

Some Challenges of Living and Studying in Ghana

Share with your Parents

- You need to inform yourself about what it means to adjust to significantly different living conditions and standards of hygiene, notions of privacy and personal space, interpersonal communication, public expressions of spirituality, and characteristics of the educational system.
- Daily routines in Ghana are likely to be quite different from those kept by UC students. Ghanaian cultural practices and approach to daily life are different and may at times seem insensitive or even hostile to you.
- As guests in Ghana, you are expected to respect the ways of the host culture and not expect Ghanaians to adapt to your beliefs and ways.

The following information will help you raise your awareness of some of the difficulties you can expect to face in Ghana. You are responsible for researching additional information on your own.

Physical surroundings and living conditions

- **Running (Potable) Water**

All over Accra, you will see people carrying water, as water supply is intermittent and only 45% of households have a main connection. As in many places in Ghana, the student dorms experience interruptions in water supply, and regular electrical outages.

- Past UC students report that the men's dorm, particularly in Legon Hall, allegedly has water only 50% of the time.
- Sometimes the water gets turned off for a day or two so you will need to carry a bucket of water to the dorm for your daily use.
- You will learn that the use of water in Ghana differs tremendously from the way it is used, and thought about, in the United States.
- With no running water, every drop counts because you will have to haul, collect, and store the water for your daily use.

- **Drinking Water**

- The lack of clean drinking water and sanitation systems is a severe public health concern in Ghana, contributing to 70% of diseases in the country.
- Drink only known brands of bottled water, making sure that the bottle caps have not been tampered with or are unbroken before you open it.

- **Residence Halls**

- Most EAP students are juniors or seniors and probably have not lived in residence halls since they were freshmen.
- Most Ghanaian students do not keep late hours. Many Ghanaian students are devout Christians, and preachers with megaphones or amps are outside the res halls as early as 4am. It's important to understand that UC students need to adjust to the patterns of the hosts, not the other way around.
- **Bathing/hygiene**
 - When running water is unavailable, water for personal hygiene must be carried to the dorm in buckets.
 - Bottled and packaged water for drinking/brushing teeth can be purchased and is widely available.
 - Washing hands can be a challenge, particularly when traveling. The use of antibacterial hand wipes or alcohol-based hand sanitizer containing at least 60% alcohol is strongly recommended.
- **Toilets**
 - Lack of running water also means that toilets do not function properly in some halls of residence and they may be backed up for several days. Students are recommended to save the left over water used for a bucket bath to flush the toilet.
 - Students are strongly recommended to carry toilet paper wherever they go in Ghana because restrooms do not have supplies. It is also a very real possibility that students will not always find a toilet to use, especially outside the city. The toilet may instead be just a paved spot on the ground with a wall in front.
- **Laundry**
 - Many students wash their own clothes by hand in a bucket, although past students have paid others to wash their laundry.
 - Undergarments are considered to be the personal responsibility of the wearer and paying someone to wash underwear is not an accepted practice.
- **Electricity**
 - Due to power rationing in the country, there may be days in a row without electricity in the dorms, with only flashlights and candles for light at night.
 - Keeping food or medications, if needed, without much refrigeration is a challenge so students should be prepared for what will seem like sparse conditions for obtaining, keeping, and cooking food.
- **Noise**
 - Daily life in Ghana is very loud. It is almost impossible to walk down a street without hearing music playing or announcements and news from loudspeakers on top of the noise of business, cars, etc.

