

Redefining Home: Reverse Culture Shock Among Semester-Long Exchange Students: A Qualitative Research

Mendefinisikan Ulang Makna Rumah: "Reverse Culture Shock" yang dirasakan oleh Mahasiswa Pertukaran Selama Satu Semester: Sebuah Penelitian Kualitatif

Pingkan Patricia Mumbunan¹, Christin Wibhowo²
21e10234@student.unika.ac.id¹, christine@unika.ac.id²

¹Program Sarjana Psikologi, Universitas Katolik Soegijapranata, Jl. Pawiyatan Luhur Sel., Bendan Duwur, Semarang, Indonesia

²Program Sarjana Psikologi, Universitas Katolik Soegijapranata, Jl. Pawiyatan Luhur Sel., Bendan Duwur, Semarang, Indonesia

Info Artikel

| Submitted: 30 May 2025

| Revised: 28 June

| Accepted: 4 July 2025

How to cite: Pingkan Patricia Mumbunan, etc., "Redefining Home: Reverse Culture Shock Among Semester-Long Exchange Students: A Qualitative Research", *Medical : Jurnal Kesehatan Dan Kedokteran*, Vol. 2 No. 2, Juli-Desember, 2025, hlm. 1-23.

ABSTRACT

There has been a lack of research exploring the re-entry experiences of students in semester-long study abroad programs, despite the urgency of the reverse culture shock phenomenon. This is crucial because even though students are abroad for only a few months, if their return is not properly supported, the goals and values set by the program might be lost. This study aims to investigate the reverse culture shock experienced by semester-long exchange students, focusing on Indonesian students who joined the Indonesia International Student Mobility Awards (IISMA) program at Sophia University, Japan. Using a qualitative approach, data were collected through in-depth interviews and observations of four students. The findings revealed that participants struggled to readjust to life in Indonesia, as everything felt different from the more suitable lifestyle they experienced in Japan. They found aspects like traffic, public services, and social interactions more relaxed and less organized, which felt strange and frustrating after living in a more individualistic and efficient culture. The anticipated challenges of returning appeared as feelings of alienation, loneliness, loss, anomie, unhappiness, withdrawal, depression, and minor physical illness, typically lasting two to three months. Participants were aware of the potential for this phenomenon before returning. Several coping strategies were identified, including a strong desire to return to Japan.

Keyword: *Re-entry Culture Shock, Reverse Culture Shock, Exchange Student*

ABSTRAK

Penelitian mengenai pengalaman re-entry mahasiswa yang mengikuti program studi luar negeri selama satu semester masih sangat terbatas, meskipun fenomena *reverse culture shock* sudah menjadi isu penting. Hal ini krusial karena meskipun mahasiswa hanya berada di luar negeri selama beberapa bulan, jika kepulangan mereka tidak didukung dengan baik, maka tujuan dan nilai yang ditetapkan oleh program bisa tidak terpenuhi. Studi ini bertujuan menyelidiki *reverse culture shock* yang dialami oleh mahasiswa program pertukaran satu semester, dengan fokus pada mahasiswa Indonesia peserta *Indonesia International Student Mobility Awards* (IISMA) di Sophia University,



This work is licensed under [CC BY-SA 4.0](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/4.0/)

Jepang. Dengan pendekatan kualitatif, data dikumpulkan melalui wawancara dan observasi terhadap empat mahasiswa. Hasil temuan menunjukkan bahwa para partisipan kesulitan menyesuaikan diri kembali di Indonesia karena segala sesuatu terasa berbeda dari gaya hidup di Jepang yang lebih sesuai bagi mereka. Aspek seperti lalu lintas, layanan publik, dan interaksi sosial di Indonesia dirasa lebih santai dan kurang terorganisir, sehingga menimbulkan frustrasi. Tantangan yang dihadapi setelah pulang muncul dalam bentuk perasaan keterasingan, kesepian, kehilangan, anomie, ketidakbahagiaan, menarik diri, depresi, dan gangguan fisik ringan. Fenomena ini berlangsung selama dua hingga tiga bulan, dan sebagian besar partisipan telah menyadari kemungkinan mengalaminya sebelum kembali. Beberapa strategi coping yang diidentifikasi termasuk keinginan kuat untuk kembali ke luar negeri.

Kata Kunci: *Re-entry Culture Shock, Reverse Culture Shock, Mahasiswa Pertukaran*

Introduction

In the present day, the mobility of students and faculty is becoming increasingly common in higher education around the world. Studying abroad has become an essential part for today's generation, allowing students to enhance a better understanding of different perspectives, recognize their connection to the broader world and build the ability to interact and collaborate with people from diverse cultures and backgrounds.

While international scholarship programs have been influential in many developing countries, Indonesia has expanded opportunities for Indonesian students to study abroad, leading to a noticeable increase in the number of students opting for studying abroad. One such initiative is the Indonesian International Student Mobility Awards (IISMA), a program organized by the Ministry of Education, Culture, Research, and Technology of Indonesia. This IISMA program has provided scholarships for Indonesian undergraduate and vocational students to spend one semester at universities abroad.¹

Upon being given the opportunity to study abroad, these students must prepare themselves to face major cultural differences. Such preparations are not only limited to managing culture shock during their time abroad, away from their home culture, but also include re-entry shock, or as known as reverse culture shock, upon returning home. Culture shock describes the feelings of confusion or discomfort that exchange students are likely to experience when encountering a new and unfamiliar cultural environment, regardless of the destination.² On the other way around, reverse culture shock refers to the feelings of confusion or discomfort that exchange

¹ Ministry of Education, Culture, Research, and Technology of Indonesia. "Indonesian International Student Mobility Awards (IISMA)." Partnership, Ministry of Education, Culture, Research, and Technology of Indonesia. Accessed May 15, 2025.

² Alice Fanari, Rain Wuyu Liu, and Taylor Foerster, "Homesick or Sick-of-Home? Examining the Effects of Self-Disclosure on Students' Reverse Culture Shock after Studying Abroad: A Mixed-Method Study," *Journal of Intercultural Communication Research* 50, no. 3 (2021):1

students experience when returning to their home country. Jacobsson stated that this phenomenon of reverse culture shock's meaning lies in the negative and unpleasant feelings when a sojourner returns to their home country.³ Thus, Alkhalaf, Al-Krenawi, and Elbedour further detailed the negative and unpleasant feelings the individuals or groups face when experiencing intense reverse culture shock; they often struggle to maintain a clear sense of identity and feel satisfied with life.⁴ These adjustment difficulties could also make everyday social challenges even more challenging. In summary, the stress of returning to one's home culture after time abroad can negatively affect both psychological well-being and social adaptation.

