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## Change

### Abstract

Michael McConnell is a recent first-generation graduate from Northern Ireland who completed his degree in England at Durham University. In this article, McConnell examines the concept of change and the struggles that come with it as an autistic, international student. In his time at university, McConnell discovers that though big change can feel daunting, when you confront and embrace it, change becomes easier over time and can lead to powerful personal transformation.

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## Change

Change is a scary thing. It's a great big beast towering over you wrapped in a shroud of darkness called the unknown. Every living thing experiences multiple encounters with this beast in their lifetime. The caterpillar enters a cocoon, then breaks down and changes into the beautiful butterfly it emerges as. University was like this in a way: a cocoon freshly 19-year-old me went into that broke me down and changed me, turning me into who I am today.

Growing up working class in Northern Ireland and coming to England to study at a prestigious university such as Durham can be daunting. Not only are there different culture shocks that come from being in a different country, but there's class culture shocks as well. Throw autism into the mix, and things get even more complicated.

My autism does not like change, it tends to take one look at the towering beast and turn around and run back to the comfort of the familiar. Moving countries was the first round against change I had to overcome. Thankfully, the disability support department held an early induction for students with autism so we could adjust to the city before the chaos of Freshers week. However, this was . . . well, 'interesting' to say the least, as it turned out the disability support staff knew next to nothing about autism (they did not even know that sunflower lanyards for hidden disabilities existed before Covid). I felt very lonely in my accommodation, that is until Freshers week occurred, and I met my flat mates and then later my friends.

Geography is one of the subjects where you fully experience the class culture shocks from field trips. The people I shared a minibus with on my Iceland field trip were all in the upper middle class and chatting about all these parties, holidays etc., while I sat there talking about my part-time job while at university. Having to endure questions like "where do you ski?" multiple times was exhausting, and the reactions I received when I responded with the fact I've never ski-ed in my life were very judgmental. This made me feel even more of an outsider than I already was.

Working a job while at university is a challenge as well; not only do you have to juggle both work and a social life, but you also have to work your studies into the schedule. Working late shifts and then getting up for 9 am lectures is not a fun experience and arguably worse than going to a lecture hungover (these were both quite common occurrences for me). There were multiple times where I would be doing a piece of work while on my break in the crew room or finishing a shift late at night and heading to the library to work on an assignment as it was the only time I had to complete it.

But it is not all bad and awkward; having a job while at university increased my time management skill and made me see both sides of the coin looking at the experience from a worker and student point of view. If I had not decided to move to England for university, I would never have met any of my friends or been exposed to as many cultures as I was. Northern Ireland is a predominantly white country, and a lot of people have very backwards views on things—ESPECIALLY religion. Being in England, I met and befriended many different people from diverse backgrounds, classes, and ethnicities. These interactions helped

me develop a better, more nuanced understanding of diverse cultures than I ever would have gained had I stayed in the “comfort” of my home country.

Being independent is a challenge, but it helps you discover who you really are without following strict rules and regulations like at school. You can experiment with different activities and such to find what you enjoy. I discovered that I do in fact really enjoy watching football with my mates. I discovered how fun nights out can be and how they can result in some great memories and stories to tell.

I went through promotions at work, chose a geography field I had never studied before, tried new foods and alcohol for the first time. I went to concerts by myself, I went to some new barbers, I learned a new bus and train timetable. I have encountered so many small changes that felt huge at first, but in a similar way to how a video game character levels up and gets stronger with experience, I too found over time that small changes did not impact me as much or were not hard to overcome anymore. I found that I had become more confident. I could mingle with the university students and the locals of the area without feeling like an outsider to either, but also without having to mask or be a chameleon, like I used to have to do.

The many challenges I have faced over the past three years at this cocoon of university have helped shape me into the magnificent butterfly I have become. From matriculation to graduation the breaking down and rebuilding has helped to reshape me as a person. From learning how different cultures and classes live and operate to having to be fully independent, the university experience has helped me deal with change much better than when I was in secondary school back home. I no longer run away from this beast but face him head on with much more confidence than ever before.

Change is inevitable but I feel more equipped and ready for whatever change comes next. From moving countries, jobs, and learning to do things on my own properly, I have racked up so much experience in only three years. I have a better understanding of cultures and classes, and although my autism still does not like change, I have learned to not only deal with it but fully embrace what occurs.