

# GOING HOME

A guide for international students returning to their home countries



## INTRODUCTION

Most students who are going home are excited. However, the experiences shared by many international students indicate that going home is often a time of mixed feelings and emotions.

Among the joys of going home there are often painful and stressful moments of readjustment.

While you have been away you will have changed and things at home will have changed too. What follows is information that is meant to help you prepare for and understand the experience of *going home*.

## TRANSITIONS

Just as the transition from your home country to Australia probably involved some difficult adjustments, the transition experience of returning home will most likely have moments that are strange and uncomfortable.

Leaving Australia, and in particular leaving Newcastle, will mean leaving many things including:

- A familiar place and time of belonging
- Having a role and being known amongst a group
- Being involved in particular activities and having a place in those activities

Before settling back into life at home you can expect a time of readjustment that has anxious and difficult moments where much seems unfamiliar.

- In one study of American and Japanese returnees, 60% reported significant reverse culture shock upon returning home
- 62% of Peace Corp volunteers reported they found returning home difficult
- More than 50% of Swedish exchange students reported they didn't fit in when they returned to Sweden

Putting these difficulties aside, most returning international students acknowledge that their time spent in another country has been a time of significant personal growth.

## EXPECTATIONS

Surprises are delightful. They can also shock sometimes.

Unrealistic expectations of returning home can complicate the experience and create additional stress. Much of the complication of returning home is not so much that things are different, but that we are expecting them to be the same. Returning students often assume that the readjustment transition will be automatic, natural and wonderful. Unfortunately this assumption can be misleading.

Expectations need to be realistic. You may ask yourself:

- What am I expecting to happen?
- How will returning home feel?
- What assumptions do I hold about the family and friends I left behind months or years ago?
- What assumptions do I hold about myself?
- What assumptions do I hold about how people will react to me, about the place I am going back to?

Try thinking about your expectations and assumptions before returning home, and what are some misconceptions that can be readjusted?



Here are a few:

- It will pass. The truth is that transitions take time. One returnee commented, 'I never realised that in returning home I would not be instantly home.' It may take six months to two years to readjust.
- I must be abnormal. This is not true. To encounter difficulties and feel some discomfort are very normal experiences for many students.
- People will be intensely interested in what I have been doing and the people I have been with. Unfortunately this is not always the case. One returnee commented that people would schedule time to come and catch up. When they arrived they would talk about themselves and rarely ask about his experience.
- I will be treated as special. This often does not happen at all, and when it does, it usually lasts just a few weeks.
- I will pick up where I left off. It is more likely that you will always be a little changed, multicultural, an 'in between person.'

## CHANGE

A major issue for students returning home is change.

Part of the reason home may not measure up is because it has changed so much in your absence. The other part is that you have also changed as a result of your overseas experience, and the person you have now become will inevitably not see home in the same way as the person who went overseas one year or more ago.

One returnee commented,

*I arrived in Toronto from Trinidad, an eighteen year old with little experience of the world. One year later, I returned to Trinidad to visit my parents. Within days I realised the extent of the change that had come not only to me, but also to all I had left behind. Even after so short a time, old friends had become new strangers, and old places remained only old places. The human personality is not immutable.'*

One returnee commented that it was a lot of little changes that gave her feelings of strangeness and not belonging. Other terms used to describe this experience are feeling 'out of step with your home culture', 'out of touch,' 'an outsider' and a 'foreigner at home.' There can be a sense of being a stranger in one's own home and while we may become accustomed to feeling out of place abroad, the strangeness of home is bound to be more alarming than the strangeness of overseas.

The sense of not quite belonging can result in confusion, bewilderment and a myriad of other feelings.

## EMOTIONS

Emotions are not problems; in fact they are assets. They act as signals and signs of what is going on inside of us. There are however some specific emotional issues relating to returning home that are problematic and deserve special mention. They are anger, grief and loneliness.

Anger can arise from numerous issues such as general frustration, the disinterest of others, a clash of values, or a clash of expectations and reality.

This anger is not the real problem. For most part, anger is simply a sign of grief.

