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## Cultural distance or cultural similarity? A study of academic expatriates in the UAE

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**Abstract:** The purpose of this study is to investigate the relationship between cultural distance and, the cultural competence and adjustment of academic expatriates in the UAE. The cultural distance paradox has been investigated amongst the general population of expatriates but not amongst academic expatriates. The two hypotheses under study are: H1: There is a positive relationship between cultural distance and expatriate social adjustment; H2: There is a positive relationship between cultural distance and expatriate cultural competence. The theoretical framework of this study is the theory of selective perception and dissonance and the theory of change. Qualitative data was collected from 103 academic expatriates. The main findings in this study are in support of the cultural distance paradox. Additionally, expatriates from different cultures to that of the host country culture do better in cultural competence and adjustment than expatriates from cultures that are similar to the host country culture.

**Keywords:** cultural distance paradox; cultural competence; adjustment; academic expatriate; United Arab Emirates.

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## 1 Introduction

As of 2019, the population of the UAE is around nine million, where 80% are expatriates. In the expansion of its higher education sector, the UAE has had to rely mainly on academic expatriates (Austin et al., 2014). Academic expatriates in the UAE come from a large variety of cultures as the country attracts expatriates from all corners of the world. Therefore, making this context a fertile research field for the study of cultural differences, adaptation and competence amongst academic expatriates.

The higher education cultural context of the UAE is a unique context. Education is one of the sectors with the highest representation of expatriates because of the country's need to train its own people so they can successfully integrate in the job market and take responsibility for their own country. This encounter between Emirati students on the one hand, and Western-trained teachers on the other, is taking place, within a context of change and education reforms. The context of the UAE education system is one of the most interesting fields in the world for cross-cultural interaction between western-educated teachers and students of Arab-Islamic background (Diallo, 2014).

The academic expatriate is a self-initiated expatriate who is active participants in this era of career mobility. Self-initiated expatriates are characterised by four conceptual criteria, namely

- a self-initiated international relocation
- b regular employment (intentions)
- c intentions of a temporary stay
- d skilled/professional qualifications (Cerdin and Selmer, 2014).

Motivations behind expatriation varies such as financial, a sense of adventure, refugee purposes, and career growth (Richardson and McKenna, 2002).

The purpose of this study is to investigate the relationship between cultural distance and, the cultural competence and adjustment of academic expatriates in the UAE. Cultural distance is the cultural difference between the expatriate's culture of origin and the culture of the host country (Selmer, 2002). One of the problems with cultural distance is its measurement, specifically whether this is objective or perceived cultural distance.

The characteristics adopted in this study to justify cultural distance are: language (Caligiuri et al., 2001); neighbouring country (Pedersen and Pedersen, 2004); religion (Suutari and Brewster, 1999); and climate (Caligiuri et al., 2001). Adjustment is defined as the extent to which a person is comfortable with various aspects of the new setting (Black and Gregersen, 1991). This may be further subdivided into personal, social and work adaptation leading to feelings of comfort towards the environment and better functioning. Whilst cultural competence is the incorporation into everyday practice of one's cultural learning, specifically facts, knowledge and attitudes (Schim and Miller, 1999).

Although the cultural distance paradox is a phenomenon that has already received a lot of attention in literature, the contribution of this study is that it analyses the cultural distance paradox in the specific population of academic expatriates. The cultural distance paradox has been mainly investigated amongst the general population of expatriates and not so much within the specific population of academic expatriates (Vromand and van Engen, 2013). Another contribution is that whilst other studies examined the cultural distance paradox from an expatriate adjustment perspective (Hemmasi and Downes, 2013), the current study adds the cultural competence dimension to that of adjustment. In summary, two research gaps are addressed in this paper. One relates to the application of the cultural distance paradox to academics and the other to the application of the paradox to cultural competence.

## **2 Literature review**

The work by Selmer (2002) provides a theoretical framework to this study. Selmer (2002) proposed two theories that help understand the cultural distance paradox. These are the theory of selective perception and dissonance and the theory of change by Kurt Lewin. Primarily the theory of selective perception and dissonance explains how people are selective in perceiving their environment to make sense of the large amount of information they receive from their environment. In selecting information the expatriate working in a host country having a similar culture to his/her culture of origin avoids information that does not match his/her beliefs of similarity. As a result problems in adjustment occur and these are attributed to others such as students or colleagues and not to actual differences in culture.

Selmer (2002) also borrows from Lewin's (1951) theory of change that posits that in order to embrace change the expatriate has to go through a process called unfreezing during which the expatriate is willing to let go of learned behaviour and attitudes. This demands a lot of psychological strength. Unfreezing is slowed down when differences in culture pass unnoticed. This is a trap that expatriates from similar culture may fall into due to assumptions made about the host country culture. Since it is more difficult for striking cultural differences to pass unnoticed expatriates from differing cultures have an advantage over expatriates from similar cultures since they are less likely to fall into the trap of false assumptions.

