



full article

## The role of Cultural Distance in the Adaptation of Arab Students to the Educational Environment of Russian Universities<sup>1</sup>

Vera A. Fedotova

National Research University Higher School of Economics (Perm), Russia, Perm

vera\_goldyreva@mail.ru

<https://orcid.org/0000-0003-2189-9791>

Scopus Author ID: 57194205801

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**Abstract:** In the 21st century, many universities seek to internationalize their educational activities. The number of foreign students is one of the indicators of the university's success in the market of global educational services. The success of education, in its turn, depends on the students' socio-cultural adaptation in the host country. In this study, we used cultural distance as a predictor of socio-cultural adaptation for students from Arab countries. When cultural distance is high, immigrants find it more difficult to adapt to the new environment. We conducted a socio-psychological survey among first-, second-, and third-year students from Morocco, Syria, and Egypt receiving education at the universities of Perm, Moscow, Astrakhan, Kazan, Nizhny Novgorod, and St. Petersburg. Our study showed that cultural distance affects socio-cultural adaptation. It was the differences between Russian and Arab cultures in values, traditions, and appearance that affected the adaptation of Arab students in the Russian cultural environment. Our results can contribute to further research into the predictors of adaptation for foreign students. They can also be used to develop adaptation programs for Arab students studying not only in Russian universities, but worldwide.

**Keywords:** adaptation, socio-cultural adaptation, adaptation scales, cultural distance, Arabs

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оригинальная статья

## Роль культурной дистанции в адаптации студентов из арабских стран к условиям образовательной среды российского вуза<sup>2</sup>

Федотова Вера Александровна

Национальный исследовательский университет «Высшая школа экономики» (Пермь), Россия, Пермь

vera\_goldyreva@mail.ru

<https://orcid.org/0000-0003-2189-9791>

Scopus Author ID: 57194205801

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**Аннотация:** Проблематика социально-психологической адаптации иностранных студентов к условиям образовательной среды российского вуза представляет собой одну из наиболее востребованных и актуальных тем для дискуссии в научном знании. Иностранные студенты, выбравшие Россию в качестве страны для обучения, сталкиваются с рядом проблем. Получение образования в иной культуре дает возможность расширить мировоззрение, получить опыт межкультурной коммуникации и развить межкультурную толерантность, что в будущем окажет положительное влияние на личностный рост и построение успешной карьеры. Тем не менее процесс адаптации к учебе и жизни в новой культуре может быть долгим и напряженным. Представителям разных культур необходимо адаптироваться к иным климатическим и бытовым условиям, к другому языку общения и к специфике обучения в российском вузе. Молодые мигранты, адаптирующиеся к иной культурной среде, часто испытывают

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чувство одиночества и сталкиваются с дискриминацией ввиду культурных различий. При ощущении высокой культурной дистанции иностранному студенту крайне сложно адаптироваться к жизни и обучению в чужой культуре. В представленном исследовании мы рассматриваем культурную дистанцию как условие адаптации молодых мигрантов из арабских стран, обучающихся в России. В ходе исследования мы попытались ответить на вопрос, влияет ли культурная дистанция на социокультурную адаптацию студентов из арабских стран, получающих образование в иностранном государстве. Обнаружены различия в социокультурной адаптации арабских студентов в зависимости от страны их первоначального проживания. Несмотря на достаточно низкий уровень социокультурной адаптации у всех арабских респондентов, наибольшие трудности испытывают студенты из Ирака, например, в процессе покупки продуктов и приготовления еды и при пользовании общественного транспорта и т. д. Студенты из Марокко адаптируются несколько лучше и испытывают меньше трудностей при вхождении в другое культурное сообщество. Арабские студенты, обучающиеся в России, отмечают различия между арабской и российской культурой в плане языка, внешнего облика, отношения к женщинам и приема пищи. В ходе исследования выявлено, что культурная дистанция влияет на социокультурную адаптацию арабских студентов, обучающихся в России. Высокий уровень культурной дистанции ведет к низкому уровню социокультурной адаптации. Ограничением исследования является невозможность экстраполяции результатов на всех представителей изучаемой культуры, однако полученные результаты могут служить основой для дальнейших исследований в этой области. Полученные данные способствуют дальнейшему развитию представлений о роли культурной дистанции в адаптации иностранных студентов из других государств в российском вузе. Результаты можно использовать при разработке адаптационных программ для иностранных студентов, адаптирующихся в новом вузе.

