

Travel broadens the mind, but can it alter the brain? **Kira Shaw**, Guardian, Monday 18 January 2016

Studies suggest that taking a gap year or studying abroad can positively influence your brain to make you more outgoing and open to new ideas

Is it true that moving away from home makes us more open to new experiences?

There are lots of opportunities for students to travel: be it to postpone your degree and travel the world after taking your A-levels; to take a placement abroad; or to spend your summer months volunteering. Reports show that over 20,000 UK students spend time abroad for a period of [over three months each year](#).

It's hardly surprising so many students decide to spend time away from the UK: the benefits of travelling are well documented. You can make new friends, broaden your outlook and gain stories to tell. But that's not all: you may also improve your brainpower and become more outgoing.

Blue-sky thinking

According to [a study by Adam Galinsky](#), a professor at Columbia Business School, those who have lived abroad are more creative. His research found that the more countries people had lived in, the more creative their work tended to be. However Galinsky says that just being a tourist isn't enough to see any benefit. "Someone who lives abroad and doesn't engage with the local culture will likely get less of a creative boost than someone who travels abroad and really engages in the local environment," he says.

Gain confidence and independence

Travelling and living abroad can also affect the way we interact with people. [Research](#) by Dr Julia Zimmermann and Dr Franz Neyer compared the personality development of a large sample of German university students who had studied abroad for at least one semester with a non-travelling group.

The results showed that those who studied abroad were generally higher in extraversion than those who chose not to travel during their studies: the travellers were likely to enjoy being around other people more than being alone. When they returned home after travelling, the participants also tended to show an increase in openness to new experiences, agreeableness and emotional stability.

Tom Champion, 26, a PhD student from the University of Sheffield who is studying in Singapore for 18 months, says he has become more accepting and compassionate since living abroad. "Seeing the world through a foreigner's eyes has led me to realise my previously invisible cultural habits and hone my sense of empathy and my ability to understand others," he says.

Will international love help your language skills blossom?

Moving abroad also allows young adults to gain a new sense of responsibility and independence, and to manage their own finances. Nikitha Aithal moved to the UK from India when she was 10 years old, and later worked in Spain for a year as part of her undergraduate language degree at the University of Leeds. She says: "Living and working in Spain made me appreciate the struggle

my parents went through when moving to the UK – simple things such as setting up a bank account or paying the water bills.”

Student travellers: make the most of your holiday. Go it alone

Sharpening your mind is a no-brainer

The new and unusual situations we encounter while travelling – whether trying to figure out how to navigate the local metro system, or just to order a meal in an unfamiliar language – help to keep our mind sharp, [according to a study](#) commissioned by the U.S. Travel Association.

It found that challenging new experiences can boost cognitive health, as when your brain is exposed to an environment that is novel and complex, it reacts by forming new connections as it tries to categorise the new and unusual stimuli. This grows the brain and keeps it active in a similar way as taking up a new hobby or learning a language.

So if you're in the fortunate position of being able to choose whether or not to travel, why not take the plunge and explore the world – your brain will thank you for it.