Grief is the result of experiencing many losses, and for returning international students the losses and separations are numerous. For many, much has been left behind and some things that were once at home are no longer. A list of the losses international students experience could look like this:

- Status
- Independence

- The future as it could have been
- What was home and what it might have been had they not left
- Life goals and plans
- Friendships/relationships
- Self confidence
- Security
- Culture - including food, special places and things, and the environment

Some returning students face the additional challenge of acquiring employment on their return home. This can be huge, and if the returnee experiences difficulty or lengthy delays in gaining employment that takes into account their newly acquired qualifications, the stress can be even greater, and contribute to further feelings of anger and grief.

There can also be a feeling of loneliness. When others cannot identify with or understand your experience you are in effect obliged to remain a stranger to the people you love. The sense of loneliness many returnees experience upon returning home comes from the feeling that close friends and family no longer know who they are. It is also why it may be useful to find someone else to talk to who has had the same or a similar experience to you.

## **CLOSURE**

A first step in going home is good closure. Lives are profoundly affected by the way in which passages of life are brought to a close. For our purposes, closure is about the way your time of life and study are brought to an end before leaving Australia. If the closure process is done well it can ease the returning home experience.

Goodbyes are important. Without a meaningful goodbye, an effective closure, there can be no real hello, a new and hopeful beginning. Some people, finding the process of goodbyes to be difficult, slip into the habit of avoiding farewells. Though an effective short term pain reliever, such avoidance may result in a legacy of anxiety and sadness. Though it can be hard at the time, it is important to ensure goodbyes include, attending the Farewell Ceremony for international students and making time to farewell significant staff and friends.

## **SUPPORT - a message to friends and family of the returning students**

On returning home the support of family and friends will be very important. The greater the degree of support and understanding provided for returnees, the less the degree of stress in the readjustment experience.

Some of the things you can do to help as family members and friends include:

- Show interest in the experience your family member or colleague has had. They need to tell their story
- Try not to feel offended if / when they compare your home country unfavourably with Australia, or if they criticise your home country
- Be patient. They will adjust to being home again, but it may take some time
- Try not to make them feel defensive. Try to avoid telling them that they should be happy and content, that there is no reason they should be feeling unhappy or discontent



- Give them time to adjust to being home before asking them to accept the full responsibilities of home life
- Help them to acknowledge and deal with their feelings which may include grief, anger and loss

If you are unsure what your family member or colleague may be experiencing, the symptoms outlined in the section below entitled **Common Symptoms of 'Returning Home' Stress** may assist you to greater understanding.

The following table details some of the feelings and experiences international students may encounter when returning home, and suggested methods for managing them.

### COMMON UNEXPECTED SITUATIONS

Returnees Did Not Expect	Reaction	Suggestion
To arrive feeling physically and emotionally drained	Tiredness, lethargy	Schedule in several transition days of rest and relaxation between departure and home arrival. Do not over schedule your time upon arrival.
To feel so 'foreign' upon return	Confusion, disorientation	Make yourself aware of changes at home and within yourself before you return.
A 'let down' feeling after arrival	Disappointment, lack of fulfilment	Be prepared for a possible 'let down'; realise that you have probably been operating on an emotional high prior to and shortly after your return.
Readjustment to take more than a few days	Discouragement	Readjustment can be expected to take some more time - more for some others. This is natural.
To be 'third culture people' upon return- not able to re-identify fully with your own culture	Unsettled feeling, confusion	Realise that you have absorbed some of the host culture, and that you never will be able to return fully to your past way of life. See this as a positive benefit.
To be as difficult fitting into the flow of things at home or at work	Unsettled feeling, insecurity	Actively look for changes instead of allowing them to take you by surprise.
To feel out of touch with current issues at home (political, economic, educational, etc)	Embarrassment, feeling 'out of it'	Again, it only takes a little foresight to plan ahead and read to bring you up-to-date.
To find your personal values have changed greatly	Uncertainty, confusion	This often comes as a surprise to many when returning home. Attempt to define the changes that have taken place.
To feel so uncertain in interpersonal relationships	Insecurity, withdrawal	You will need to relearn cultural bases for relationships- different levels of commitment, etc.
To have to readjust to verbal/ nonverbal mannerisms of home country	Uncertainty, embarrassment	Watch for social cues - eye contact, gestures, proper etiquette, etc. This takes some time, but deliberate observation speeds the process.