**Ключевые слова:** адаптация, социокультурная адаптация, шкалы адаптации, культурная дистанция, арабы

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## Introduction

Socio-psychological adaptation of foreign students to the educational environment of Russian universities is one of the major challenges discussed by psychologists and sociologists. Foreign students in Russia are faced with a number of problems, having to adapt to another climate, a foreign language, and new living conditions.

In the current era of globalization, students are increasingly seeking higher education outside of their native culture [Rienties, Tempelaar 2013]. This gives them an opportunity to expand their intercultural knowledge and worldview, as well as enhance their personal development and future career prospects [Rienties, Tempelaar 2013]. However, adapting to a new culture can be difficult and stressful [Berry 2005; Ward 2001].

According to literature, international students adapting to a foreign cultural environment experience a sense of loneliness [Wang et al. 2015], difficulties caused by changes in their usual way of life [Szabo et al. 2016], discrimination [Ward, Leong 2015], and cultural differences [Hirai et al. 2015].

Foreign students studying in Russian universities also acquire new ways of intercultural communication. Representing different cultures, they cannot always understand each other correctly, even if they speak the same language. Verbal and non-verbal communication is culturally

and nationally conditioned. Cultural "acclimatization" depends on the peculiarities of intercultural communication practiced in a particular country. Effective communication with host citizens is the basis of adaptation.

Adaptation to the educational environment is a method of socialization that allows foreign students to actively participate in various events and activities of the social environment. This process can be complicated due to linguistic, climatic, intercultural, interethnic, and motivational barriers.

According to C. M. Yuldasheva, socio-psychological adaptation is an individual's adaptation to a new social group and new forms of communication. During this process, an individual develops their own style of behavior. A high level of adaptability indicates that the person has adapted to the environment without a sense of conflict or inner discomfort [Yuldasheva 2019].

A. E. Kurasheva argued that the socio-psychological adaptation of students takes place in the constantly changing educational environment of a university and is accompanied by changes in their own personality [Kurasheva 2019].

L. A. Maryukova reported that during the first year, migrant students adapt to the general requirements of a higher school and its educational process, as well as to the new culture, social environment, and language.

They also learn methods of organizing their educational work and its forms. Finally, they adapt to the new time zone and climatic conditions [Maryukova 2007]. According to the author, the success of this process depends on the teacher.

E. L. Ryabkova defined socio-cultural adaptation as a student's cognitive, psychological, and behavioral changes, as well as changes in their system of values, aiming to comply with the requirements of a social system in the new culture [Ryabkova 2018].

Foreign scientists define sociocultural adaptation as an ability to understand the culture of a host country and function accordingly in the new cultural environment [Kim 2001; Ward et al. 2001]. During sociocultural adaptation, the individual experiences cultural stress which can be eased by social support. Researchers highlight a close relationship between cultural stress and human mental health. They argue that psychological adaptation needs to be studied in addition to cross-cultural adaptation. People with high levels of acculturative stress are at risk of experiencing not only depression [Mui, Kang 2006; Rahman, Rollock 2004], but also suicidal ideation [Hovey, King 1996]. Further research has shown that acculturative stress is correlated with high levels of anxiety and depression in international students [Crockett et al. 2007].

