Navigating young adult aspirations and dilemmas: benefits, challenges and lessons learned as a Swedish student living abroad in the UK and US

Sara Hedenskog, svhedenskog1@sheffield.ac.uk
University of Sheffield, UK

Key words biographical reflections • young adulthood • international students experiences • personal dilemmas

To cite this article: Hedenskog, S. (2023) Navigating young adult aspirations and dilemmas: benefits, challenges and lessons learned as a Swedish student living abroad in the UK and US, Families, Relationships and Societies, 12(1): 157–161, DOI: 10.1332/204674321X16711848766880

Introduction

This reflective article has been written while I lived in the UK as an international undergraduate student in my twenties. In this piece, I reflect on my motivations and experiences as a young person from Sweden who embarked on university education in the UK and the US. I reflect on my reasons for choosing these pathways and my experiences of living away from my country and family of origin, settling into life abroad and contemplating my next steps. I reflect on my generational experiences and my hopes and concerns for others embarking on a similar path.

My journey

Looking back now I feel the best decision and the worst decision I ever made was as a young adult to leave my home country and move abroad. As a young person in Sweden, I had been aware that there were opportunities to live abroad and I recall being interested in these from a young age. As a child, I spent a year in Toronto and enjoyed the exhilarating feeling of being in a new place. It felt like a constant adventure undertaking the small things like grocery shopping, being on public transport and a normal school day, when you live in a country that is not your own. I felt sure I would move abroad again, but was uncertain when and where to. My high school years in Sweden were quite tumultuous in many ways: I ended up switching my subject programme, I had family members dealing with mental health problems and was experiencing health issues myself, all of which made it hard for me to contemplate leaving my family and home country. At the same time, many of these things made
me want to leave even more. Looking back, I also wasn’t ready to leave my friends, my handball team and my home town just yet. I also knew that when I did move abroad there was a chance I wouldn’t move back. However, as a first-year university student, I packed my bags and left Sweden and got on a plane to England. My first year studying in the UK went by in a blur of rain, hikes in the Peak District and COVID-19 restrictions. Then, following the decision and opportunity to undertake my second year in another country, I packed my bags again and went even further across the Atlantic, to the USA! This time my plane landed in 35-degree Celsius heat in Texas, a US state known in Europe for its liberal gun laws, red trucks and cowboys. To me, Texas was full of vast landscapes, friendly people and great Tex-Mex food. The experiences and opportunities I have had have meant moving abroad twice has been the best decision I ever made. However, leaving my home country has also been a difficult experience.

Challenges to living abroad

As an international student, I feel living in new countries is broadening my perspectives and improving my knowledge of different societies, cultures and histories. Simply put, living abroad you will learn things you would not know of if you were only visiting the place. While living in a new country may be exciting most of the time it also has its challenges. Adapting to a new place takes time. For me it has taken roughly four months before I start to feel at home, find my confidence and a rhythm of life in a new country. Engaging with an ex-pat community was helpful for me at first. It helped me to form some strong bonds and to share experiences with others who are going through the same thing when you’re missing your family and friends. In my younger years in Canada, my family and I had also engaged with a Swedish community based there and as an international student I also used this strategy to help me to enjoy exploring a new place with others. I have also made great friends in the local community and met so many friendly people who have welcomed me into their countries, cities and homes. It is through the people I met that my perspectives and my understanding of the world have broadened and deepened. Being abroad, I have had to adapt to not seeing my family, partner and friends as frequently as before. Communication has mainly been solely online, which I have found challenging. From my experience, staying in touch with family and friends is fairly easy but maintaining and growing meaningful relationships with distance is hard. Visits have also been mostly nonexistent due to travel restrictions. I wish I could share more of my life abroad with the people I love. If only I could bundle everyone up and move us all to one single place in the world. And although you may expect the hardest part is to move abroad, moving back is also challenging as I recently experienced when my year in Texas ended and I found myself back in England for my last year of university studies. I feel much more lost and less confident in my social and academic life now. As life feels more real and plans more long term, part of the thrill is lost.

Curse of living abroad

I have come to realise the curse of living abroad is to never fully feel at home again and because of this I have indeed questioned my desire to move abroad. Why did I leave my home country? This is not just a question I ask of myself as I frequently get
asked why by others too. This might be because it is Sweden I am leaving, a country
many people associate with democracy, a strong welfare state, happiness and equality.
But I myself also wonder why I want to leave a place that not only will provide
me with support and stability that are hard to find elsewhere but also has a culture,
traditions and values that shaped me and that I very much still align with. Up until
this summer, I didn’t really have the words to explain it: that feeling of longing to
be somewhere else and explore other countries while always wishing you were back
where you have always been. In a radio programme the host, a radio correspondent
and fellow Swedish ex-pat living and working in Brazil for the past 20 years, described
how since moving abroad he is never fully content, always longing for the other place
where he is not. He talked of a Portuguese word, saudade, which is a melancholy
feeling of longing for something one can’t have. Even if it is not longing for a place,
many people long for a person, times gone by or experiences that are lost. What
really made me resonate with the word is that saudade has a second layer to it. After
a while of feeling saudade, one may start longing for longing itself. Feel nostalgic for
nostalgia itself. This longing for longing itself is why I moved abroad, why I did it
another time and why I would do it over and over again.

