

# Culture shock in Canberra

by Gerhardt Siune

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City bus station, Canberra  
Photo Credit: [Philip Mallis/Flickr](#)

Travelling overseas for the first time as a young undergraduate at the University of Papua New Guinea (UPNG) was both exciting and nerve-racking. Getting selected to attend the 2023 [ANU-UPNG Partnership](#) Summer School Program at the Australian National University (ANU) Crawford School of Public Policy in Canberra, Australia, exceeded my expectations. While the program provided me with a fantastic opportunity to learn new skills and progress academically, it also provided me with a big cultural shock. In this blog, I will discuss my insights and experiences, as well as how the experience expanded my views to new perspectives.

One of the first things I noticed was time management and how punctual people were in Australia. In Papua New Guinea people are more flexible with time and punctuality: people turn up late to meetings and classes, and events often start later than scheduled. For example, lecturers would come to class 10-20 minutes late or students come into class 20-30 minutes late. (Ironically, I used to be like this.) However, in Australia, being punctual is highly valued. It was challenging to adjust to this new way of thinking and operating, but it has enabled me to appreciate the benefits of managing my time properly, being on time, and getting things done on time.

The social environment in Australia was also very different from what I was used to in PNG. In Australia, apart from my lecturers and coordinators, people are generally more reserved or have got something going on that keeps them busy all the time, and it can be difficult to strike up a conversation with strangers. I did meet some friendly people around Civic (the city centre), on Citywalk and Bunda Street, and in all the stores that I did my shopping.

However, in PNG, people are generally more outgoing and friendly – you see people sitting around for hours doing nothing, cracking jokes or telling stories, discussing rugby and other things. This difference was an eye-opener for me. It opened my eyes to the different ways in which people can interact and connect with one another. I would like to try to develop a system that would merge the positive Australian ways that I've learned into my PNG communal way of life, so it works

best for me.

Canberra is a quiet and organised city compared to Port Moresby, where nearly all governments and business operations are crowded within Waigani, Gordons and Downtown area. The roads in Canberra are more organised, and the public transport system is very efficient.

In contrast, Port Moresby is a small city with chaotic traffic and an inadequate and disorganised public transport system, with taxis and buses stopping anywhere they want causing unnecessary traffic. Visiting Australia gave me a greater appreciation for the challenges we face in PNG, and the need for continued development and infrastructure improvements, including moving towards a decentralised township in Port Moresby.

The education standard in Australia is much higher than in PNG. The facilities, resources, and teaching methods are world class. I was amazed at the depth of knowledge that the lecturers had and the level of engagement they had with us, their students.

It was a refreshing change from what I am used to, where we just go and sit in class, listen to lectures and after the lecture is done, we are done. This experience motivated me to strive for excellence in my education and to seek out opportunities for further studies, career growth and development.

PNG and Australia have striking cultural differences. People dress, greet, and interact in a variety of ways. Individualism is highly valued in Australia, whereas PNG has a more diverse yet communal culture. It was intriguing to witness and learn about these distinctions, as well as get a better knowledge of diverse cultural values and beliefs.

Despite the culture shock, I was able to appreciate Australia's natural beauty and diversity during a weekend vacation to Sydney. Sydney is undeniably a stunning city, but the beaches and coastlines of PNG are unrivalled in terms of their natural beauty and cultural diversity. This comparison has motivated me to promote PNG's potential as a tourist destination and to highlight the country's distinctive beauty, from the coastlines to the highlands – as well as the authentic traditional and cultural experiences it has to offer.

My experience with culture shock at the summer school program has widened my horizons and made me more aware of the diversity around the globe. I also have a fresh appreciation for my home – for PNG's beauty and potential.

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