Many factors influence the success of adaptation in foreign students. One of them is cultural distance, which has repeatedly become a subject of study in cross-cultural psychology. Cultural distance, which is defined as the degree to which cultures differ in language, religion, values, etc., has regularly affected the adaptation of immigrants [Ward, Kennedy 1999]. When the cultural differences between the groups are large, adaptation is more difficult. Many studies show that cultural shock is positively correlated with cultural distance. The more the foreign culture resembles the native one, the less traumatic the adaptation process. According to J. W. Berry, the distance between cultures is directly proportional to the number of changes that a migrant will have to make in his or her behavior to adapt to a new cultural environment [Berry 2017].

Thus, based on literature analysis, we defined socio-psychological adaptation to the educational environment as a necessary process and a method of socialization. It allows foreign students to be actively involved in various elements of the university's social and educational life. Some of the obstacles to adaptation are language, climate, and intercultural barriers. Therefore, we need to take an individual approach to teaching international students to ensure their successful adaptation to the unfamiliar cultural environment. Students should be divided into groups, depending on their cultural peculiarities, and taught using a personalized approach.

By taking adaptation measures for students from other countries, we can minimize the risk of their maladjustment and help them integrate into the Russian educational space [Gritsenko et al. 2021]. According to D. S. Tretyachenko, faculty members at Russian universities need to develop special pedagogical competencies in the socio-cultural adaptation of foreign students [Tretyachenko 2021]. Another study concluded that some universities were able to properly organize the educational environment for foreign students, involving them in social activities as well. This contributed to their social and psychological adaptation [Tarasova 2017].

In this study, we looked at the degree of cultural distance as a major factor in the success of socio-cultural adaptation of foreign students. In particular, we aimed to determine whether a pronounced cultural distance can affect the socio-cultural adaptation of Arab students in Russia. For this, we put forward two hypotheses:

- 1) significant differences in cultures (high cultural distance) can have a negative effect on the socio-cultural adaptation of Arab students;
- 2) the differences between Russian and Arab languages, values, and traditions can have a negative effect on the socio-cultural adaptation of Arab students.

## Methods

**Participants.** Our study was based on the data obtained from first-, second- and third-year students from Arab-speaking countries (Morocco, Syria, and Egypt) studying at institutions of higher education in Perm, Moscow, Astrakhan, Kazan, Nizhny Novgorod, and St. Petersburg (Russia). In particular, there were 248 respondents (56 from Syria, 84 from Egypt, and 108 from Morocco). Their age ranged from 20 to 34, averaging 28.

**Procedure.** The study involved a questionnaire offered to the respondents in two forms, offline (face-to-face) and online (via Google Forms). The respondents were students of humanities and technical degrees in Russian universities. The students in Moscow, Astrakhan, Kazan, Nizhny Novgorod, and St. Petersburg completed an online questionnaire which was distributed through the departments working with international students and in social network groups for international students. The students in Perm filled out a questionnaire in the presence of an interviewer.

We should acknowledge the potential cognitive biases commonly associated with self-reported measures, such as the effect of social desirability. The respondents were unfamiliar with each other and we did not state the purpose of the study in the questionnaire.

**Instruments.** Scales for measuring socio-cultural adaptation [Ward, Kennedy 1999]. The respondents were asked

to rate their agreement with twenty statements using a five-point scale. In particular, they were asked to assess the level of difficulty they had experienced in various social situations in the new culture. The answers received were recoded to assess adaptation, not maladjustment. There were three scales in the method: formal relationships, informal relationships, and adaptation to everyday life. This technique was tested, adapted, and achieved a reliability score (consistency of the points) of  $\alpha = 0.95$ .

*Scales for measuring cultural distance* [Wark, Galliher 2007]. To measure cultural distance, the respondents needed to evaluate the indicators in terms of differences between the two cultures. The question asked was "How similar and how different are the following indicators in Russia and in your country?" These indicators included food intake and attitudes towards family, children, women, religion, traditions, customs, values, and beliefs.

Analysis of variance was used to determine the differences in the characteristics of socio-cultural adaptation. The regression analysis was employed to establish a relationship between cultural distance and adaptation of young migrants from Arab countries. We used IBM SPSS Statistics for Windows (Version 26.0) to calculate descriptive statistics, correlations, and tests for mean differences, as well as IBM AMOS26 to determine correlations between socio-cultural adaptation and cultural distance.