## COMMON UNEXPECTED SITUATIONS - continued

Returnees Did Not Expect	Reaction	Suggestion
Others who see or understand things differently to them	Frustration, discouragement	Remember that your perspective has changed, not theirs.
Others show little interest in hearing about their experiences	Discouragement, withdrawal, resentment	Take it as fact that others are usually not able to relate to your experiences as you would wish. Some are just not interested.
Family to be so possessive after initial return	Impatience, discouragement	Be sure to reaffirm your commitment to your parents and family. Reassure them that you are not 'lost' to them and that you love them. Avoid coming on too strong with your overseas experience.
People seem to be so ethnocentric and narrow in their perspectives	Rejecting, superiority feelings	Remember that you do not have the right to judge others on the basis of your own 'enlightened experience.'
To find a critical attitude developing toward their own culture or colleagues	Guilt, frustration	Critical attitudes can slip in during readjustment. Some things will definitely bother you. Stay aware and be gracious.
To feel lonely	Unfulfilled, feeling of rejection	Especially if you have established deep relationships overseas, it is natural that you will feel the loss of friendships. Actively seek out new relationships at home. Get involved with people right away; do not isolate yourself from others.
To become emotional over 'little things'	Insecurity, unsettled feeling	Sometimes the excitement of returning home and seeing family and friends causes great emotional release. This is not unusual. However if this response continues, it would be advisable to talk to a friend or counsellor.

## COMMON SYMPTOMS OF 'RETURNING HOME' STRESS

- Disorientation - feeling out of place, not fitting in, or feeling like a guest in a foreign land
  - Uncertainty in personal relationships - unsure of proper mannerisms, greetings, social etiquette, dress etc.
  - Feelings of loneliness, isolation or being lost in a crowd
  - Restlessness - a desire to 'get away' or to return as soon as possible to the host country
  - Feeling that nobody understands the returnee's experience
  - Feeling tired and listless
  - Feeling critical towards the returnee's home country
  - Out of the ordinary emotional responses - crying etc
9. Frustration over the inability to get things done, to get around, a different pace of life

## **COMMON SYMPTOMS OF 'RETURNING HOME' STRESS - continued**

- Inability to communicate new ideas and concepts freely
- Feelings of dissatisfaction
- Feelings of defensiveness
- Feeling like retreating, withdrawing etc
- Having unnatural responses to 'ordinary' situations
- Confusion over conflicting attitudes and responses
- Rejection of overseas experiences or a desire to forget and not talk about them

## **VARIABLES AFFECTING RE-ENTRY (RETURNING HOME)**

While this document has attempted to describe a kind of generic re-entry (returning home) for students, in fact the re-entry experience is not the same for any two individuals. Some of the key variables are presented below.

- Whether re-entry is voluntary or involuntary: involuntary is worse
- Whether re-entry is expected or unexpected: unexpected is worse
- Age: re-entry may be easier for older people who have been through more life transitions
- Previous re-entry experience: the first time is frequently the most difficult
- Length of overseas stay: the longer the sojourn, the greater the chance of adaptation, hence the harder it may be to leave and return home
- Degree of interaction with the overseas culture: the more involved students have become, the harder it may be to leave behind
- The re-entry environment: the more familiar and supportive, the easier the re-entry
- Amount of interaction with the home culture during the overseas experience: the more familiar the returnee is with the changes in the home culture/company, the easier the re-entry
- Degree of difference between the overseas and home culture: anecdotal evidence suggests the greater the difference, the harder the re-entry

## **CONCLUSION**

Many people have successfully returned home after living in another country for years. Going home for most international students is a positive and joyful experience. It is also a life transition that can contain some stressful and painful moments. Life, in the end, is a mixture of joys and sorrows. Your return home may have such a mixture. We wish you all the best in your future plans, and hope that your experience at the University of Newcastle creates many more opportunities for you in your life.