Martin, as cited in Fanari et al., pointed out that reverse culture shock should be seen as an essential aspect of the broader cultural adjustment process, in which it involves the emotional and psychological effort the individual makes to adapt to a different cultural environment.⁵ This stage could take time and vary from person to person. Research conducted by Dykhous & Bikos found that students returning from global service-learning programs experienced a decrease in their psychological well-being, which hit their lowest point about four months after they got back.⁶

Though the length of time can differ for everyone, returning and settling back in often comes with its own set of mental and physical challenges. Uehara identified several psychological and physical challenges that returnees often face. These included feelings of alienation, loneliness, loss, withdrawal, and unhappiness, as well as deeper issues like anomie, depression, and sometimes even physical sickness.⁷ These problems were seen as a result of the drastic changes returnees had gone through while abroad. This idea from Uehara was mentioned in Périco and Gonçalves who then brought the statement that it is important for exchange students to receive psychological support during their first few months after returning since the re-adjusting process could be considered as complex due to various changes.⁸ These indicators identified by Uehara are useful for a qualitative

³ Emilia Jacobsson, "Reverse Culture Shock: An insight into returning student sojourners at Malmö University and their experience of reverse culture shock" (2023):11-12

⁴ Khulud Alkhalaf, Alean Al-Krenawi, and Salman Elbedour, "Reverse culture shock among Saudi students returning from the US to their homeland," *Journal of International Students* 14, no. 4 (2024):744

⁵ Alice Fanari, Rain Wuyu Liu, and Taylor Foerster, "Homesick or Sick-of-Home? Examining the Effects of Self-Disclosure on Students' Reverse Culture Shock after Studying Abroad: A Mixed-Method Study," *Journal of Intercultural Communication Research* 50, no. 3 (2021):4

⁶ Elizabeth C. Dykhous and Lynette H. Bikos, "Re-entry friction: The curious effects of cultural dislocation on outcomes for global service learning returnees," *International Journal of Intercultural Relations* 72 (2019): 104-105

⁷ Asako Uehara, "The nature of American student reentry adjustment and perceptions of the sojourn experience," *International Journal of Intercultural Relations* 10, no. 4 (1986):421

⁸ Franco Gatelli Périco and Roberto Birch Gonçalves, "Academic exchange: the difficulties of adaptation and readaptation," *Educação e Pesquisa* 44 (2018): 16

research that seeks in-depth accounts of personal experiences of the participants, as it helps to explore not only the visible effects of this phenomenon, but also the hidden emotional struggles that the participants faced.

Samira et al., surveyed 18 students who went for a ten-months cultural exchange program. Their findings revealed that most of the students experienced reverse culture shock to a large extent, reaching the percentage of 68.8% and they went through various degrees of reverse culture shock, such as difficulty reconciling their home and host cultures, reverse homesickness, feelings of alienation, and challenges in reconnecting with friends and family.⁹

In addition, there are reported cases of students who have studied abroad often feel confused and frustrated that their home environment and the people they left behind have changed just as much as they have and when they don't feel that nothing has changed, they could feel disappointed and disconnected, especially for the returnees who gained new values and ways of thinking while they were abroad.¹⁰

Jacobsson examined the experiences of students returning to Malmö University after their time abroad, focusing on the challenges of reverse culture shock. Most of the students reported feeling a strong sense of loneliness and isolation once they returned back. This was because they no longer lived with the close groups they had been part of during their exchange and their social environment in Malmö no longer provided them the sense of connection and engagement as it had while they were abroad.¹¹

Another research by Périco and Gonçalves looked into the challenges faced by students from Brazil who took part in the Science Without Borders, a study abroad program initiated by Higher Education Institutions (HEI). The study found that many students struggled to detach from their culture of origin. Feelings of nostalgia and a strong desire not to return home after the exchange made the reentry process especially difficult.¹²

⁹ Samira E. A., A. E. Karfa, and Hamza Farhane, "Dealing with Reverse Culture Shock after Cultural Exchange: Contributing Factors and Coping Strategies," *Journal of Psychology and Behavior Studies* 4, no. 1 (2024): 53-54

¹⁰ Asako Uehara, "The nature of American student reentry adjustment and perceptions of the sojourn experience," *International Journal of Intercultural Relations* 10, no. 4 (1986): 421-432

Peter Allison, Jennifer Davis-Berman, and Dene Berman, "Changes in latitude, changes in attitude: Analysis of the effects of reverse culture shock—A study of students returning from youth expeditions," *Leisure Studies* 31, no. 4 (2012): 494-498

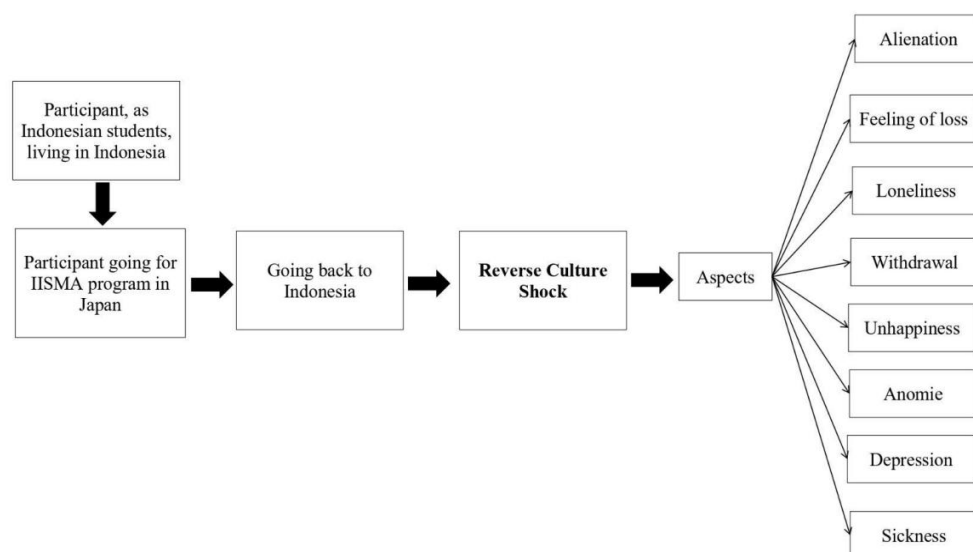
Kevin F. Gaw, "Reverse culture shock in students returning from overseas," *International Journal of Intercultural Relations* 24, no. 1 (2000): 101