## Results

The results from the first block of the questionnaire indicated perceived cultural distance among Arab students. Based on the primary analysis of the answers, we calculated the minimum, maximum, and mean values for each variable, as well as standard deviations (Tab. 1).

As can be seen, the respondents noted a fairly high degree of cultural distance between Russia and Arab countries in terms of language, appearance, their attitude towards women, and food intake. Their attitude towards work had some similarities with the one for Russian culture. Additionally, Arab students showed somewhat similar views on family relations and parenting.

The analysis of variance revealed some differences in cultural distance and socio-cultural adaptation of Arab students depending on their native country (Morocco, Egypt, and Syria) (Tab. 2).

As can be seen in Table 2, despite the rather low level of socio-cultural adaptation of all Arab respondents, the students from Syria experienced the greatest difficulties ( $F = 386.8$ ;  $p < 0.001$ ). Conversely, the students from Morocco adapted better ( $M = 2.51$ ) and experienced less difficulty in entering the Russian cultural community compared to the students from Egypt ( $M = 1.77$ ).

There were differences in perceived cultural distance among Arab respondents. For the students from Egypt, Arab culture was increasingly different from Russian culture ( $M = 2.05$ ), compared to the students from Syria ( $M = 2.42$ ) and Morocco ( $M = 2.71$ ). Thus, those students whose culture differed greatly from the host culture in several ways found it extremely difficult to adapt to their life and studies there.

Further, the regression analysis established a relationship between perceived cultural distance and socio-cultural adaptation (Tab. 3).

As can be seen, a high level of cultural distance led to a low level of sociocultural adaptation. Therefore, the greater the differences between the migrant's culture and the host culture, the more difficult and time-consuming the process of adaptation.

To test whether the differences in language, traditions, appearance, and values can have a negative effect on socio-cultural adaptation, we carried out another regression analysis (Tab. 3).

We found that the differences between Russian and Arab cultures in terms of language, traditions and customs, appearance, and values affected the process of adaptation for Arab students in the foreign socio-cultural environment. The perceived cultural distance made their entry into the Russian educational environment more difficult.

## Discussion

Adaptation of international students to the educational environment in a foreign country is a prerequisite for, and a method of, socialization and further engagement in various elements of the social environment. This process can be hindered by linguistic, climatic, intercultural, interethnic, motivational, and other barriers. We aimed to determine whether cultural distance can affect the socio-cultural adaptation of students from Arab countries receiving education in Russia.

We found that despite certain similarities in both cultures, the level of cultural distance is still quite high. This makes it extremely difficult for Arab students to adapt to their new life and studies in Russia. The level of socio-cultural adaptation was rather low for all of them, with some differences depending on their home country. In particular, the students from Iraq experienced the greatest difficulties in shopping, cooking, using public transport, and other activities, compared to the students from Morocco, Egypt, and Syria. The students from Morocco adapted slightly better and experienced fewer difficulties in the Russian cultural community. Earlier research identified differences in learning abilities among international students from Arab countries. Particularly, the students from Morocco,

Tab. 1. Perceived cultural distance among Arab students

Табл. 1. Воспринимаемая культурная дистанция у арабских студентов

Scales	Min	Max	M	SD	Skew.	Kurt.
Cultural distance (Cronbach Alpha 0.64)	1.17	3.42	2.3065	0.574	-0.132	0.073
Eating	1.00	5.00	2.1151	1.26	0.963	0.045
Attitude towards family	1.00	4.00	2.9408	1.23	-0.453	-1.539
Parenting	1.00	4.00	2.9309	0.90	-0.601	-0.326
Attitude towards women	1.00	4.00	1.8980	0.77	1.276	2.105
Religion	1.00	3.00	2.4638	0.64	-0.813	-0.404
Traditions and customs	1.00	4.00	1.7467	0.97	1.167	0.247
Social norms	1.00	4.00	2.4836	0.90	0.480	-0.739
Appearance	1.00	3.00	1.9178	0.68	0.104	-0.843
Values and beliefs	1.00	4.00	2.4770	1.08	0.305	-1.244
Attitude towards work	1.00	4.00	2.8059	1.02	-0.105	-1.330
Friendship	1.00	4.00	2.5395	0.89	0.287	-0.794
Language	1.00	3.00	1.3586	0.63	1.560	1.171