## **CONTACT US**

Student Experience & Community Engagement  
International Office  
Hunter Building, Callaghan Campus  
**E:** [international-advisors@newcastle.edu.au](mailto:international-advisors@newcastle.edu.au)  
**P:** (02) 4921 6236  
**W:** [www.newcastle.edu.au/international](http://www.newcastle.edu.au/international)

## RETURNING HOME CHECKLIST

There are a many things to consider when you are returning home. This checklist is intended to help you prepare for your departure, and to remind you of some of the things you may have to do before you leave.

### UNIVERSITY SERVICES

Finalise any outstanding University accounts (e.g. loans, library fines, parking fees) so that your official transcript can be released. You can check your student account at [myhub.newcastle.edu.au/](http://myhub.newcastle.edu.au/)

Please note that you will not receive your academic results if you have outstanding payments, your student account will have a negative service indicator. If this happens you should contact the University Cashiers Office at [FinServ-revenue@newcastle.edu.au](mailto:FinServ-revenue@newcastle.edu.au) or go to: <http://www.newcastle.edu.au/service/cashiering/enquiries.html>

It is important to update your mailing address and contact details with the university so that your transcript, testamur and any other important documents may be sent to you after you return home. You can do this online at [myhub.newcastle.edu.au/](http://myhub.newcastle.edu.au/)

Ensure that you provide your forwarding address and contact details to all relevant offices. This may include:

- Human Resources (Payroll) at [payrollservices@newcastle.edu.au](mailto:payrollservices@newcastle.edu.au)
- Office of Graduate Studies at [research@newcastle.edu.au](mailto:research@newcastle.edu.au)
- Alumni Office at <http://alumni.newcastle.edu.au/default.asp>
- Your bank or financial institution

Check your academic results at [myhub.newcastle.edu.au/](http://myhub.newcastle.edu.au/) . If you have failed any courses you may need to make special arrangements.

Contact one of the [Student Hubs](#) for information about graduation, to request a copy of your academic transcript, or for any other general enquiries at [EnquiryCentre@newcastle.edu.au](mailto:EnquiryCentre@newcastle.edu.au)

Return all of your library books or you could end up with a large fine. You can check your loans online at *MyLibrary* by going to <https://library.newcastle.edu.au/patroninfo>

Complete a request form if you wish to obtain the early release of your official academic testamur. The form is available at <http://www.newcastle.edu.au/study/forms/index.html>

### GRADUATION

The university holds graduation ceremonies at the Callaghan and Central Coast campuses in Australia. These are customarily held twice yearly during study recess periods in semester 1 and semester 2. Overseas graduation ceremonies are also held in Singapore and Hong Kong. Students may choose to receive their testamur (official university certificate) at any graduation ceremony as long as they first register their attendance.

For more information contact *Examinations and Graduations*

**P:** (02) 4921 7960 **F:** (02) 4921 7163 **E:** [graduation@newcastle.edu.au](mailto:graduation@newcastle.edu.au)

Most international students return home soon after completing their studies and are unable to attend an official graduation ceremony. In recognition of this the University's International Office provides a Farewell Ceremony for International Students. The Farewell Ceremony provides an opportunity for international students to celebrate their time spent at the university, and allows the university to thank departing students for their contribution to the university community.

They are held twice yearly, usually in May and October, and students are able to attend in academic gown. All completing students are notified of Ceremony details well in advance. For more information email: [international-advisors@newcastle.edu.au](mailto:international-advisors@newcastle.edu.au)

## **EMPLOYMENT**

Contact the University's Careers Service for information and advice about career planning, job vacancies, transition from study to work, and opportunities for graduates. The Service has access to numerous job listings and databases for Australian and International vacancies across a range of professional fields. For more information contact the *Careers Service* at:

**P:** (02) 4921 5588

**F:** (02) 4921 6926

**E:** [careers@newcastle.edu.au](mailto:careers@newcastle.edu.au)

**W:** <http://www.newcastle.edu.au/service/careers/>

Think about who to approach to ask for a work reference. If you have undertaken work experience or part time employment during your studies, it may be helpful to obtain a written reference from someone who is familiar with your work. This may assist you later when applying for employment in your chosen field.

## **FINANCES**

Arrange to close your bank account and notify the bank of your forwarding address overseas.