A global perspective

Although there is always likely to be a level of uncertainty when moving abroad I
experienced particularly unexpected uncertainties. Both the COVID-19 pandemic
and Brexit have had effects on my decisions and opportunities to move abroad.
When I was applying for universities in the spring, I felt like I was running out of
time. Starting my studies in the UK in 2020 means I am part of the last cohort of
EU citizens receiving the same tuition fees as home students. With the increased
tuition fees that EU students are paying after Brexit, I would not have been able to
study in the UK and my options would have become increasingly limited. Another
obstacle hindering many people’s dreams of living abroad in recent years has been the
ongoing COVID-19 pandemic that affected global travel greatly. I moved to England
during the first year of the pandemic and was shocked at how differently my new
home country was dealing with the virus compared with my old one. Although I
had felt the effects of the restrictions in Sweden, I was not prepared for the online
learning, lockdowns, mask mandates, closed-up restaurants and socialising rules that
became my first year in the UK. I was lucky that I was even able to go at all, and
even able to do a year abroad in the US the year after. With some trouble I managed
to get my US visa, but I know a lot of students were unable to get theirs due to long
waiting times or closed-down embassies. Many countries also closed their borders
to exchange students.

We need to fight for our rights

I am extremely fortunate to have grown up in a country and a time of stability, safety
and with resources to be able to explore the world. I wish the same opportunities
were available to every young person but instead, the world feels more unstable
now than I have experienced and witnessed before in my short lifetime. Climate
change, war, conflict, oppression and fear for their own lives is forcing people to
leave their homes and sometimes their countries. Politicians promising drastically
less immigration and ignoring scientists warning of a climate disaster are winning elections. This includes recently in my own home country. While both Brexit and the COVID-19 pandemic have affected my experience living abroad, I was also in Texas during a time when women’s rights to choose over their own bodies were greatly diminished and later taken away completely after a decision by the Supreme Court to let the states decide their own abortion laws. Abortions are now banned at all stages of pregnancy in Texas unless the woman has a life-threatening medical emergency. Many women, from economically marginalised minorities, have now completely lost access to legal and safe abortions. Another event that marked my time abroad was the school shooting in Uvalde, Texas, which happened in May of 2022. It was the deadliest school shooting in the country in ten years. Interacting directly with individuals of different and diverse viewpoints on issues like these made me realise that the issue of gun rights and abortions in the US is oversimplified in European media. While being in a place where your values and perspectives do not align with others can be challenging, frustrating and even scary at times it has taught me the complexities of life in a way that no article or lecture at university ever can. Both abortion and gun laws are huge issues and there is not just a state divide, but a national rift that will be difficult to work around, and even more difficult to mend. However, seeing the immediate solidarity of individuals, abortion clinics and women's rights organisations in assisting women affected by the ban on abortions is what gives me hope for the future. The way people and communities unite, support and fight for each other when the state fails is inspiring. People in all countries, my own too, may be slowly waking up to the realisation that what we have taken for granted will be gone if we don’t fight for it every day. But I have hope that people are waking up.

Looking ahead

I came into my sociology degree with much interest in the topic and didn’t have specific future study or employment plans in mind. While I have loved that sociology is such a wide-ranging field and I have really used that to my advantage by taking courses on topics ranging from global health to mixed-methods research to poverty in the US, I remain uncertain about my next steps and future career path. I am aware it is common as a prospective social science graduate to struggle with this, as my degree did not provide training in a profession and there are several potential next steps. For me, postgraduate study that takes forward my interests in sociology and social research is an aspiration as is working with people in a community or social work role or working as a social researcher in a government or non-government organisation. However, postgraduate study is very expensive, especially for me as a Swedish citizen if I continued to study in the UK. Graduate opportunities also seem quite limited and difficult to access. My approach, which may be a necessary or fortunate one, is I am open to trying a few different options while I figure out my next step. Not being a citizen of the UK, my immigration status affects my decisions and options as freedom of movement for EU citizens has also been affected by Brexit. I would be keen, for myself and others, for international and European educational exchanges to be more highly valued, supported and maintained. As my graduation date comes closer, most people still ask about Sweden, but now wonder if I will move back. I tell them that I plan to stay, find a job and move in with my current partner here in the UK. I don’t think I want to move home as I am not sure if my hometown – if
Sweden – is my home anymore. Even if I miss it when I am away, I struggle to feel like I belong when I am there. I can’t help but feel *saudade*. Still, I have not shut the door completely on moving back and I’m still searching for my place to call home.

**Conflict of interest**
The author declares that there is no conflict of interest.