¹¹ Emilia Jacobsson, "Reverse Culture Shock: An insight into returning student sojourners at Malmö University and their experience of reverse culture shock" (2023):19-20

¹² Franco Gatelli Périco and Roberto Birch Gonçalves, "Academic exchange: the difficulties of adaptation and readaptation," *Educação e Pesquisa* 44 (2018):15

While most studies have explored mainly the phenomenon of reverse culture shock experienced by students who went for a minimum of one year study abroad program, this research aims to investigate the same phenomenon specifically among students who participated in semester-long study abroad. A study revealed that one semester is the most ideal duration for studying abroad, as students who participated in semester program reported better outcomes in several terms, that are their contribution to class discussion with showing diverse perspectives and ideas, their advanced empathy, broad general knowledge, critical thinking, and also their effective ways in group works.¹³ Therefore it is expected that semester-long study abroad programs will become more common and may even become a trend in the near future. Acknowledging that, this part of the study abroad experience needs to be more looked at thoroughly as students could still face some major difficulties in the aspects of emotional, academic, and social when they come home, even after only a few months abroad.

The research questions for this study are to explore the extent to which participants are affected by reverse culture shock after a semester-long study abroad program, how long the effects typically last, as well as whether the participants had anticipated experiencing it before returning. By exploring the reverse culture shock of students in semester-long programs, this study also seeks to fill the gap in existing research and to encourage institutions to provide better support to all returning students. This is because, without the proper support, the phenomenon of reverse culture shock could affect students' well-being and reduce the positive impact that the program is meant to provide.



¹³ Jeffrey Scott Coker, Evan Heiser, and Laura Taylor, "Student Outcomes Associated with Short-Term and Semester Study Abroad Programs," *Frontiers: The Interdisciplinary Journal of Study Abroad* 30, no. 2 (2018): 101

Research Method

This research uses a qualitative method, focusing on reverse culture shock as the variable. As an exploratory study, it aims to uncover, as understand, and interpret this relatively under-researched phenomenon by examining the experiences of students who participated in a semester-long study abroad program. While discussing reverse culture shock that is experienced by the semester-long exchange students as a whole, this research takes the IISMA 2024 Awardees to Sophia University as the research samples. Using purposive sampling to recruit the participants through personal and professional connections of the first author, there were four awardees chosen as the participants. These four awardees shared several common characteristics: they had completed their IISMA program for one semester, attended Sophia University, lived in the metropolitan area of Tokyo for 4 months and 2 weeks in a shared dormitory, went right back to Indonesia right after the program ended, and reported experiencing reverse culture shock upon returning to their home. Data were collected approximately 3 months after the return from the host country.

Following the consent procedures, the participants were given an Informed Consent to fill out before data collecting, as a way for the researcher to ensure that they understood the purpose of the research and agreed to participate voluntarily. The data was collected through in-depth one-on-one semi-predetermined interviews and observations with the participants through online meetings in April to May 2025. Each participant was interviewed two to three times, and a semi-structured interview format was used to gather data because, according to Jacobsson, this semi-structured interview format allows more questions to develop during the duration of the interview as well as allowing the participants to bring up ideas that were relevant and meaningful for them.¹⁴ The predetermined interview questions were made based on the eight aspects of Re-entry Culture Shock classified by Uehara: Alienation, Loneliness, Feeling of loss, Withdrawal, Unhappiness, Anomie, Depression, and (sometimes) sickness, that later on were developed into seven items that helped the researcher assess the intensity of emotional and physical challenges: 1) Physical problem, 2) Feeling anxiety, 3) Feeling of apathy, 4) Feeling of loss, 5) Feeling of loneliness, 6) Relating to old friends, and 7) Relating to my family.⁷ Subsequently, interview guidelines were developed with questions such as: "Did you feel anxious or nervous about your re-adjustment after returning to your home? What were you most worried about?", "Were there specific activities or social settings that you found difficult to engage with, either because of the cultural

¹⁴ Emilia Jacobsson, "Reverse Culture Shock: An insight into returning student sojourners at Malmö University and their experience of reverse culture shock" (2023):15

differences or the emotional impact of re-entry?”, “How did it feel to be surrounded by people who were unaware of the challenges you were facing? Did this make you feel even more isolated or disconnected?”, etc.

To analyze the data in this research, researcher used thematic analysis, that is a method introduced by Braun and Clarke.¹⁵ This particular approach was especially useful for qualitative and exploratory research, as it allowed the researcher to understand the participants’ personal experiences with reverse culture shock with recurring patterns in what the participants had shared. The process began with transcribing the interviews into written words in Google Documents, and then researcher familiarized themselves with the content. After gaining a deep understanding of the context, key ideas were developed and then were coded systematically from the existing theory from Uehara and by the data itself (inductively, that appeared unexpectedly in the interviews themselves). In the next phase, the codings were organized into several potential themes, which involved grouping similar or related codes together. After the initial codes were made, they were grouped into bigger and interconnected themes. These themes were then checked and refined to make sure they truly represented what the participants had shared. Finally, the findings were written into a report, mentioning dialogues with the participants to help show and explain each theme clearly.

Results and Discussion

Uehara listed 8 aspects of reverse culture shock: Alienation, Loneliness, Feeling of loss, Withdrawal, Unhappiness, Anomie, Depression, and Sickness.⁷ These were used as the basis for the interview guidelines. By holding onto that, researcher then found a number of codings that refer to each aspect. These findings answer the questions that the research was trying to explore.

1.1 Alienation

After spending one semester in a different culture, two of the participants stated that they had the desire to share the experiences they had back in Japan, but facts showed that these participants did not feel satisfied with their family and friends’ reaction towards their stories. Participant 4 agreed to the question ‘Are you not satisfied with your friends’ reactions towards your Japan stories?’ as she nodded strongly and later clarified,

“When I hang out with my friends, I used to tell my stories about my Japan experiences, I did this, I did that, but then my friend started to notice that and got kind of annoyed and said such thing as ‘You talk about Japan too much’ or ‘Yeah, yeah, we

¹⁵ Virginia Braun and Victoria Clarke, "Using Thematic Analysis in Psychology," *Qualitative Research in Psychology* 3, no. 2 (2006): 77-98

get it, you've been to Japan' in joking tone, and ever since then I started to hold myself from telling them stories about Japan."