- Ghanaians are early risers; 5 a.m. is not an uncommon hour for them to start cooking, playing music, talking or preaching with a megaphone outside the student dorms.
- **Past students recommend bringing earplugs as the noise can become overwhelming.**
- **Garbage**
 - As with most developing countries, in some areas, garbage is irresponsibly disposed of. You should make a conscientious effort to dispose of their waste responsibly.
- **Personal Space**
 - Ghanaians have a different sense of personal space in negotiating around others.
 - Students need to adjust to being in constant physical contact with others in public and especially when using public transportation.
 - Students report that Ghanaian passengers think nothing of bumping into, stepping on, or using other people's arms and shoulders as a means to prop up or help steady themselves while moving around within the *trotros*. Male-male touching is also more prevalent. Ghanaian men may take hold of another man's hand to take him somewhere.
- **Community Space (Dorms)**
 - Some students have found that kitchen utensils, pots, pans and appliances (e.g., hot plates) they bought and kept in the shared kitchens were treated as communal property by other dorm residents.
 - Students should store their possessions in the privacy of their rooms to avoid the misconception that the items are for public use.
- **Traffic patterns**
 - Accra has a lot of traffic, so if you must take a bus or taxi somewhere, plan accordingly and allow ample time to get where you need to go.
 - Vehicles (including bicycles or motorcycles) do not yield to pedestrians, anywhere, but especially on campus. They drive fast and assume people will just get out of the way.
 - Everyone knows not to take chances assuming anyone will stop for you.
- **Dress styles on campus**
 - There has been a movement away from conservative attire for women on campus. Two things that are still not common are outfits that bare the stomach or midriff and low-cut tops. Otherwise, the guiding principle should be light, easily washable clothes.

Status

A university education confers high social status in Ghana. Other factors influencing perceptions of social status and power include wealth (real, relative, or perceived)

and culturally embedded positions held within the community, such as elder, chief, or priest.

- **Obruni:**

- Among the most difficult things for Americans to adjust to is being the center of attention constantly simply because they are so obviously not Ghanaian.
- The Twi term, *obruni* which means stranger or foreigner is also used to mean “white” person, and *all* UC students—regardless of ethnicity—can expect to be called *obruni* while in Ghana.
- The incessant attention can be trying, but most Ghanaians in the villages and small towns look for a way to connect with someone who is a foreigner *and a person with a different outlook* in their midst.
- Along with curiosity may come less desirable behaviors. Children may run up and try to touch students’ skin and hair.
- The friendliness of Ghanaian men towards female UC students may be expressed by professing their love and offering marriage proposals.
- Some students may run into problems by associating with “riffraffs” who may want to become acquainted with male UC students to be associated with the *Obrunis*.
- Some Ghanaian students may appear unfriendly as they ignore students to avoid the impression that they are out to exploit them.

- **African-Americans**

- Some Ghanaians may see black Americans as having more in common with white Americans than with Africans. Alternatively, they may identify black Americans in terms of the images of black culture portrayed by Hollywood.
- They may express the belief that African-Americans are better off (and have attained higher status) because their ancestors were taken to the United States. While this may be perceived by Americans as an astonishingly insensitive thing to say, it makes some sense from the standpoint of a Ghanaian who may be eager to emigrate to the U.S. However, this view should not be generalized as the outlook of Ghanaians.

- **Relative wealth**

- Although many Ghanaian students on campus come from some of the wealthiest families in the country, UC students have reported that some of them appear to harbor a mixture of resentment and envy of the Americans' relative wealth, and assume that EAP students are rich. This may seem unfair to EAP students living abroad on a limited budget, but you should remember that the per capita income in Ghana (a low-income economy) is below \$500 per year.

Religion and Faith

- Religion is central in the lives of most Ghanaians, and the spiritual side of life is regarded as essential.
- There are thousands of churches in Ghana.

- Ghanaians are devout Christians. About 60% of the population is Christian (the highest percentage of Christians in West Africa) and the visual presence of Christianity is particularly widespread in Accra.
- Evangelical churches host large gatherings throughout the week, and even the mainline Christian churches incorporate singing and dancing into their services.
- Some past UC students, who are used to the private experience of faith generally expressed in the U.S, have commented negatively on the early morning chanting and singing in areas near their dorms. They have expressed a particular discomfort at the displays of Christian religiosity within the university and other public spaces.
- Students should treat all Ghanaian religious beliefs with respect.

Living in a group-oriented society

In individual-oriented societies like the U.S., the ties and expected obligations between individuals can be described as loose. In general, people are expected to look after him/herself and immediate family.

In group-oriented societies such as Ghana, people are integrated into strong, cohesive in-groups, often extended families (with uncles, aunts and grandparents) and extended social networks which protect them in exchange for varying degrees of loyalty.

