



My Journey to Study in Australia: Excitement and Unexpected Realities

James Asimwe
University of Canberra, Australia

Abstract

This reflection by an international student about his experience of transitioning into an Australian university highlights how small issues tend to become daunting challenges for international students while they are transitioning and adjusting psychologically, socially, and academically, especially in the beginning.

Keywords: international student, transition, culture shock

In 2012, I was offered a scholarship to a master's program in Australia. This excited me so much because it was a double blessing. I was going to get a master's degree and also live in a developed country for the first time in my life. As a student from Uganda, which is a developing country, I had some expectations like finding a unique, huge city with tall buildings. Knowing that air transport is the fastest, I also expected to arrive in few hours even though the flight schedule indicated the actual time. My thinking was "I am moving from earth to heaven" since I was taught that developed countries had everything one could imagine. Surprisingly, everything that I experienced from my flight, to arrival, study and culture was far different than I had anticipated. My initial experiences almost made me regret my decision to go to Australia. Fortunately, after a short while, all my surprises in Australia ended and I was left with excitement. This reflection describes my personal experience of going from Uganda to Australia to undertake a master's degree in international development. I reflect on my experiences on the long flight, the foreign culture and studying in Australia. This paper starts from the time I started the journey to the first two months of settling in Australia.

My experiences confirmed the findings of Brown and Holloway (2008) who established that the move to a new environment can be one of the most traumatic events in a person's life. The flight to Australia traumatised me because it took much longer than I had anticipated. Due to my initial excitement to travel abroad for the first time, I had not read my itinerary carefully. I ended up with a flight schedule that took me 32 hours when I could have selected much shorter ones. This long journey stayed in my mind and I kept worrying about how I would fly back

home after my studies. These thoughts even interrupted my initial classes for my master's degree.

When I set off from Entebbe airport, I kept checking on my watch counting the hours to arrival until I asked the crew member who assured me that the journey had just started. When we arrived in Dubai, the same crewmember came to me and said the journey we were left with tripled the time that we had just covered. I panicked at this time and asked my friend whom I had moved with whether our family members would ever see our bodies in case anything happened. My friend just asked me to be silent because he was also stressed with the flight. The Dubai-Melbourne-Canberra trip became so long that my friend asked me if he was in a dream or if it was a real flight. It would have been helpful for me to understand and read about other first time international student travellers' experiences before I left. Perhaps I would have had a more relaxing journey.

The other unexpected reality I experienced was upon arrival on my way from the Canberra airport to the University of Canberra. My choice of this university was based on the fact that it was in the capital city/Australian Capital Territory. I expected to see a congested city like my home city Kampala with skyscrapers, congested streets, many people and open shops everywhere. I expected a city that was busier than in my home country. In Kampala, whatever service a person needs can be accessed 24 hours a day, be it food, medical, drinks, clubs, public transport extra. I had expected to find the same or more in Canberra. To my surprise, I saw more trees and farmland. The University of Canberra, which I had expected to find in the city centre, was found surrounded by trees, Kangaroos, snakes, wild rabbits and wild mushrooms. The differences in the city caused a lot of boredom and stress initially and it put me in isolation within the first weeks. My experience was similar to the findings of Khawaja and Stallman (2011) who in their studies about experiences of international students in Australia, established that international students suffered from isolation and loneliness. After checking in, I called my wife in Uganda whom I told that Australia was more of a well-maintained bush than a city. My wife was also shocked and asked me if I was serious with what I was telling her. The next days, I managed to move around the city with my friend and confirmed that it was not the city I had expected. Initially, I had perceived that development had a lot to do with "big modern cities" and this was attributed to my primary and secondary education in Uganda. In Ugandan schools, children are taught that developed countries modernised their cities before the 17th Century. We are taught that their civilisation and development is older than Africa and that Europeans came to Africa during the 18th Century to help and modernise the continent (Development, Modernism and Modernity in Africa, 2011). I realized these teachings were a myth upon my arrival in Canberra. It was not until I went to Sydney, that my expectations for visiting a modern city in Australia came true.

When I started attending classes at University of Canberra, I faced more realities that further surprised me. The university lecturers treated me with much respect and I was shocked when they served me food during a short welcome party for the first class session. In my academic life, I had never seen a lecturer or teacher carrying a plate of food to serve students with a smile. I thought they were employees of a catering firm and when they were introduced to us as Professors and Doctors I was shocked. In my country, I was used to the student-lecturer education system that Godwin (2009) described as "non-interactive and authoritarian." The informal environment, including students being served food by the teacher, surprised me to the extent that I remembered my former undergraduate lecturer in Uganda who rebuked me for going to his office while chewing. Generally in my home country, adults are expected to eat at

home or in restaurants or any place designated for eating. In Australia, one is free to eat anytime and anywhere when one is hungry. My experience here was similar to that of Chih-Ning (2011) an international Doctoral student in the United States who felt like a child in the wilderness and started asking why Americans were eating during classes. Like Chih-Ning (2011), I found the cultural attitudes towards food and eating in public in Australia disorienting.