Participant 1 seemed really disappointed with those kinds of reactions from his friends and showed the feeling of heavy-heartedness by his head gestures and melancholic tone upon explaining.

At the same time, Participant 4 also shared that she did not get a satisfying reaction from friends and found it hard to share their stories,

"I would say that they understand me 50%-ish. They don't understand that much even though I already explained a lot, but maybe it's hard for them to imagine because some of them can't relate to the stories, as we share different kinds of experiences."

This lack of understanding from friends not only left the participants feeling disconnected but also intensified their sense of alienation. As they tried to share their experiences, they found it harder to connect with those around them. It was as if the person they had become while abroad did not quite fit with the expectations of their old social circles.

While reconnecting with friends in Indonesia was found to be challenging, they found that the mindset of people from abroad was more relatable. For some, the attitudes and approaches they experienced in other countries felt more aligned with their values, leading them to develop a preference for foreign ways of thinking and behaving. For instance, Participant 4 explained the major difference between the local Indonesian mindset and foreign mindset regarding their plans for their future,

"So, I met up with my friends, right? And they weren't really aware of what they wanted to do next, just being lazy about doing their studies or working on their thesis. It made me think, when I was abroad, I met people, friends, who were really driven... they were different, like they were naturally ambitious, and they also planned out everything ahead of time. Then, I met my friends here..."

In relation to that, Participant 3 also expressed a preference for the mindset of people abroad, particularly in how they state their future plannings,

"You know, when we're abroad, people are really slow, but they take things seriously. You get what I mean, right? They think about their future seriously, even though they haven't figured it out yet, but they're actively seeking the answers."

Realizing how much they resonated with the mindset of people abroad made it even more challenging to feel connected after returning home. What once felt familiar in Indonesia now felt distant, and in some cases, harder to relate to. Participant 3's statement supports these ideas where she felt less able to express her full personality at home,

"...when I'm in Indonesia, I'm half introverted and half extroverted. But when I'm in Japan, I'm fully extroverted, and when I'm back again to Indonesia, I'm half again."

However, despite these challenges, participants also found comfort in the support and pride expressed by their families. Two of the participants shared that their families were proud of what they had accomplished, which helped ease their feelings of alienation. This recognition and sense of being valued played an important role in helping participants feel welcomed and accepted upon their return to their home country.

1.2 Loneliness

While alienation left participants feeling disconnected and out of sync with their surroundings, it also intensifies the deeper sense of loneliness. As they feel the emotional distance from friends, combined with the lack of shared experiences and meaningful social connections, three out of four participants felt lonely.

Out of the four participants, Participant 2 seemed to have this sense of loneliness the most, as he clarified that he missed his IISMA friends whom he shared house and life with for one semester and he had difficulty reconnecting with them,

"I had a really comfortable life in Japan, mostly because I lived in a dormitory with my friends. I got quite attached to them, we were literally living in rooms right next to each other... That closeness, doing everything together, made me feel like I really bonded with them, especially with my dorm mates. We did a lot of things together in Japan, as a group, like a little gang, I guess. So when IISMA ended, I actually felt a sense of grief leaving it all behind. And when I lost contact with my friends, it really affected me. I felt lonely because I couldn't meet my friends from campus anymore. Ever since I got back from Japan, I haven't really been able to see any of my friends, and I guess... yeah, I did feel lonely."

One of the key reasons Participant 2 felt a strong sense of loneliness after returning home was the deep bond they had formed with friends during their

time in Japan. Additionally, Participant 4 has a solid supporting statement for that, being alienated from her old friends and the long distance with her IISMA friends actually contributed to her loneliness upon re-adjusting,

"And the contrast is really strong, I mean the life in Japan, especially living in the same house with my IISMA friends, was so much fun. We did so many things together. But now that I'm back, a lot of my friends aren't even in my city anymore, and I don't have classes, so it really feels like I don't have any friends around anymore."

This feeling of loneliness led both participants to spend more time alone and experience a sense of emotional isolation.

Relating to that, Participant 3 also stated how 'hanging out with friends' is the one thing she misses the most from Japan and explained how it is not easy to maintain a good relationship with the people she made friends with for a long term,

"I think what I miss the most is hanging out with my friends there, that's the first thing. I really want to keep maintaining our friendship, but it's been really hard to do now that I'm back in Indonesia. I'll try if I can, if there's a chance. But there are some friends I find really hard to reach out to, I just can't find any good topics to start a conversation with, it's just a shame..."

However, researcher found an interesting finding from Participant 1 who stated that he feel less lonely when they return home as he was glad to be reunited with his old friends,

...maybe because most of my friends were from Indonesia, and then in Japan, like, yeah I had a bunch of friends, of course, but not as many as in Indonesia. And you know, how Japanese people can be a bit hard to connect with. So in a way, I wasn't socializing that much and just felt kind of lonely. Aside from my IISMA friends, I was basically living a solo life, going places alone, that kind of thing. But in Indonesia, I have a lot of friends, so I could invite them to go here and there, play games, and just hang out.

1.3 Feeling of Loss

After spending a semester in Japan and successfully adapting to the local culture, participants had to leave that life behind and return to their old routines. This transition proved to be one of the most difficult challenges they faced. The feeling of loss emerged as they began to mourn not just the country

itself, but the daily life they had come to enjoy and identify with. Many shared moments of nostalgia and vivid flashbacks related to their experiences abroad. Based on the interview results, this theme stood out as the most significant aspect, as all participants strongly expressed it across multiple codes.

All four participants showed a great amount of energy and enthusiasm when sharing the things they experienced and got there in Japan. They shared so many flashbacks and expressed how much they missed various aspects of Japanese culture, such as the places they visited, food, and the people. Participant 1 shared the place he enjoyed the most in Japan, mentioning that he had all his hobbies organized while there. He also mentioned that he spent his last moments before returning to Indonesia by recording his travels around Tokyo through video to keep as a memory,

"There were also days when I recorded everything for my last moments in Japan. I recorded everything, starting from Fujimidai, then to Ikebukuro, and then wandered around Shinjuku, recording it all. On the very last day, because normally I would just take pictures, not videos."

Participant 2 shared how he misses certain aspects of his time in Japan, particularly the food and the academic atmosphere. He expressed a strong preference for Japanese food, especially soba, noting how difficult it is to find it in Indonesia. "If there's a chance to eat soba, I will eat soba," he said. Additionally, he mentioned missing the vibe of his host university, including the friends, the academic environment, and the overall atmosphere that made his experience there so memorable.

