

My First Weeks as a Boarder

At an assembly two years ago I talked to you about studying abroad. I spoke about my experience moving from the United Kingdom to Australia to attend university at eighteen years of age.

During the Christmas vacation I read an article in *The Standard* newspaper written by a 15 year old Hong Kong girl who is studying at a boarding school in the UK. I could relate to her story at a personal level remembering my journey to Australia all those years ago and more recently my relocation to Hong Kong. This morning I would like to share with you her story in her own words as printed in the newspaper.

“For many students, going abroad to study can seem like a distant dream. For me, it isn't. My parents - like many others - sent me abroad to study. Soon after I found out I would be leaving Hong Kong, I was already imagining how life at boarding school would be.

I saw myself sitting on a huge grassy area chatting with friends, or enjoying the beautiful weather and the views. I also imagined how happy I would be when playing with my classmates.

In short, I was imagining a free, peaceful life in the United Kingdom away from my parents' control.

However, the minute I stepped into my new school, everything changed ... it just was not how I had imagined it. Dream - broken.

I was about to face reality.

I thought I was a person who can very quickly adapt to a new environment - but not anymore.

It is different when dealing with people living in their own country and having a culture that is different from mine.

I am not implying that both cultures cannot co-exist, but sometimes we cannot tolerate each other even though it's just something trivial.

Abroad, communication is a key skill. And no matter how good my English was in Hong Kong, it can never measure up to that of a native speaker.

I need to concentrate really hard when I listen to my classmates, but even then I can only understand a few words.

If I want to talk to them, I need to first mentally compose the sentence before I can say it.

Sometimes, when I want to express myself, I don't know how to say it. Communicating with native speakers has been the hardest thing for me during my first few months at boarding school.

It was also a challenge for me to make friends since the very act of speaking to them seemed tiring.

At school, the subjects are not very difficult in themselves, at least for me.

Over here the difficulty lies not in the concepts that are part and parcel of the subjects, but in listening to the lectures.

Although I used to have English as the medium of instruction, teachers in my new school are all native speakers - their accents, speaking speed, even the different types of pronunciation are all different.

Though we had native English teachers in Hong Kong, they were very different from the ones I have here. While attending classes in the UK, I have to fully concentrate on what the teachers are saying. At times, I even have to follow the movements of their lips to try and catch what they are saying.

During my first week in the UK, my eyes were extremely tired and dry.

Every day after school, I felt like I had done tons of exercise and was dying. I was tired, not physically but mentally.

And when I was having difficulties or feeling depressed, there was no one I could speak to.

Of course, I had my teachers, but then I didn't know how to express my feelings to them.

I was badly looking for support from my friends back home ... but then there was the time difference to reckon with.

My good luck was having my mom Skype with me every day after I finished school.

She would always tell me: *"Don't worry, it really doesn't matter, do not rush yourself to get used to it. You have only been there for a few weeks! Relax, don't put pressure on yourself, everything will be all right. You will get used to it soon!"*

I was better off than those who had gone overseas to study a decade ago, she reminded me, saying: *"They didn't have Skype or even personal computers in those days. They could only call home using expensive telephone calls."*

Now when I recall those times it still brings a tear into my eyes. If my mom didn't talk to me every day, I wouldn't have got used to it so soon. I think family support is very important.

So if your son or daughter or even a friend is at boarding school, remember to support them. Even a simple chat with them will be a big helping hand to them. At least then they will know that someone is thinking about them."

Cecilia Tsui is 15 and in a boarding school in the UK. She used to attend a Hong Kong public school.

Reproduced in its entirety from The Standard (Hong Kong) Tuesday 31 December 2013

Dr. John Kennard