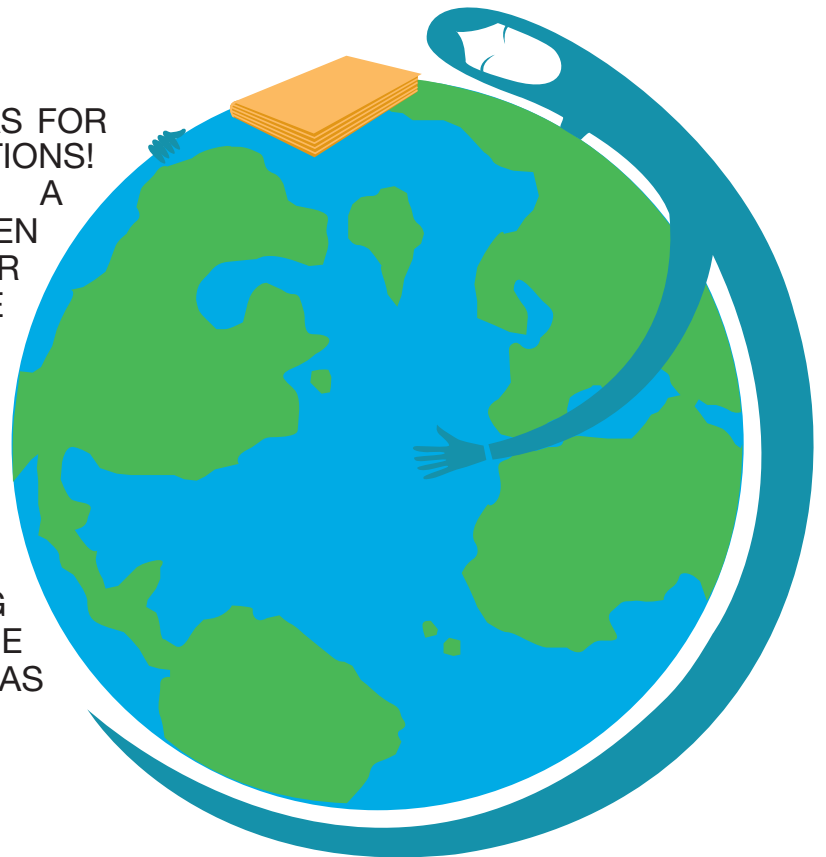


STUDYING ABROAD - MAKING THE MOST OF A SOJOURN OVERSEAS

By ROY KHENG

SO YOU WANT TO GO OVERSEAS FOR YOUR STUDIES. CONGRATULATIONS! YOU HAVE EMBARKED ON A JOURNEY THAT WILL BROADEN YOUR HORIZONS, ADD TO YOUR PERSONAL WORTH AND BE THE MOST MEMORABLE EXPERIENCE OF YOUR LIFE. THIS ARTICLE IS FOR THOSE CONSIDERING AN OVERSEAS EDUCATION. I WILL BE COVERING ISSUES LIKE CREATING AND DEALING WITH EXPECTATIONS, MAKING A HOME AWAY FROM HOME, RE-FORGING YOUR IDENTITY, MAKING THE MOST OF YOUR TIME OVERSEAS AND ACADEMIC ISSUES.



WHERE TO GO?

How does one go about choosing the best institution for your personal academic needs? Research is paramount. If you are considering the UK, seek advice from the British Council. If you wish to explore academic opportunities in the land down-under, www.idp.com is your best bet. And if you want "Shock and Awe" USA then the United States Education Information Center is the place for you (www.useic.org). All of these resources have great tools such as school rankings and step-by-step application guides. I would advise you to apply to more than one school just in case your application encounters any snafus (lost applications, mistakes on your application etc.). You can also get valuable information from alumni, family and friends who have studied overseas. Goal-setting and knowing what you want are essential to making the most of this huge investment. Know what course of study you wish to pursue and pick the right course from the right school. Since you and your family will be spending a king's ransom (or you will be bonded to a company under a scholarship programme), do your research carefully and thoroughly. It would be best if you followed your passion

and made it congruent with your future career. Also know that the flexibility of foreign education systems allows you the opportunity to explore your interests. Take courses that meet graduation requirements AND are interesting. Such opportunities don't come easily so make the most of it!

MAKING A HOME AWAY FROM HOME

Now that you've decided where you want to go, how do you go about making a home away from home? You can arrange for temporary accommodation through student hostels or stay with fellow Singaporeans already living and studying there. You can contact the various Singapore Student Associations via the schools website or the International Office of whatever institution you decide on. The best way to make friends is to stay at a student hostel. You'll get to meet young people from all over the world who are in the same boat as you. You can then decide if living in the hostel is your cup of tea. If it isn't, you can rent off-campus housing. Do understand that in some countries, the public transportation system isn't as comprehensive as it is in Singapore and

acquiring a set of wheels might make your experience there convenient and complete. I know of Singaporeans who complained that a particular city they were studying in was boring but it was because they didn't get out much. Be it car or motorcycle, scooter or even bicycle, have wheels will travel!

