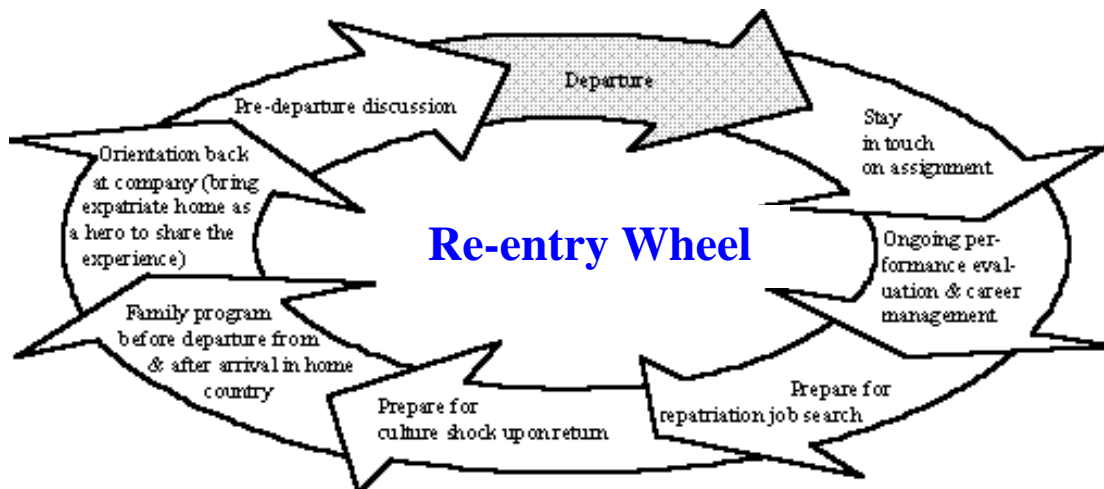
Chapter Four

Tips from Returnees

The good news is that the re-adjustment process rarely lasts forever. Further, there is strong evidence indicating the problems of reentry can be substantially minimized or controlled through proper preparation. The following tips were compiled from returnees willing to share their experiences in the hope of easing re-entry problems for others. Some of these reinforce earlier comments.

The *re-entry wheel* can be helpful in showing the various stages that the student goes through when returning to their home country.

- Start planning ahead for your return home.
- Look for jobs while at university in the career center or online in Malaysia.
- Give your family some expectations for your return—what you want to do and a time line for finding a job if you don't have one lined up. Your family may not understand why you are not immediately looking for a job.
- Talk to your counselor about pre-departure orientation for your country.
- Return home and give yourself time to adjust and take a break before beginning the job search.



Anticipate Reverse Culture Shock

Nearly all returnees admit that they thought they were the "exception to the rule" and did not expect to experience reverse culture shock. Yet, they do in fact, report that it is more stressful than the initial culture shock experienced when they first entered the United States.

Anticipating reentry or reverse culture shock and the need for a planning transition period will greatly reduce its impact and severity.

Knowledge That You Are Now Different

In addition to clothing and other personal items that you will bring home from the United States, you will also be carrying invisible cultural baggage.

Assess the changes in your behavior and communication patterns that have occurred as well as anticipate where conflict is likely to occur within your traditional home behavior, communications, and values.

A big step towards successful re-entry is in knowing that you are the same person, yet different.

Make Plans for Returning Home

Prepare yourself for leaving the United States. An abrupt departure can be more stressful than slowly letting go. Many returnees suggest taking time to say goodbye, including attending going away parties, taking pictures with those closest to you, getting all contact information of close friends, and allowing friends to send you off at the airport.

Keep in Touch With Home

Part of the preparation for returning home includes keeping up with political, economic, and social developments at home. Reading online Malaysian newspapers and maintaining contacts with relatives and friends at home will ease the shock of finding that everything has changed during your absence.

Returnees fortunate enough to be able to travel home during school breaks still report that they encounter some reverse culture shock upon return.

Allow Yourself Time

Give yourself time to relax and reflect upon what is going on inside of you and around you, how you are responding to it, and what you might like to change.

