

Cultural Diversity in the Workplace: International Faculty Members in Saudi Arabia

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Abstract

Along with many other countries, Saudi Arabia has recently experienced increased cultural diversity in the workplace. Among a total estimated population of 30 million inhabitants, the kingdom currently has approximately 10 million immigrants living within its borders. To replenish its workforce, Saudi Arabia welcomes legal immigrants and temporary residents from other countries seeking educational and employment opportunities. As a result of this open immigration policy, more than 60% of the national workforce is now composed of non-Saudis. Researchers emphasized that foreign workers in Saudi Arabia, along with their families, often experience difficulty adapting to established cultural practices. Such cultural challenges are often seen in higher education, one of the most diverse sectors in the economy. This study examined the cultural adjustment experiences of international faculty members working at King Abdulaziz University in Saudi Arabia. Relationships between selected demographic characteristics and the degree of cultural adjustment were explored. The study also examined the impact of cultural adjustment on job satisfaction and organizational commitment. The sample size of the study which used an online survey was 110. The quantitative data results of this study showed that international faculty members had a moderate level of job satisfaction, organizational commitment and cultural adjustment. The study also found that female participants had a higher level of cultural adjustment than male participants. The qualitative data results discussed the major themes that were emerged from participants' responses regarding the open-ended questions. Major themes included: initial challenges, positive experiences, negative experiences, family concerns, and adjustment difficulties

Keywords: Culture, Diversity, Saudi Arabia, Adjustment

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Introduction

As the rate of globalization accelerates across the world, so do the number of interactions among people from diverse cultural, religious, and ethnic backgrounds. This increased cultural intermingling is clearly seen in the modern workplace. Although scholars agree that diversity can promote greater creativity and innovation within organizations, it can also generate serious communication problems and intercultural conflicts that impair business growth and sustainability (Al-Jenaibi, 2012). Given the reality of increasing globalization, successfully managing employee diversity is one of the greatest challenges that organizations face today.

Because of its robust economy, Saudi Arabia attracts numerous immigrant workers from nearby countries seeking better employment opportunities than are available in their native land. Saudi Arabia encourages this foreign influx as a means to address a large shortage in the domestic labor supply (Bhuiyan et al., 2001; Edgar, Azhar & Duncan, 2016). This employee shortfall has emerged as many Saudi Arabian college students pursue degrees intended to secure well-paying government jobs (Hain, 2011). These factors have created a largely foreigner workforce in the private sector, where up to 93% of employees are non-Saudi in some industries such as health care, transportation services, manufacturing, and technical services (Pakkiasamy, 2004; Peck, 2017).

Not all these foreign workers and their families smoothly integrate into Saudi society. Many find themselves in a land with customs and values dramatically different from their native country. Strict prayer times, gender segregation, and a ban on alcohol use are a few of the common cultural differences immigrants encounter—and often struggle to accept.

Research Questions

1. What are the experiences of cultural adjustments among international faculty members working at Saudi Arabian universities?
2. How do personal or demographic characteristics impact the cultural adjustment of international faculty members?
3. How does cultural adjustment affect international faculty members' organizational commitment and job satisfaction?
4. What are the barriers to successful adaptation for international faculty members in Saudi Arabia?

Methods

This study utilized a cross-sectional design and a quantitative method approach to explore cultural perceptions of international university faculty members working in Saudi Arabia.

The research instrument included 34 questions divided into three sections. The first section of the survey explored successful adjustment and was measured using four constructs: (1) job satisfaction; (2) organizational commitment; (3) adjustment and (4) perceived discrimination. International faculty members were questioned about their degree of job satisfaction and organizational commitment using a 7-point Likert scale.

The second survey section included demographic questions such as age, gender, marital status, and country of origin. The third survey section consisted of three open-ended questions intended to elicit further information about the cross-cultural perceptions and experiences of these international faculty members

The study utilized a non-probabilistic sample. Sample criteria included: (a) current full-time employment as an international faculty member at the designated Saudi Arabian university, and (b) at least one year at the academic position. A total of 130 responses were received, after cleaning the data, 110 responses were used for the analysis.

