

# Grad School Abroad

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Are you considering pursuing a psychology graduate degree abroad? Have you been offered the chance to participate in an international exchange program? Studying in another country during graduate school offers many great opportunities for personal and professional growth, but it also entails challenges. For those considering international study, I offer a few tips for making the most of your experience abroad.

## 1. Explore Your Possibilities

Sometimes, the opportunity to study abroad just knocks on your door. If your supervisor, for example, is aware of the importance of such an experience for your future career and has connections with researchers from other countries, he or she may suggest that you go on an exchange program. You can also take a more active approach if you are interested in graduate studies abroad. As a first step, check your university's partner universities. Usually, it is much easier to get accepted to one of the partner universities' programs than to a university not officially related to your academic institution. Another idea, if you know where you would like to study, is to check local websites for scholarships and opportunities. For example, the [German Academic Exchange Service](#) offers a vast database where you can look for scholarships based on your nationality, area of study, and other factors.

## 2. Gather Information

Before making a decision, collect as much information as possible on the academic program you are considering: Will all lectures, assignments, and exams be in English, or will you need to learn the local language? What is the international ranking of the academic institution, and that of the specific department? Are there well-known professors among your future lecturers and supervisors? If you are looking for a place to write your dissertation, you should also be aware that the durations and supervisory structures of PhD programs vary across countries and academic institutions. For example, in some European countries, PhD programs are more structured, and each student has multiple supervisors (i.e., a PhD committee), while other European countries favor an individual mentor program in which a contract is signed between the doctoral student and a supervisor, and no additional courses are required. Another factor to consider is whether you would like to gain teaching experience while working toward your PhD. There are countries where all PhD students, for example, are university employees and receive their salaries by doing research and developing their own courses, while in other countries, PhD students are not offered teaching positions and generally receive funding through internal scholarships. Finally, if you plan on returning home after the degree, make sure the PhD program you pursue is recognized by employers and universities in your home country.

## 3. Assess Your Readiness

Consider the possible emotional and financial challenges of studying abroad. Are there good funding opportunities? Have you ever gone on a long trip by yourself to another country? If so, how did it feel?

To what extent will you miss your friends and family? What other consequences are there of going abroad for a long period of time (e.g., breaking a lease)? Will you have to quit a job?

#### **4. Consider Language Barriers**

Keep in mind that, unless you leave for an English-speaking country, you will probably face language barriers. In academia, the level of English proficiency tends to be high; however, in daily interactions with local residents outside the academic world, many people will not speak or understand English, especially if you don't live in a large, "touristy" city. If possible, try to prepare in advance by taking at least a basic language course that focuses on speaking and understanding skills.

#### **5. Get to Know the Academic Culture**

After moving to your new location, get to know the new culture — the sooner, the better. Start with the academic culture: Do you call your lecturers and supervisors by their first names, or would that be considered impolite? How do other PhD students dress for work? What are the expectations for timeliness? In some countries, running late for a work meeting would be perceived as very rude, while in others it may be completely acceptable. Since there are substantial cultural gaps, look carefully at how your colleagues do things, and don't hesitate to ask how things should work if anything is unclear.

Despite all of the challenges, studying abroad, whether as an exchange student for a semester or for a couple of years as a doctoral student, can really boost your résumé and "internationalize" your professional identity. During your stay, you will gain a much more global view of your field, and you may be surprised at how research is conducted in other places around the world. The experience abroad will enhance your future career opportunities, as universities usually like to hire people who understand global issues and know how to interact with diverse student populations. One thing is sure: You will never forget your time as a foreign student, and you will have many funny and interesting stories to tell when you return home.

#### **Reference**

The German Academic Exchange Service (DAAD): Change by exchange. (n.d.). Retrieved February 16, 2015, from <https://www.daad.org/>