The four participants mentioned that they had the best time during their IISMA program. Participants also stated that they were comfortable with the life they had, where they could live on their own terms, with their own freedom, and full authority for themselves to explore numerous things daily. Therefore they had to lose their freedom and autonomy after returning, as Participant 2 brought up how he had less responsibilities when he was in Japan and he felt a bigger sense of freedom,

"I had fewer responsibilities, and I also had my own money to spend, my own income. I had access to transportation, which was really convenient, no need for a vehicle since I could get anywhere by train. That made a big difference. Ultimately, it all comes back to the fact that I had fewer responsibilities while I was there. My main responsibilities were academic, so I had more time for myself and felt a greater sense of freedom."

Moreover, Participant 4 explained how she still mourn her daily life back in Japan and wished that she could bring those back to her life now,

"It was just a simple habit, like preparing my own meals – thinking about what I needed to buy, budgeting a certain amount of money, setting aside time to shop and cook. Even something as simple as that turned out to be meaningful in my life. After I came back here, I realized I wasn't doing anything like that anymore because everything was taken care of. It made me feel like my life became kind of dull. So, the everyday activities there; being independent, taking care of myself, and even going out on my own without feeling anxious, really made my life more colorful."

Relating to that, Participant 3 pointed out how she used to go out almost every day, exploring different places and returning to their dorm at night. However, after returning to her home city, she felt there weren't many places to visit, so she ended up spending most of their free time at home, playing games and only going out when invited by friends. She also mentioned that in Japan, she tended to spend a lot of money on unnecessary items, but upon returning to Indonesia, she has become more focused on buying only the essentials. In fact, she had not been shopping at malls for nearly 2-3 months.

By the end, the feeling of loss was included as a big part of the phenomenon of reverse culture shock these participants went through. The difference between their exciting and full of freedom abroad and the more laid-back routine in Indonesia left them feeling empty.

1.4 Anomie

Upon returning back to their home culture, participants found some major struggles in finding the meaning of coherence and started to notice the lack of structure regarding roles and routines in their home culture. There are three major codes that correlate to this aspect: future conflict, value clash where participants feel like the Japanese norms they have internalized are at odds with the social behaviors they often see in Indonesia, therefore it causes confusion and anxiety.

Participant 3 shared that she contemplated her future a lot after returning back home. She showed some sad gaze and gestures upon telling her cancelled future plans, that she had to take additional semesters to complete college and how she was uncertain about working in Indonesia,

"After I have achieved IISMA, I don't have another goal yet. I'm still searching for it, it's kinda hard, I feel lost and started to question myself about what I want for the future. Every day, I feel pressured. I'm about to graduate and I want to pursue a

Master's degree, but people keep saying it's better to get work experience first. The thing is, I don't want to work in Indonesia because the visual fields aren't really appreciated here, plus with AI now, things are changing fast..."

Based on the interviews with the four participants, it was evident that the strongest feeling they all experienced was a clash of values. There were several aspects that the participants put their concern on. The first thing, Participant 1 appreciated the fact that people in Japan tend to mind their own business and avoid interrupting others, which he saw as a perfect fit for introverts like himself. Similarly, Participant 2 also reflected on his preference for the more individualistic mindset in Japan, saying,

"I really miss some of the standards in Japan that I actually liked, especially in terms of personalization. Back here in Indonesia, it's more about the community. In Japan, they don't focus much on you as an individual, but here, people really, really put you to the things they are concerned about... something like that."

Participant 3 also expressed her frustration and anger toward the common habit in Indonesia of neglecting traffic laws, which she felt contributes to the chaotic and disorganized nature of the streets. Reflecting a related concern, Participant 4 compared her experience of going out alone in Japan versus in Indonesia. She explained that in Indonesia, it is not that going out alone is inherently uncomfortable, but rather challenging as there is a social stigma where people often look at individuals as 'pitiful' if they go on their own. In contrast, being alone in public spaces is completely normal in Japan.

"In Japan, a lot of people go out by themselves, and the public spaces are designed to support that. For example, many restaurants offer single seating. Everything in Japan feels supportive of doing things alone, especially the transportation system. Meanwhile, here in Indonesia, things still feel unsafe, and public transport doesn't really support solo activities."

The last point is that Participant 3 and Participant 4 both expressed a sense of disappointment with the mindset of some of their peers back home, which they perceived as lacking ambition or direction. Participant 3 observed that many people she knew seemed to have given up on their future goals, saying,

"a lot of people I know here, whenever I ask them what they want to do in the next few years, they just say things like, 'I don't know yet... maybe I'll follow my

parents... maybe I'll help with the family business... or just do anything I can in this city.' It's just different. Back in Japan, even though people take their time, they really think about what they truly want. Some of them land serious and good jobs after graduating. Meanwhile, a few of my friends here feel so pressured to find work that they just settle for anything they can get."

Participant 4 added her own frustration, not just about long-term mindset differences, but also about daily cultural behaviors that no longer felt acceptable to her.

"I've become really sensitive toward people here who think it's normal to be late. Like, if we agree to meet at 7, they'll show up at 7:30 or 8. I've been trying to be on time, but if I bring it up, it feels like I'm being too much. I guess that's part of dealing with the culture here, people just accept lateness as normal."

These reflections show that the participants experienced anomie as they tried to reintegrate into their home culture, where the values and social behaviors no longer aligned with the ones they had internalized abroad. The confusion, discomfort, and even mild frustration they expressed.

1.5 Withdrawal

Relating to the previous aspect, participants tend to avoid social interaction that is not engaged with the foreign experience. This behavior aligns to the term "Withdrawal", where participants keep clinging to old behaviors or habits from the past culture and staying emotionally connected with the past through social media.

By being exposed to a different culture, participants adopted several new habits, such as walking more, waiting in line, obeying traffic laws, eating healthy and clean food, and going to the gym. They made an effort to maintain these habits as much as possible. This aspect is the result of the coping strategies the participants used, to stay connected with Japanese culture. Participant 2 explained how he learned new habits during his one semester in Japan,

"I definitely learned new habits. For instance, I developed a routine where I count my things before leaving my room. In Indonesia, I'd just bring a few general items, but in Japan, I made sure to prepare exactly eight things each day: my phone, wallet, keys, commuter pass, watch, bottle, umbrella, and headphones. I'd count them one by one before heading out, and this habit stayed with me even after returning to Indonesia. Another thing I learned was Japanese mannerisms. I started walking more,

being careful not to interrupt people, and trying to be less annoying overall. These behaviors are things I picked up in Japan and brought back with me to Indonesia."