Note: N – the number of respondents; M – mean values; SD – standard deviation; Skew. – the coefficient of asymmetry; Kurt. – the coefficient of kurtosis

Tab. 2. Differences in cultural distance and socio-cultural adaptation (analysis of variance)

Табл. 2. Различия в культурной дистанции и социокультурной адаптации: результаты дисперсионного анализа

Country	N	Mean	95% confidence interval for mean		Min	Max
			bottom bound	upper bound		
Cultural distance						
Syria	56	2.4213	2.3961	2.4465	2.25	2.58
Egypt	84	2.0580	1.9343	2.1818	1.58	2.50
Morocco	108	2.7103	2.5742	2.8464	1.92	3.42
Socio-cultural adaptation						
Syria	56	2.0857	1.9777	2.1937	1.70	2.50
Egypt	84	1.7726	1.7374	1.8079	1.55	1.95
Morocco	108	2.5194	2.4779	2.5610	2.30	2.85

Tab. 3. Influence of cultural distance on socio-cultural adaptation (regression analysis)

Табл. 3. Влияние факторов культурной дистанции на социокультурную адаптацию: результаты регрессионного анализа

Predictors of socio-cultural adaptation	Cultural distance, $\beta$	Language, $\beta$	Traditions and customs, $\beta$	Appearance, $\beta$	Values and beliefs, $\beta$
Socio-cultural adaptation	-0.94*	-0.17*	-0.22*	-0.19*	-0.28**
R <sup>2</sup>	0.33	0.13			
F	10.291*	9.16**			
Cohen's f <sup>2</sup>	0.18	0.12			

Note: \* –  $p < 0.05$ ; \*\* –  $p < 0.01$ .



Algeria, and Tunisia performed much better than those from other countries. This was due to the influence of the French educational system that has survived in these countries since the end of the colonial era [Pavlyukova, Dryagalova 2015]. The Arab respondents in our study noted some differences between Arab and Russian cultures in terms of language, appearance, attitude toward women, and food intake. However, they found that Russians hold somewhat similar views on family relations and parenting.

Cultural distance is directly proportional to the number of changes that a migrant will have to make in his or her behavior to adapt to a new cultural environment. We found that the differences between Russian and Arab cultures in terms of values, traditions and customs, as well as appearance, affected the adaptation of Arab students to the Russian cultural environment. This partially confirmed our second hypothesis: socio-cultural adaptation is affected not only by the differences in language, values, and traditions, but also by the differences in appearance between Arab and Russian students. Our data revealed that the pronounced distance between Russian and Arab cultures does affect the socio-cultural adaptation of Arab students in Russia.

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## Conclusion

Although our results are not representative of all the people living in Arab countries, they can serve as a basis for further research on a different sample of foreign students to establish additional determinants of the socio-cultural adaptation of young migrants in Russia.

Creating a favorable educational environment for international students in Russia has motivated researchers to learn how they adapt to new living and learning conditions. Socio-cultural adaptation contributes to greater inclusion in the educational process, improves the quality of training, and allows for a painless transition into a new cultural context. Our findings can promote ideas about the role of cultural distance in the adaptation of Arab students from Morocco, Syria, and Egypt. In particular, they can be used to develop adaptation programs for international students.

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**Конфликт интересов:** Автор заявил об отсутствии потенциальных конфликтов интересов в отношении исследования, авторства и / или публикации данной статьи.

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