Remain Flexible

Attempting to re-socialize totally into your old way of life can be difficult, but remaining aloof is isolating and counterproductive. Try to achieve a balance between maintaining earlier patterns and enhancing your social and intellectual life with new friends and interests in addition to those acquired during your time in the United States.

Beware of Comparisons

It is natural to notice differences. However, use caution when making comparisons so as not to seem too critical of home and too lavish in praise of things American. Many returnees indicate that they have greater awareness of their home culture and themselves upon their return than they had prior to leaving. A returnee overheard his mother talking to a neighbor and related the following conversation:

“So, how is your son adjusting to coming home after 5 years in the U.S.?”

“He complains a lot and compares our life to the U.S. He keeps saying, ‘In the U.S. they do such and such this way or that way. In the U.S. they drive with more rules

and less accidents. In the U.S. there are no lines at banks'. In the U.S. this or in the U.S. that. I am tired of hearing about the U.S. What is wrong with Malaysia, I ask you?"

"My daughter is the same way, ah. I told her she lives here now, not in the U.S. Time to take a good look at what Malaysia has to offer. I guess we have to put up with them until they feel comfortable in Malaysia."

Try not to idealize the United States or criticize your own country. Attempt to remain objective. Be careful how you phrase your comments or criticize your own country. People that live in your home country are proud of it and may not take your criticism lightly.

Cultivate Sensitivity

Once home, strive to resist the natural inclination to make quick decisions and judgments on the environment and people. Foster good observation and listening skills. Anticipate predictable situations and questions and try to rehearse answers for them.

Approach less predictable circumstances with a calm and thoughtful manner and you will be able to work through the circumstances easily.

Do not try to change the way things are done in your home country because you think you saw a 'better' way. Show people that you appreciate what they have done for you and as opportunities arise try to integrate your new knowledge into traditional ways by going slow.

Share Your Adjustment

Many people are not aware of the reverse culture shock you are experiencing. Try to educate your family and friends about your adjustment process. Many returnees agree that once those around them are aware of their situation, they are bit more patient and understanding, even helpful, to the re-adjustment process.

Record your thoughts and frustrations in a journal. This will give you a healthy outlet for expressing your feelings. Save your journal and read it later. You will be

able to follow your adjustment period and see how well you have progressed.

Stay in Contact With Your Host Culture

Keep in contact with the friends you made in the United States. Many returnees indicated that chatting online and emailing friends in the U.S. have helped them significantly.

Seek Support Networks

Seek out mentors who have successfully readapted. They understand what you are going through and can suggest ways of coping.

Contact MACEE for alumni lists. Join MYUCIA, or AUAM which are active U.S. university alumni groups. Discuss your U.S. experiences with other alums and you will find that they want to talk about their experiences too.

Reverse Culture Shock is Normal and Beneficial

Learning to readapt to your home culture is an enormous personal growth experience. You develop an understanding of peoples in other countries and become more tolerant of their failings. You learn that people, no matter what race, color, or country have the same feelings, fears, and desires.

Employ Stress Management Techniques

Take care of yourself. Maintaining activities such as eating healthy and exercising will reduce the chances of depression setting in. Get involved in your community.

How Do You Know When Your Reentry Is Successful?

The total adjustment process is complete when the returnee can function effectively in the home environment. Reentry can be difficult but with sufficient preparations successful, reintegration can be a reality. Let awareness be your ally. Have the courage to make the changes to your new life that really matter.

Remember, courage is not the lack of fear, but the presence of fear of change and the will to be successful.

Pre-Departure Check List

Use this list to help you organize yourself before returning home:



1. Book your flight to your home country.
2. Fill out a forwarding address at the local post office and give all your friends your new address.
3. Clear all of your accounts and debts.
4. Close your bank account.
5. Clear your student account so your transcripts and diploma can be released. Make arrangements to have your diploma sent to you if you do not have it before leaving.
6. Check out of your housing, leave a forwarding address with the manager and request the return of your security deposit after you leave the apt. in the condition it was rented to you.
7. Give your university alumni office your address in your home country.
8. Call or visit friends before you leave.
9. Let your family and friends know when you are returning to give them time to prepare.

Welcome Back



To Malaysia!!