He mentioned that he still tries to maintain the habits he adopted from Japan. In fact, he explained that if he did not continue those habits, he would feel like he was losing the new personality he developed during his time there. Participant 2 also shared that he uses social media to stay connected with his IISMA friends, often through calls on Discord, as a way of coping. Similarly, Participant 4 highlighted the role of social media in staying connected with people interested in her experiences in Japan. She noted that many people seemed excited to follow her journey, so she found herself sharing more about her life in Japan.

On the other hand, Participant 1 mentioned that he did not avoid social interactions after returning to Indonesia. He felt it was important for him to re-adjust quickly and stay connected with the people around him.

1.6 Unhappiness

After the experience of withdrawal, participants began to express feelings of unhappiness and dissatisfaction with their daily lives back home. The contrast between their life in Japan and their return to Indonesia led to a sense of frustration, boredom, and irritation with the mundane aspects of life. Several participants expressed the struggles to find the same sense of excitement and fulfillment they had while abroad. The differences they encountered, such as the lack of public facilities, the humid and hot weather that leads to climate shock, and safety concerns in public spaces, only intensified these feelings. Participant 3 explained how there are several aspects that are different between both countries,

"I think almost everything has a big gap between my city and Japan, starting from the weather, city facilities, almost everything... the public transport, the people..."

Participant 4 supports that statement with expressing how hard it was to re-adjust with the weather and temperature difference that disturbs their daily life,

"As for the climate, I really felt a drastic change, especially when I first arrived. I stayed in Jakarta for a few days, and the temperature difference was extreme, it went from below zero, I think, to around 30 degrees Celsius. It was really uncomfortable, I even had trouble sleeping because it was so hot, though that only happened during the first few days."

It was not only the climate that showed a significant contrast that is making it more difficult for participants to maintain their habit of walking, public facilities and safety also differed significantly, as Participant 1 explained how he found the answer why people in his country do not walk as much as the people in Japan,

"I tried to bring back my walking habit by walking around my neighborhood, but after just 10 minutes, I was like, "Okay, now I understand why not many people walk in Indonesia." But yeah, I ended up traveling a lot less. The transportation system in Indonesia is so different from Japan's, so most of the time, I just stayed at home."

Building on the previous statement, Participant 2 also mentioned feeling anxious about returning to his old routine, particularly when it comes to taking the commuter trains in his city.

This sense of dissatisfaction is not limited to the differences in physical aspects, but the participants also showed unhappiness about being reunited with their responsibilities in their home, the certain pressure to be productive and the gaps in motivation that refers to the emotional struggle with re-engaging with their life goals. Two of the participants stated that they had a hard time regaining their motivation while they knew that they needed to get up from those negative feelings, therefore it made them anxious for not being able to be productive,

"I feel like I'm not as ambitious as I used to be, and I'm not sure if this is a downgrade, but it probably is. Before, I'd take on anything, like when I was willing to lead the KKN project and manage everything. Now, I'm only interested in activities that help me gain skills for work, but I'm less motivated and often lazy since coming back from Japan. Maybe it's because I planned to relax while I was in Japan, but now I feel anxious, and that mindset has carried over to Indonesia. I'm afraid I won't be as driven as I was before."

However, this aspect might be influenced by the participants' personalities. Participant 1, who described himself as a calm and laid-back person, mentioned that he didn't feel pressured by falling behind his friends' academic progress. Instead of losing motivation, he saw it as a source of motivation to return to Japan.

1.7 Depression

The results do not necessarily refer to the clinical diagnosis for depression, but rather for the emotional distress as a result of reverse culture shock. This consists of reports of low energy and emotional fatigue and the fear of being left behind from their peers where participants feel stuck from life progression, taking the statement from Participant 4 as a solid example,

"It's like, I'm tired, I want to do something, but I just don't have the motivation to do it. I feel exhausted, and then I get anxious because I'm not doing anything. It's hard to explain. There's a willingness, but no energy to follow through."

Participant 2 also reported feeling very sad and heartbroken upon leaving behind all aspects of Japan and the IISMA program, and having to readjust to everything back at home, especially the responsibilities awaiting him. Participant 3 also mentioned the feeling of "mentally burdened" when facing the cultural differences. In line with that, Participant 4 expressed feeling anxious and afraid of being left behind by her peers, as they had made significant progress while she was in Japan:

"The anxiety really came from feeling like I was falling behind compared to my friends, who had already made a lot of progress while I was in Japan. They were already doing internships, finishing their thesis... Coming back really brought out that anxiety, because of how much I felt left behind. I even talked with a friend who also studied abroad, and they told me that it's normal to feel this way, that everyone moves at their own pace. But still, I couldn't help but feel anxious, especially about not having a job yet, and things like that."

While their time abroad was full of growth and new experiences, returning made them realize how much had changed, both the things around them and within themselves. Seeing their friends move ahead while they were away brought a sense of being left behind, and even though people told them it was normal to feel this way, the anxiety still stuck around. It became clear that adjusting back home was not just about routines, it was about finding their place again after everything they'd been through.

1.8 Sickness

This aspect includes mentions of disrupted sleep and appetite due to the sudden shift in environment. While none of the participants experienced extreme symptoms or serious health issues, a few did note some physical discomfort upon returning. Some struggled to readjust their daily routines, particularly during the first few days back. Participant 2 reported a brief loss of

appetite, while Participant 4 experienced difficulty sleeping due to the drastic change in climate. However, the other two participants agreed that the time difference between Japan and Indonesia, that is only two hours, was not significant enough to cause serious struggles such as major jet lag. Overall, the participants stated that they were physically fine and did not encounter any lasting health problems.

1.9 How long do these effects typically last?

While this may vary within the four participants, it was found that, on average, feelings of grief, discomfort, and disorientation lasted from February (when they returned to Indonesia) until around March, which makes it roughly two months. By April and May, most participants reported feeling more adjusted and had generally blended back into their home culture. However, some still found it challenging to fully embrace aspects of the culture that no longer felt comfortable or aligned with them within the period of the interview. As for those who experienced physical symptoms like disrupted sleep or appetite, these issues typically lasted no more than a week for their bodies fully adjusted to the changes.