BEING AN ALIEN

You might not notice it at first but juggling academic, social, financial and domestic commitments will change your perspective on life, even alter the very essence of your identity. Beware of culture shock where the patois and idiosyncrasies of locals leave you going: "Huh?" The best way around this is integration with the locals. Do make friends outside of the Singapore/Asian fraternity. Learn about the new culture you've immersed yourself. Be adventurous and make the most of opportunities to mix outside your comfort zone. Avoiding faux pas like speaking in your mother tongue and passing comments without translating for your non-Asian friends, it is extremely rude. Celebrate local holidays and perhaps even find a host family to live with. On the other side of the coin, beware of reverse culture shock. When you come home for vacation, try not to bristle when your personal space is encroached or when you get service that, based on your "new standards", are just hard to take.

Remember that you are an informal ambassador of Singapore. Locals are going to view all other Singaporeans according to what you say and how you behave. Don't mess things up for other Singaporeans. Be proud of where you're from but don't be arrogant. Try not to be intimidated by locals (if they happen to be non-Asian). They breathe the same air, eat same food; and are essentially not really different from us.

MANAGE YOUR LIFE

Domestic management is another aspect of studying abroad that you need to be very aware of. Managing your funds through budgeting is very important. You want as few distractions as possible. Set a monthly budget and try to live within your means. Master your favourite dishes before going overseas so that you can impress your newfound friends with culinary works of art. Trust me, Singaporeans aren't the only ones who enjoy a scrumptious meal! In most major metropolitan areas of the world there will always be a small cluster of Asian businesses that should be able to meet your gastronomic needs. Ask fellow Asians where the best places to eat and shop are. They'll know. Introducing locals to these places will definitely score you points as well. Don't be afraid to try out local food and get your new friends to share restaurant and cooking tips with you. Discipline will also reap untold benefits. Have a schedule for housekeeping and for study time. Avoid friends who make you unhappy or are detrimental to your health. I'm not kidding. Friends who offer drugs aren't friends at all. Friends who are reckless on the road are very very unhealthy! If you do encounter any problems, don't be afraid to call a friend and share your burdens even if they are here and you are there.

PLAN, PLAN, PLAN

Insurance is vital for peace of mind. You can get a policy that will cover your car, apartment and health insurance needs. Just shop around to get the best deal. In some cases you

can get a discount for good grades in school. If you do have your driving license already, (car or motorcycle) then get your International Driving Permit from the Automobile Association (River Valley Road). You'll be able to hit the ground running and can roll your exploring, apartment hunting and shopping into one really fun exercise. Speaking of shopping, as a student, you'll be on a tight budget so make your dollar stretch. Exploit Outlet Malls, Hypermalls and even try bulk buying with friends. Coupons and discount booklets are also a perennial favourite with cash strapped students. If you're really adventurous and have wheels, look out for farmer's market days. Really fresh produce at low prices. All this activity will also help distract those of you who'll feel homesick.

TALK FOR CHEAP!

In this age of ubiquitous Internet, cheap international calls and direct flights, communicating with loved ones won't cost you an arm and a leg. Look out for the calling cards that are "rechargeable" (via credit card). The easiest thing to do is to check around with other foreign students, they would have already sniffed out the best deals out there

EXPAND YOUR MIND

Make the most of your time overseas. Travel. Road trips are always an adventure and you can organize group excursions. If you happen to be studying in Europe, by all means make full use of the discounted Eurail student pass (www.eurail.com) and cheap hostels. Build up an intimate knowledge of the city or country you're in. In retrospect, most of my "education" came from outside of the classroom. Cultural immersion will pay dividends in an intangible form. Get out of your comfort zone and try making friends who are not Asian. Unfortunately, the specter of racism might rear its ugly head. The best way to deal with it is to walk away or ignore it, there is no point engaging someone with preconceived notions. Other specters to beware of are alcohol and drugs. Moderation is the watchword. A couple of drinks is fine, drinking till you can't remember your name isn't.

YOU HAVE TO STUDY, YOU KNOW?

Following your passion is half the battle won. Explore your interests. Some schools give academic credit for NS, A levels and your Polytechnic diploma. Bring the originals and certified copies. Letters of recommendation from previous employers and former teachers go a long way. Also, do note that Professors are more than wonderful sources of information and the person who gives you your final grade. Get to know them, spend time with them during office hours. And if you do "click" with him or her, spend sometime outside of class, they all have fascinating lives which you can pick up a few tips from. There is nothing like having a beer with your prof at the campus bar.

In hindsight, going overseas was the start of an incredible journey that has added so much more to my life experience and personal worth. These intangibles can't be quantified but they add to your being independent and having confidence in your abilities. This is definitely one sure benefit of fending for yourself while studying overseas. You have to worry about bills, do your laundry, cook for yourself and generally, survive. This is the best "schooling" there is.