

# Overcoming challenges of studying overseas

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**U**NIVERSITIES abroad have always been a popular option for Malaysians who wish to pursue their tertiary education. The reason for going overseas to study varies, but in general, it is an opportunity to see the world with the added plus of obtaining credentials from a university overseas which is often esteemed and will enhance a job prospect, especially in today's globalised work environment.

Some students want to delve into a specific field of study, and for these, studying at a particular institution of higher learning will provide them with better learning opportunities.

For Poh Choo, an associate director with Sunway Education Group's International Office, says that to study abroad, Malaysian students would first have to take up internationally recognised pre-university programmes to obtain the necessary qualifications that would enable them to earn places at universities overseas.

Upon receiving offers from universities, students would then have to start making preparations for studying abroad like applying for a visa and learning how to open bank accounts, she said.

Unlike travelling for leisure, studying abroad involves much more than just a short stay in a foreign land. It involves adjusting and adapting at many levels, including culturally, academically, socially and financially.

The inability to cope could impact students' academic performance and results, and even their overall well-being.

"Besides doing their best academically, students studying abroad are encouraged to get involved in activities beyond the lecture halls. There are opportunities to participate in internships, study abroad programmes, field trips, community engagement projects and career networking sessions.

"Students who take up these opportunities will find that the experience and skills obtained will come in handy when they join the global workforce later," she said.

### DEALING WITH CULTURE SHOCK

Students who study abroad usually undergo a four-phase adaptation process, said Associate Professor Dr Sabariah Mohamed Salleh, head of Medical Informatics Research Group and an expert in Young People and Media with Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia's UKM Centre for Communication and Digital Societies.

The four phases are honeymoon, culture shock, adjustment and mastery. It is otherwise known as the U-curve model, a theory by Norwegian sociologist Sverre Lynggaard from 1955.

"Like the letter U, students who go abroad



Melissa Low Jee Yee (right) enjoying the sights of Melbourne with a friend.



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**HOR POH CHOO**  
Sunway Education Group's International Office associate director

would be full of excitement when they first arrive. It is the romanticised feeling of being in a new country, very much like when we go for a holiday where we look forward to an exciting adventure," Sabariah explained.

But over time, students will start feeling homesick, miss local and home-cooked food, start pining for their family and even the pets that they left behind.

"Students studying in a country whose lingua franca is not English or Malay usually will feel troubled in this phase because more often than not, they are not fluent in the new language and particularly, the local dialect. Frustration will set in because of this. At this point, some students will even question their decision to study abroad," Sabariah continued.

Adjustment is when students start to familiarise themselves with their new surroundings, finally being able to get accustomed to the new environment, culture, norms, language and values. By this time, new friends whom they can trust would have been made. They would have also probably gotten used to a new daily routine.

"Mastery is a phase where we can see students being able to adapt to the local culture and finally feel at home in their new environment," she explained.

Sabariah said it is difficult to predict how long each phase will last, as it depends on the students themselves. Some may choose to wallow in self-pity thus prolonging the culture shock phase.

However, the pain of adjusting could be lessened with the help of social media and the internet.

"Students can gauge what to expect and better prepare themselves by searching for relevant information which can be easily obtained from blogs and social media networking sites such as Facebook and Instagram," Sabariah pointed out.

Once abroad, the students should not confine themselves to their living quarters and lecture halls.



Muhammad Nabil Rashidi Aly (centre) during his graduation at the University of Edinburgh in Scotland.

"It is important for them to make new friends and have their own support system in the new environment. The people who live with or near them are the ones who they can turn to when they are unwell, in distress or need help," she said.

### ADAPTING

Melissa Low Jee Yee, 23, who recently graduated with a Bachelor's degree in Business (Accounting) from RMIT University in Melbourne, Australia last December, said that the experience of being away from home for studies has made her more "mature".

"The experience of having to fend for myself in all aspects of my life was an education in itself," she said.

From "setting up home" like getting the WiFi service to dealing with the agent at the Student Housing Board and shopping for groceries, Low learnt to be more responsible and prudent with her spending.

"I needed to have an open mind and not stray too far away from my roots.

"This also meant adapting to a new method of learning. There was a lot of studying and reading I needed to do. I learnt quickly that completing the recommended readings would make my time at RMIT all the more smooth sailing," she said.

My advice to incoming students is to be friendly but cautious of the friends you choose during the vulnerable time as they will play a part in the goals that you achieve, the career you will work towards.



Associate Professor Dr Sabariah Mohamed Salleh

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