## **TAX**

If you have been working, search the Australian Tax Office (ATO) website for information about lodging your tax return prior to departure and claiming superannuation contributions. The ATO website is <http://www.ato.gov.au>

## **ACCOMMODATION**

Give written notice to your landlady/landlord or real estate agent of the date that you will leave your accommodation. Do this within the time specified on your lease (usually 4 weeks before).

Clean your house and arrange for the premises to be inspected.

Finalise any outstanding rental accounts.

Request the return of your bond money. Sign the claim form for your bond and see that the form is completed by your landlord or real estate agent and forwarded to the Rental Bond Board for a refund.

Arrange disconnection of your telephone a few weeks before you leave and pay your account.

Contact Australia Post and arrange for your mail to be re-directed.

Arrange for the disconnection of electricity and/or gas services. Pay any outstanding accounts and arrange for the refund of any deposits.

Return your house keys.

Consider how you will dispose of unwanted items and goods, for example you could sell some items through advertising in local newspaper classifieds, placing advertisements on University noticeboards, taking goods to second hand dealers or donating them to local opportunity shop.

## **VISA**

International students are required to leave Australia before the expiry date of their student visa. You may be able to apply to stay in Australia for a short period on a 'Visitor Visa' however you will have to fulfil certain conditions. For more visa information contact the Department of Immigration & Citizenship (DIAC) on 131 881 or [www.immi.gov.au](http://www.immi.gov.au)

## **HEALTH**

Finalise any medical insurance claims. Visit <https://www.oshcworldcare.com.au/> for more information. Arrange for any important medical records to be transferred to your doctor in your home country.

## **FAMILY**

If your children have been attending school in Australia, let the Principal of the school know of your departure. They may provide reports on your child's progress that may be helpful for your child's return to school in your home country.

## **TRAVEL**

Check that your passport and visa are valid.

Advise your family and friends of your expected arrival time.

Confirm your flight 72 hours before departure.

Contact Happy Cabby at least 24 hours before departure if you are receiving an airport transfer to Sydney International Airport.

Make arrangements to arrive at the airport at least three hours before the departure of your flight.

Ensure you have sufficient Australian currency for the following:

- travel to Sydney
- food at the airport (you may have a delayed flight)
- excess baggage. Do not risk having to send, or leave behind some of your belongings at the airport because you cannot pay for excess luggage

## **FREIGHT / EXCESS BAGGAGE**

Check with your airline for specific regulations on the weight and size of suitcases and the cost of excess luggage. If you are flying from Newcastle to Sydney be aware that these small planes have very strict weight limits.

Consult your embassy or consulate on custom regulations to consider when taking your belongings home.

If sending belongings home, compare the cost of airfreight, sea freight and mail and the length of time taken by each method. Compare prices for a few freight forwarders before deciding who to go with.

When taking computers or other high tech equipment home, check with the freight company regarding the relevant regulations, and complete the necessary customs forms.

## **GLOBAL ALUMNI NETWORK**

You have your degree but that doesn't mean you have to end your ties with the University. You have just become an automatic member of the University of Newcastle Alumni. We warmly welcome you into the community of 110,000 graduates, across 95 countries, who make up the proud tradition of our Alumni. For more information go to <http://alumni.newcastle.edu.au/default.asp>

The University of Newcastle Global Alumni Network is made up of a diverse range of UoN graduates, who have studied at any University of Newcastle Campus in Australia and abroad.

The Global UoN Alumni Network provides University of Newcastle graduates access to regional, national and international forums with other like-minded graduates, chapter leaders are central to developing and growing the University of Newcastle Global Alumni Network, and are highly valued by the University.

The UoN Global Alumni Network has international chapters in the following countries;

Botswana, China (Beijing, Guangzhou, Shanghai), Hong Kong, Kenya, Indonesia, Malaysia, Singapore, Taiwan, Tanzania, Thailand, The Philippines, Turkey, United Kingdom and United States

If you would like to be the contact person for your country please email [alumni@newcastle.edu.au](mailto:alumni@newcastle.edu.au)

## **PERSONAL**

Start thinking about who you particularly want to say goodbye to and start doing this. Make sure you exchange addresses and email addresses.

Have an enjoyable and safe trip - goodbye and good luck.