1.10 Did they have expectations of experiencing this?

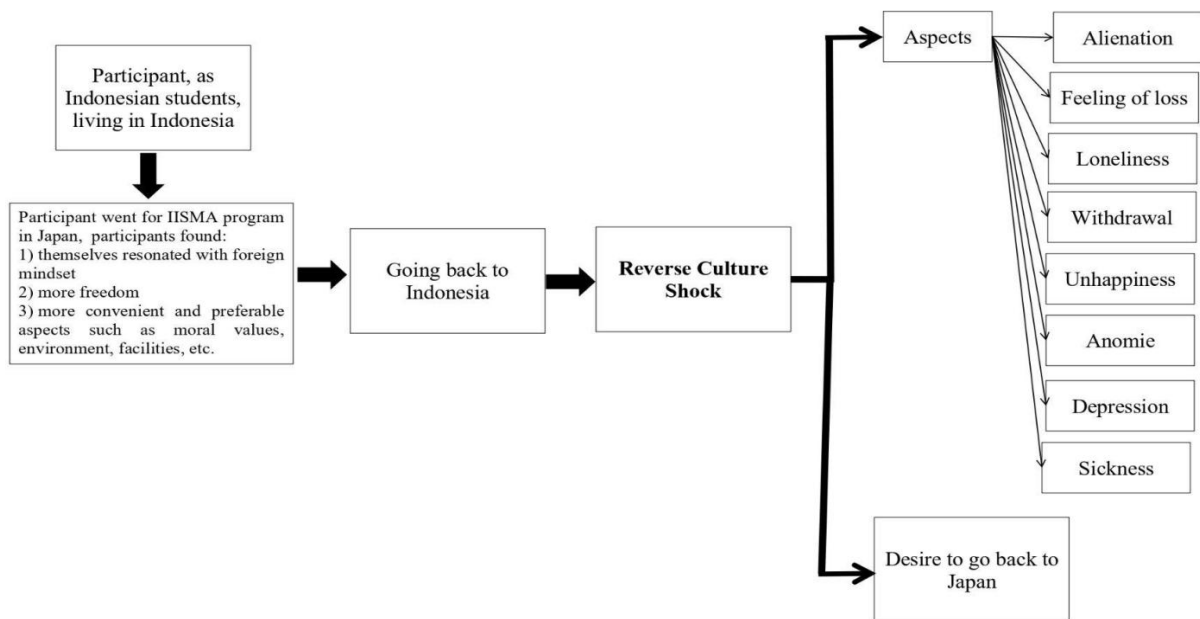
Martin explained the difference between acculturation and reacculturation, stating that although both involve the process of integrating into a different cultural system and the loss of familiar ones, the key difference lies in the returnees' expectations. According to Martin, returnees typically do not anticipate having difficulty reentering their home environment.¹⁶ However, this study challenges that idea. It was found that three out of four participants had expected and were aware that they might experience reverse culture shock before returning to their home country. They began to feel anxious about going home during their final days abroad. Only Participant 4 did not anticipate this experience, as she was more focused on her life in Japan and did not think much about returning to Indonesia while she was still there.

1.11 Coping strategies

A study by Lysgaard, as cited in Gaw, examined the adjustment patterns of 200 returned Norwegian Fulbright scholars and introduced the concept of the U-curve of cultural adaptation. This curve outlines the emotional journey of sojourners, beginning with initial euphoria, followed by a period of depression,

¹⁶Martin, Judith N. "The intercultural reentry: Conceptualization and directions for future research." *International Journal of Intercultural Relations* 8, no. 2 (1984): 123

and eventually leading to resolution as they adjust to a new culture.¹⁷ The



findings from this study supports that idea. After reflecting on their time abroad, the participants expressed a strong desire to return to Japan, either to pursue further studies or career opportunities. For many, this goal served not only as a future aspiration but also as a coping mechanism to deal with the emotional challenges of readjusting to life back home as Participant 1 captured this sentiment clearly when he shared,

"It's like... the resolve to go back there again. So, that hope is what always pulls me through. Like, it's okay for now, work hard for a few years, and if you really intend to return, then just strive for it. So... maybe that's it. I wanna go back there."

As Arouca puts it, coping with this phenomenon is about finding a sense of balance, with being present in the here and now, while also making peace with past experiences. This might mean setting certain memories aside or compartmentalizing them, as long as it doesn't get in the way of moving forward.¹⁸ Participants in this study shared a similar approach. Rather than resisting their current reality, they tranquilly navigated the challenges of reverse culture shock by focusing on their long-term goals abroad. Their plans and dreams abroad gave them something to hold on to. Adjusting also involved

¹⁷ Kevin F. Gaw, "Reverse culture shock in students returning from overseas," *International Journal of Intercultural Relations* 24, no. 1 (2000): 83

¹⁸ Arouca, Raquel Alexandra. "A qualitative study of returning study abroad students: The critical role of reentry support programs." (2013):150

becoming more aware of the subtle changes in themselves and their behavior, and seeking recognition or understanding for the time they spent abroad.

Conclusion

This study explored the emotional and psychological challenges experienced by students after returning from a semester-long study abroad in Japan. The participants shared feelings of discomfort, loneliness, loss of autonomy, and dissatisfaction with their surroundings after coming back home. The participants struggled to adjust when they came back to Indonesia, feeling that the pace and social norms were so different from what they had gotten used to in Japan. In Japan, they lived in a more well-organized and structured environment where being on time, independent, and self-reliant were the norms. But when they returned to Indonesia, they found everything the opposite, especially when dealing with things in their daily life, especially traffic and public facilities. They also noticed how much more relaxed people were about time and the way social interactions worked, which felt a bit strange after being in a more individualistic culture. These findings suggest that the students who had returned from a semester-long study abroad adopt new values and perspectives during their time abroad. Therefore, when students realized that these newly formed perspectives are different from what people are used to at home, students could have a hard time adjusting therefore causing them to feel stressed and anxious.

While none of them reported serious mental health issues, being low in energy, and emotionally exhausted were common as they tried to readjust. Some of them even felt like they were “falling behind,” as they were comparing themselves to their friends who had kept moving forward with their careers or studies while they were abroad. This finding also suggests that students who had returned from a semester-long study abroad face more challenges when they return home and parts of it are caused by their experiences that helped them see themselves more clearly and realistically.