It has been emphasised that culture is one of the roadblocks for an international student's success (Street, 2003). The Australian culture surprised me because of people's dressing style, work style, and socialisation. It was completely different from my home culture. One morning, I went with my friend to a shopping centre to buy shoes. We entered a shop and I pointed to a shoe on the floor that I wanted to fit in. When the lady shop attendant bent down to pick it up, we had an awkward moment due to how much her body was exposed. The woman was dressed in a very short skirt which is not common in my home country. In Uganda, people would just say she was naked. In Australia women dress in any way they want and at the university it was worse. It took me a long time to get used seeing half-dressed ladies on a daily basis. I was also surprised to see some professors coming to lecture rooms while dressed in shorts, especially during evening time and in summer. During their interviews with International Students at the University of Queensland, Khawaja and Stallman (2011) were informed that different styles of dress and other cultural differences were a big hindrance to learning and cultural assimilation. Noticing dress patterns that were different than my home at school and in public was difficult for me to get used to.

Lastly, there was almost no socialisation in Australia especially in Canberra where I lived. Everyone was on his/her own. I shared a house with Australians for a full year and I managed to socialise with only one of the six housemates. The other five never even greeted me for the whole year. Surprisingly, even when I tried to greet them and to start a conversation, they had no time. Our house was close to other neighbouring houses that were not separated with a fence, but I never even saw these neighbours except for the cars that I would see come and go from their homes. I also lived with eight Australians at the University house sharing the same kitchen and shower rooms but we never socialised as Africans would do. Socialising with Australians was so difficult because they were too busy, they only said hi and stopped there and they did not easily exchange phone numbers (Khawaja & Stallman, 2011). In Uganda, it's very easy to meet a stranger and share mobile phones within five minutes of interaction. Relationships can be easily established with strangers met on the bus, in market areas, bars and other places. It's a normal thing to share a conversation with a person you do not know. We greet everyone who comes along and for those of us who know each other we either shake hands or hug each other. While many researchers have reported this problem of lack of socialisation with international students (Khawaja & Stallman, 2011; Godwin, 2009; Chih-Ning, 2011), the fact is that once one settles and gets close to social groups, it ceases to be a problem (Hannigan, 1988). It took me a few weeks and making some of my own friends to get used to the social norms of Australians.

My experience right from the time I was awarded a scholarship to study in Australia was influenced by much excitement. It is this excitement that made me fail to analyse my flight schedule to understand the time it would take me to arrive. Had it not been this case, then the long flight would have not shocked me. The same reason of excitement disabled me from making adequate initial studies about Australia which would have removed the surprises I had about the nature of the city, lecture environment and the Australian culture generally. Much excitement and expectations made me see things one way on my arrival but when I later settled,

everything normalised. I got accustomed to the reality and started enjoying the new international exposure that reshaped my personality. All the issues discussed above turned into lesser problems as time went by. By the time I completed my studies, I was too strong to be bothered by any cultural realities and differences. Too much excitement or worry can mislead international students and stop them from preparing to move or study in a new place. This can make international students experience surprises and cultural shocks. It is therefore important that when an international student is moving to a new country, he/she should control much excitement. Learning about the culture and customs of another country can help international students like myself overcome stress and surprises. Excitement should never fail anyone to analyse important details like flight schedule and other basic needs during the transition.

References

- Brown, L., & Holloway, I. (2008). The initial stage of the international sojourn: excitement or culture shock? *British Journal of Guidance & Counselling*, 36(1), 33-49. Doi: 10.1080/03069880701715689
- Development, Modernism and Modernity in Africa. (2011). doi:10.4324/9780203157572
- Distance from Uganda to Australia. (n.d). Retrieved from [http://www.timezonedistance.com/country difference.php? Between=Australia and=Uganda](http://www.timezonedistance.com/country%20difference.php?Between=Australia&and=Uganda)
- Godwin, K. A. (2009). Academic Culture Shock. *New England Journal of Higher Education*, 23(5), 30.
- Hannigan, T. P. (1988). Culture Shock with a Happy Ending. *Journal of Counselling & Development*, 67(2), 91.
- Kahangirwe, P. (2012). Linking environmental assessment and rapid urbanization in Kampala City. *Impact Assessment & Project Appraisal*, 30(2), 111-115. doi:10.1080/14615517.2012.660353
- Khawaja, N. G., & Stallman, H. M. (2011). Understanding the Coping Strategies of International Students: A Qualitative Approach. *Australian Journal of Guidance & Counselling*, 21(2), 203-224. doi:10.1375/ajgc.21.2.203
- Lynn Chih-Ning, C. (2011). My Culture Shock Experience. *A Review of General Semantics*, 68(4), 403-405.
- Roadblocks to International Student Success. (2005). *Recruitment & Retention in Higher Education*, 19(9), 6.