

Travelling Between Worlds: The Reentry Experiences of UNB's Bhutanese Students

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As more and more international students attend universities in Canada and the United States, research explores the nature of their transitions to their host countries. However, their experiences returning home remain understudied (Arthur, 2003; Christofi & Thompson, 2007; Szkudlarek, 2010). Yet reentry can be as difficult and important a process of adjustment.

When students travel to a host country, they might experience expected adjustment issues related to language, finances, loneliness, pedagogical differences, shyness, homesickness, and worries about family left behind. On returning home, they might experience unexpected stresses related to the dissonance of seeing their home country and culture through new eyes; nostalgia for lifestyle and resources lost on returning home; difficulties “fitting back’ into prior family, educational, or employment roles” (Arthur, 2003, p. 174); and even depression (Gaw, 2000). Taken together, these challenges with re-entry are known as “reverse culture shock.” However, reentry can also be associated with personal growth, including increased feelings of autonomy (Gaw, 2000), self-awareness, maturation, and an appreciation for different cultures (Hadis, 2005).

Some research suggests that we cannot make generalizations about students’ reentry experiences, which may be determined by many variables, including the smoothness of the entry experience (Christofi & Thompson, 2007), the cultural distance

between the home and host countries (Szkudlarek, 2010), and the strength of individuals' cultural identity (Sussman, 2002).

This article reports on the findings of a research project that investigated these issues in relation to Bhutanese students at the University of New Brunswick. Bhutanese people are said to have a particularly strong cultural identity, and to view their cultural identity as a primary determinant of individual happiness (Pankaj & Dorji, 2004). The research asked, "What are the experiences of UNB's Bhutanese students when they return from Canada to their largely rural and culturally homogeneous Buddhist kingdom?" How might UNB faculty and staff help prepare them for reentry?

In order to better understand the reentry experiences of UNB's Bhutanese students, I sent a link to an online survey to 32 people who attended an alumni gathering in Bhutan in 2015. I also invited them to forward the link to other Bhutanese UNB alumni. The survey consisted of 24 questions: 10 open, seven closed, and seven closed with a comment option.

Eleven people (nine men and four women) completed the entire survey; two others completed part of the survey (at least one was unable to finish due to Internet connection failures). Ten of the participants came to UNB to complete their masters degree in Education; two completed masters degrees in Computer Science and Mechanical Engineering, and one did not specify his area of graduate study. All spent one-and-a-half or two years at UNB.

"You don't actually feel that you will be able to return"

While the survey captured only a small amount of data about participants' entry experiences, their responses suggest a

relatively smooth transition to life in Canada, following an initial culture shock that one person described as “unforgettable.” All but one felt accepted by local people and fellow students, and in particular by their professors, who are repeatedly described in terms such as “friendly,” “helpful,” and “accommodating.” The survey respondents shared a first impression of Canada as “clean, vast, and well organized,” although two also used the word “overwhelming.” One commented on “the technology then such as the vending machine, micro-wave, computers, and washing machine which were a novelty for most Bhutanese. I was afraid I would embarrass myself using them incorrectly.”

Many of the respondents were also struck by pedagogical differences, particularly the expectation “to participate in group discussion, which was intimidating at first,” and the lack of formality in student-teacher relations. One said, “I wore [a] suit in my first class. The rest of the students were in jeans and shorts. That was quite a shock.” What the participants missed most about Bhutan were family, friends, and social events (6 participants), food (6), the Bhutanese landscape and climate (2), and “the slow pace of life in Bhutan” (2).

One participant commented that the distance, both geographical and cultural, between Bhutan and Canada is so great that, on first arriving, “You don’t actually feel that you will be able to return.” However, most of the participants appear to have had a relatively smooth reentry experience. Six indicated that they did not experience reverse culture shock on returning to Bhutan; those who did were able to deal with it by telling friends and family how they were feeling or by sharing their experiences with others. All but one, for whom the process of readjustment took

several months, felt that they had adjusted to life back in Bhutan in less than a month.

However, their comments also suggest that, on returning, they saw their country differently. Five of the survey participants highlighted the positive differences: in comparison to Canada, Bhutan seemed “very calm,” “very small but sweet,” and “like returning to heaven.” One participant realized that “people in Bhutan are more content and satisfied with [the] little they have. People are more relax[ed] in Bhutan and surrounded by family.” However, six participants saw things differently: their country seemed “small and unchanged, with “poorly planned streets/town and lack or unreliable transportation system.” One participant concluded, “We need to work harder to make Bhutan more like Canada.”

All the participants commented on missing things they had in Canada that were not available to them in Bhutan. Chief among these were the Canadian climate and landscape (4 participants), friends and professors (4), “good Internet” (4), the ready availability of books and other educational materials (3), and “conveniences” such as “prompt services, regular buses,” and an abundance of choice in products and services (2). While food did not get a mention, two of the respondents added that they would miss Canadian coffee.

Eight of the participants indicated that family and friends noticed changes in them when they returned home, and nine noticed changes in themselves. The most frequently reported changes were increased confidence and maturity: one commented that “I became confident and did not hesitate to share my knowledge and skills with others.” Another said “I had become more

mature in my thinking and in my ability to deal with people and tackle new situations...growing from a shy and timid not so confident young woman into a strong, more independent and confident woman happy and at ease with myself.” Other changes included increased professionalism, critical thinking abilities, an appreciation for diversity, and better spoken English. The only potentially negative change reported by one participant was an increased dependence upon technology.

A More Structured Approach

Despite the cultural distance they travelled, the survey participants appear to have had positive experiences and relatively smooth entry and reentry transitions. Like much of the literature on reentry, this study is inconclusive, given its size and the number of variables that can shape the reentry experience. However, my findings align in several respects with previous inquiries, including Sussman (2002) and Ward and Rena-Deuba (2000), who found that reentry experiences are smoother for those with a strong cultural identity.

Survey participants reported that the only support they received for entry and reentry came from professors. Such support, though important and well-intentioned, was informal and ad hoc. Post-secondary institutions should consider a more structured approach to helping international students prepare for reentry. For example, structured support might take the form of group workshops that allow international students to share coping strategies used when adapting to life in Canada, to reflect on how they have changed, and to discuss the challenges they might face when returning home (Arthur, 2003). In addition, returning students might be recruited to serve as “ambassadors” for the university, meeting with prospective

students to share their experiences and help them prepare for both entry and reentry (Levy, 2000).

As UNB and other universities accept more and more international students, they must be sensitive to the kinds of challenges international students experience in travelling between cultures and develop specific strategies to help them prepare not only for life in Canada but for returning to their own country. As Levy (2000) observes, “the reentry process...has the potential to become a fruitful opportunity to continue the learning experience” (p. 75), but only if students are properly prepared for the transition.

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Biography

Ellen Rose is a Professor in the UNB Faculty of Education, where she teaches courses in instructional design and educational technology. Her recent research explores students' and teachers' experiences of online learning, as well as the effects of sustained technology use on habits of mind. You can contact her at erose@unb.ca