

Learning to Cope (Study Abroad)

We have heard a great deal over the past six months about the 160th Anniversary of our College. There have been numerous events and activities to celebrate this important anniversary in the life of St. Paul's. This morning I would like to tell you about another anniversary that is important to me personally. Later this month it will be 40 years since I left home. It was in February 1972 that I left my home in Norfolk, England, to embark on a life-changing journey to Perth in Western Australia. I was 18 years of age when I said goodbye to my parents at Heathrow airport in London and the start of a journey to the far side of the world.

It was during my final year of A-levels that I applied for a scholarship to study at the University of Western Australia. Only two scholarships were awarded by the University each year to students from the United Kingdom and I was fortunate to be one of those recipients. The University of Western Australia, better known by its initials UWA, was founded in the same year as the University of Hong Kong and in 1972 was the only university in Perth. By the time that I sat for my A-level examinations I knew that a place and a scholarship were in my grasp as long as I achieved the necessary AL grades.

My success came as a great shock to my parents and friends. Of course, they were delighted that I had been awarded such a prestigious international scholarship. On the other hand, however, they were saddened by my departure knowing that it would be a long time before they were to see me again.

The journey to Australia forty years ago was very different than to today. This was before the age of the long distance Boeing 747s meaning that the plane needed to refuel five times en route. After 26 hours I arrived in Perth in the early hours of Sunday the 20th of February 1972. I was met at Perth airport by the Australian representative from the scholarship board and taken to a hall of residence at the University. At 2 o'clock in the morning I opened the door to a room in the hall of residence that would be my home from that point in time. I can still remember clearly crawling into bed absolutely exhausted after such a long journey.

My arrival was two weeks before the start of the new academic year and I was the first person to move into the hall of residence. I was very much on my own in those early days and needed quickly to find things out for myself.

The kitchen was still closed for the summer vacation necessitating a walk around the local streets to find a supermarket and convenience store. My next task was to locate the University bank and open an account to gain access to the scholarship money that had been deposited in my name. You need to understand that forty years ago there were no ATM machines and money could only be withdrawn from your account by going into a bank and completing the necessary paperwork.

There was much for me to do in those first days in Perth. After sorting out where to buy food and how to access money I focussed on other rather domestic matters. The hall of residence had a laundry where the students could wash, dry and iron their clothes. This was a new experience for me given that my mother had looked after all these matters when I was at school. However, I still remember putting white shirts into the washing machine along with coloured clothing resulting in all my clothes turning a shade of green. I also needed to get ready for the new academic year. The University bookshop was now open and it took a day or two to sort out which books I required for the courses I was to undertake. But the most important building at the University at this time for me was not the Bookshop or the Library but the Post Office. In fact, it would be at the University Post Office where I would spend time every Monday morning for the next four years.

It was essential that I remained in contact with my parents. In 1972 there were no mobile phones and no computers. This meant no texting, no email, no Skype, no Facebook and no Twitter. It was possible to telephone England from Australia but this could only be done at special public telephones. The University had only one such telephone on campus and the cost of an international telephone call was far too expensive. The only way for me to stay in touch with family and friends was by letter. I made a habit of spending time each weekend writing letters ready for posting on Monday morning on the way to my first lecture for the week.

The reason I'm telling you this story is that some of you may well have similar experiences in the years ahead. Many families in Hong Kong look at sending their sons and daughters overseas to continue their studies at school or university. There are some in this year's Form 6 and 7 who will follow a similar pathway to mine in being awarded a place at a university abroad. Others will leave at a younger age to study at boarding schools sometimes from as early as Form One.

Although 40 years have passed since I made that long journey to Australia the basic experiences of studying overseas remain the same. Of course, things are easier these days. Air travel is faster and more convenient with a greater selection of airlines from which to choose. Mobile phones and email allow immediate access to family and friends. Put simply, remaining in touch is more straight-forward when compared to my experience forty years ago. Yet there are other areas that remain unchanged and none more so than a strong feeling of isolation and loneliness. Living overseas on one's own is not at all easy and there are times of homesickness. Many of you who will study overseas will return to Hong Kong for the Christmas, Easter and summer vacations but the long weeks and months in between will probably seem like an eternity. These are the times when you will need to learn how to cope and remain positive. However, what will happen is that you will learn life-skills what will serve you well in the future. Hopefully you will become a stronger person able to cope with adverse situations as a result.

I imagine that I shall celebrate my 40th anniversary quietly at home but with clear memories of events that were important in my life.

J.R. Kennard