Data Analysis: descriptive analysis, including means and standard deviations, were conducted to answer the first research question concerning experiences of cultural adjustments of international faculty members working at Saudi Arabian universities. To answer the second research question: how do personal or demographic characteristics impact cultural adjustment of international faculty member? One-way ANOVA, t-test were used to determine whether there were statistically significant differences between the dependent variable (cultural adjustment) and the independent variables (gender, marital status and country of origin). In addition, multiple regression procedures were conducted to reveal the percent of variation that faculty gender, marital, or country of origin status may contribute to the explanation of faculty cultural adjustment. To answer the third research question, simple regression analysis was used to examine the relationships between cultural adjustment (as the dependent variable) and international faculty's job satisfaction and organizational commitment (as the independent variables). To answer the fourth question: what are the barriers to successful adaptation for international faculty members in Saudi Arabia? separate methods were used to analyze responses to the open-ended questions in the third section of the questionnaire

Results

The results of the quantitative data show that international faculty members at King Abdulaziz University had a moderate level of job satisfaction, organizational commitment and cultural adjustment. In addition, participants had not experienced a high level of discrimination. The study also found that female participants had a higher level of cultural adjustment than male participants. In addition, there was no significant difference in international faculty members' cultural adjustments based on their marital status and country of origin. The results of the regression analysis reveal that cultural adjustment can predict international faculty members' organizational commitment and job satisfaction. Conversely, organizational commitment and job satisfaction impact cultural adjustment. The qualitative data results discussed the major themes that were emerged from participants' responses regarding the open-ended questions. Major themes included: initial challenges, positive experiences, negative experiences, family concerns, adjustment difficulties, and social integration.

Conclusion

With the increase of international employees in Saudi Arabia, better information is needed about their cultural adjustment successes and challenges. There is currently a lack of scholarly research on this topic, particularly regarding higher education

workplace dynamics. The study examined the experiences of foreign faculty members who relocated from 22 different countries, makes several important contributions to cross-cultural understanding. First, the study explored the adjustment experiences, including expectations and problems, faced by these individuals working at a major Saudi Arabian university. Second, the research clarified the relative—and sometimes surprising—influence of gender, marital status, and country of origin on cultural adjustment. Third, this research demonstrated the strong connection between successful cultural integration and job satisfaction and organizational commitment.

Taken together, this quantitative data indicate that faculty members as a whole experienced moderately successful cultural adjustment after moving to Saudi. The degree of societal integration, in turn, influenced faculty members' commitment to the university and their overall job satisfaction. There was a statistically significant difference based on gender, with female faculty enjoying greater cultural adaptation. Conversely, the demographic characteristics of marital status and country of origin had no measurable impact on adjustment to Saudi society. To supplement the above research, the open-ended survey questions allowed international faculty to add additional comments regarding their adaptation experiences. Based on this qualitative data, the analysis developed and explored themes and sub-themes related to working and living in Saudi Arabia.

Limitations of the Study

There are some limitations in this study. First, the study was limited to King Abdulaziz University, in Jeddah, Saudi Arabia. Therefore, the findings of this study may not be generalized to other universities in Saudi. Second, the results of this study were based on a voluntarily survey participation; thus, it will be limited to International faculty members who participated in the study.

Recommendations for Future Study

- Additional studies can focus on obtaining detailed information about the experiences of international faculty members working at other universities in Saudi Arabia.
- A mixed-methods research design, including face-to-face interviews, might be utilized to obtain a more detailed picture of foreigners' cultural expectations and experiences.
- Future researchers might compare the experiences of international faculty members in Saudi Arabia to those in other host countries. These could include nations with very different religious and cultural norms than Saudi.

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