As a visitor to Ghana, you will not be expected to know all of the customs and appropriate behaviors. However, students should be aware that the improper behavior of a person not only influences a Ghanaian's view and treatment of the offending individual, but can extend to the larger social group and community (e.g., other EAP students and perhaps to the University of California as a whole). Some important customs and cultural expectations are listed below:

- **Greetings** are extremely important to Ghanaians. Failure to greet and respond to greetings properly is considered an insult, and not easily overlooked or forgiven.
 - Whenever you pass a group of people, especially elderly, always greet them.
 - When you walk up to a group of people, always greet them and shake hands, if possible.
 - If you approach a group of people with the intention of speaking to only one of the group, you must first take time to greet the entire group before asking permission to speak to the one person. To walk up to a group and speak directly to one person only without first greeting the entire group is considered rude.
 - Time is always made for greeting and it is not seen as an interference or waste of time.
- **American individuality.** The "I don't care what others think; I will do it my way" attitude is considered selfish, socially deficient and destructive. Things in Ghana get done by consensus-agreement after much discussion.
- **Body language**

- It is culturally important not to eat, point, or offer anything with your left hand because of its association with bathroom activities.
- It is considered rude to show the bottoms of your feet or shoes to people who are facing you.
- Prolonged eye contact, especially between men and women of the same age, can sometimes be construed as overly bold or even a sexual "come-on." Similarly, eye contact between young people and elders may be seen as rude. This may not apply when dealing with Ghanaians used to western ways, but it would be wise to interact with people in this more polite form until you know what's acceptable.
- **Death.** Among Ghanaian Christians, services and burial are seen as critical to an honorable funeral, as is sending off of the deceased with music, dance, prayer and wake-keeping. Students should respect the Ghanaian customs and not expect them to follow American ways or the behavior of any particular group or U.S. society.

University Study in Ghana

Going to university is a privilege in Ghana and UC students should understand that international students may be seen as taking spaces that national students are denied. It is important to be sensitive to this issue and to treat the honor of university attendance appropriately. It is also a cultural expectation that professors and university staff are treated with respect and not merely as service providers.

- **Registering for classes.** There is no computer registration at the University of Ghana. Registration is extremely time consuming and involves standing in registration lines and completing repetitive paper work at each department offering a class in which a student wants to enroll. Many departments also require a passport photo as part of the registration process. Only courses with even numbers are offered in the spring semester, odd numbers offered during the fall semester.
- **Relative quality of courses.** A number of our students who felt their classes were not very challenging found that final exams are much harder than they expected. Sometimes material that was in assigned readings but not mentioned in class will figure prominently on the final exam. Going to class regularly is important, but also studying hard for the exams is also a good idea, maybe even with groups of students from the particular class.
- **Instructors' attitudes.** Students should be prepared for the reality of Ghanaian academic life. Classes may not begin on time at the beginning of a term; Instructors will frequently be absent. Students may be tempted to slack off or become impatient with instructors, but a more productive response is to overcome any irritation or difference of expectations, strive to get the best out of a class, and supplement it where necessary with their own study.
- **Resources for academic work.** Standard resources, such as libraries and labs, are likely to be inadequate and/or difficult to use. Students should take books important to their field of study with them and search out the kinds of resources that Ghana has to offer.

- **Ghanaian English:** The English spoken in Ghana, including in the classroom is quite different in tone, pronunciation and vocabulary from the English spoken in the U.S. Students should be prepared to take time to learn the local ways of speaking English. This will prevent much misunderstanding. Students should also remember that although English is Ghana's official language, it is not most people's first language. Not only are Ghanaian students learning in their second language, but their professor is also likely to be speaking in his/her second language.
- **Final exam conflicts.** Exam schedulers assume that students do not cross departments or grade levels, and schedule exams accordingly. So if a student takes a mix of 300 and 400 level classes, there may be a potential exam time conflict. Similarly, different faculties or departments might have overlapping exam times. Unfortunately, these schedules are usually not known until after classes start. When the schedules come out, students need to check them immediately to note any conflicts and either add or drop a class or at least let the Study Center know about it.