While their experiences varied, all participants showed signs of reverse culture shock, struggling to readjust to a place that once felt familiar. On average, participants experienced reverse culture shock for about two months, from February to March, after returning to Indonesia. By April and May, they feel more adjusted and reintegrated into their home culture, though some continued to struggle with fully accepting aspects of it that no longer felt comfortable. And quite surprisingly, three of the participants had expected this phenomenon before returning home. However, these participants managed to find ways to cope during re-adjusting, such as staying connected to their friends abroad, maintaining new habits, and setting goals to return overseas. For some, this desire to go back became a key source of motivation during their readjustment process.

Furthermore, most participants in this study were aware that they might experience reverse culture shock before returning home. Three out of four participants began to feel anxious about going back during their final days abroad, and one participant did not quite expect to face any difficulties, as this participant was still focused on her life in Japan and had not thought much about returning.

Suggestions

This study aligns with previous research by Kranz and Goedderz, which found that the longer individuals spend abroad, the deeper their immersion in the host culture and the more difficult it can be to readjust to their home culture upon return.¹⁹ Although students who participated in semester-long study abroad programs were proven to experience reverse culture shock for about two to three months, this issue still deserves careful attention. If not managed well, these lingering effects can lead to lasting challenges or even negatively affect the returnee's well-being. Therefore, it is essential for home universities to provide structured re-adjustment support, such as counseling services, peer-sharing sessions, or reintegration workshops. At a broader level, there should be more recognition from institutions and policymakers that reverse culture shock is not just a brief emotional phase, but a valid psychological transition that requires attention and care to prevent further emotional strain on returning students.

Considering the limitations of this study, it would be valuable for future research to further explore the experience of reverse culture shock among students who participate in short-term or semester-long study abroad programs, with a particular focus on the contributing factors. Additionally, future researchers are encouraged to apply data triangulation methods, such as interviewing significant others (e.g., family members, close friends, or mentors), to gain a more comprehensive and diverse understanding of the students' re-adjusting experiences.

References

- Alkhalaf, Khulud, Alean Al-Krenawi, and Salman Elbedour. "Reverse culture shock among Saudi students returning from the US to their homeland." *Journal of International Students* 14, no. 4 (2024): 741-759. <https://doi.org/10.32674/jis.v14i4.6483>.
- Allison, Peter, Jennifer Davis-Berman, and Dene Berman. "Changes in latitude, changes in attitude: Analysis of the effects of reverse culture shock—A study of students returning from youth expeditions." *Leisure Studies* 31, no. 4 (2012): 487-503. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02614367.2011.619011>.

¹⁹ Dirk Kranz and Alexandra Goedderz, "Coming home from a stay abroad: Associations between young people's reentry problems and their cultural identity formation," *International Journal of Intercultural Relations* 74 (2020): 116

- Arouca, Raquel Alexandra. "A qualitative study of returning study abroad students: The critical role of reentry support programs." (2013). <https://scholarworks.umd.edu/etd/33/>.
- Braun, Virginia, and Victoria Clarke. "Using thematic analysis in psychology." *Qualitative research in psychology* 3, no. 2 (2006): 77-101. doi:10.1191/1478088706qp063oa.
- Coker, Jeffrey Scott, Evan Heiser, and Laura Taylor. "Student outcomes associated with short-term and semester study abroad programs." *Frontiers: The Interdisciplinary Journal of Study Abroad* 30, no. 2 (2018): 92-105.
- Dykhouse, Elizabeth C., and Lynette H. Bikos. "Re-entry friction: The curious effects of cultural dislocation on outcomes for global service learning returnees." *International Journal of Intercultural Relations* 72 (2019): 96-108. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijintrel.2019.07.004>.
- Fanari, Alice, Rain Wuyu Liu, and Taylor Foerster. "Homesick or sick-of-home? Examining the effects of self-disclosure on students' reverse culture shock after studying abroad: A mixed-method study." *Journal of Intercultural Communication Research* 50, no. 3 (2021): 273-303. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17475759.2020.1866643>.
- Gaw, Kevin F. "Reverse culture shock in students returning from overseas." *International journal of intercultural relations* 24, no. 1 (2000): 83-104. [https://doi.org/10.1016/S0147-1767\(99\)00024-3](https://doi.org/10.1016/S0147-1767(99)00024-3).
- Martin, Judith N. "The intercultural reentry: Conceptualization and directions for future research." *International Journal of Intercultural Relations* 8, no. 2 (1984): 115-134.
- Ministry of Education, Culture, Research, and Technology of Indonesia. "Indonesian International Student Mobility Awards (IISMA)." Partnership, Ministry of Education, Culture, Research, and Technology of Indonesia. Accessed May 15, 2025. <https://partnership.kemdikbud.go.id/academic/read/indonesian-international-student-mobility-awards-iisma>.
- Jacobsson, Emilia. "Reverse Culture Shock: An insight into returning student sojourners at Malmö University and their experience of reverse culture shock." (2023). <https://www.diva-portal.org/smash/record.jsf?dswid=6140&pid=diva2%3A1799687>.
- Kranz, Dirk, and Alexandra Goedderz. "Coming home from a stay abroad: Associations between young people's reentry problems and their cultural identity formation." *International Journal of Intercultural Relations* 74 (2020): 115-126. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijintrel.2019.11.003>.
- Périco, Franco Gatelli, and Roberto Birch Gonçalves. "Academic exchange: the difficulties of adaptation and readaptation." *Educação e Pesquisa* 44 (2018): e182699. <https://doi.org/10.1590/S1678-4634201844182699>.
- Samira, E. A., A. E. Karfa, and Hamza Farhane. "Dealing with Reverse Culture Shock after Cultural Exchange: Contributing Factors and Coping Strategies." *Journal of Psychology and Behavior Studies* 4, no. 1 (2024): 51-56. https://www.researchgate.net/profile/Samira-El-Asri/publication/379332370_Dealing_with_Reverse_Culture_Shock_after_Cultural_Exchange_Contributing_Factors_and_Coping_Strategies/links/66047a64390c214cfd

14fb29/Dealing-with-Reverse-Culture-Shock-after-Cultural-Exchange-Contributing-Factors-and-Coping-Strategies.pdf

Uehara, Asako. "The nature of American student reentry adjustment and perceptions of the sojourn experience." *International Journal of Intercultural Relations* 10, no. 4 (1986): 415-438. [https://doi.org/10.1016/0147-1767\(86\)90043-X](https://doi.org/10.1016/0147-1767(86)90043-X).