In a study with expatriates from 36 different nationalities spanning expatriate positions in 32 nations, Hemmasi and Downes (2013) examined the relationship between cultural distance and adjustment. Cultural distance in this study was defined specifically referring only to those environmental differences which relate to culture (Hemmasi and Downes, 2013). The cultural distance hypothesis for work adjustment of expatriates,

stating that greater differences between home and host cultures are associated with less desirable outcomes, was rejected in this study. Hemmasi and Downes (2013) also rejected the null hypothesis for work adjustment that states that cultural distance is not a significant determinant in expatriate work adjustment. However authors found sufficient evidence to support the cultural distance paradox that greater differences between home and host cultures is associated with more desirable work adjustment. Findings also concurred with the Asymmetry Hypothesis. The latter states that cultural distance may be important when expatriates are sent from Country A to country B, but that it does not play as significant of a role when managers from Country B are on assignment in Country A. This notion suggests that the impact of cultural distance is contingent on the direction of the assignment. This study uncovers the need to consider context when interpreting the cultural distance paradox as results may vary depending both on the home and host country of the expatriate. This finding puts into question the generalisability of results of studies carried out on the cultural distance paradox.

Vromand and van Engen (2013) explain the cultural distance paradox giving it another name which is the presumed cultural similarity paradox. They write that prior to departure the expatriate from culturally similar background to that of the host nation may easily underestimate cultural differences and adjustment problems s/he may experience. When this results in unmet expectations there is a negative effect on adjustment. Reversely, the expatriate from a culturally different background expects cultural differences and the difficulties tied to adjustment. In such case expectations are met or even over met. Another overlapping paradox is that given by the proponents of the psychic distance paradox who argue that expatriates are not prepared for and insensitive to differences in culture because of expected similarity (O'Grady and Lane, 1996). The study by Vromand and van Engen (2013) does not refer to specific cultures. The current study takes a specific look at the Arab culture and applying the study by Vromand and van Engen (2013) one would hypothesise that prior to departure expatriates from an Arab culture may easily underestimate cultural differences and adjustment problems that may be encountered in the UAE.

In a study by Selmer and Lauring (2009) carried out amongst academic expatriates using a measure of perceived cultural distance and similarity findings show that expatriates from similar and from different culture both faced the same adjustment issues and time to become proficient. Cultural similarity did not seem to aid the expatriate adjustment and no support was found for the alternative hypothesis that perceived cultural dissimilarity could be more difficult to adjust to than perceived cultural similarity. These findings are in agreement with the findings by Jun and Gentry (2005) in a study carried out with business expatriates. The latter conclude that the arguments for cultural similarity aiding adaptation cannot be generalised to all expatriates.

Proponents of the opposing argument argue that similarities between one's own culture and the host culture facilitate adjustment (Babiker et al., 1980; Furnham and Bochner, 1986; Ward and Kennedy, 1993; Isakovic and Whitman, 2013). The study by Isakovic and Whitman (2013) was also carried out amongst academic expatriates in the UAE and did not find evidence to support the cultural distance paradox. Support was found for all the following three hypothesis related to the cultural distance, namely: culture novelty has a negative relationship with self-initiated expatriates' cultural adjustment; culture novelty has a negative relationship with self-initiated expatriates' interaction adjustment; culture novelty has a negative relationship with self-initiated expatriates' work adjustment.

Research on cultural competence and cultural differences or similarity amongst expatriates has focused mainly on the language dimension of cultural competence (Welch et al., 2005; Peltokorpi, 2010; Abugre and Debrah, 2013) which is a specific and partial aspect of the wider cultural competence utilised in this study. The study by Peltokorpi (2010) on language shows that language proficiency is easier in circumstances of cultural similarity. Peltokorpi's (2010) study is in agreement with the null hypothesis of this study that there is no significant and positive relationship between cultural distance and expatriate cultural competence when such competence is limited to language perspective. In fact the author found that Western expatriates face difficulties in linguistically distant countries, such as Japan. Later findings by Abugre and Debrah (2013) on the language dimension of cultural competence are similar to those by Welch et al. (2005) and Peltokorpi (2010).

Measuring the wider concept of cultural competence, a study carried out amongst expatriate nurses in Saudi Arabia (which context is similar to the context of the current study) also found support for the null hypothesis of this study that there is no significant and positive relationship between cultural distance and expatriate cultural competence (Inocian et al., 2015). The study found a significant difference in the cultural competency among the expatriate nurses when they were grouped according to nationality and culture of origin. Nurses originating from an Arab culture were more culturally competent than those originating from a non-Arab culture. This study raises further questions on whether one may or may take a broad view of a culture as there may be differences also within specific cultures.

A review of the above literature, which portrays arguments for and against the cultural distance paradox, when reflected upon raises various questions. One question relates to whether different studies are adopting or not different operationalisations of culture, thus resulting in different findings. Culture is a multi-faceted phenomenon that when researched from a specific perspective may generate different results to when it is researched from a different perspective. Another question relates to the various contexts within which the above studies are carried out and whether such contexts play a part or not on the differing findings. The group of expatriates is also a large group consisting of many sub-groups, one of which is the academic sub-groups, and researching different sub-groups may also result in conflicting findings. For this reason when researching the hypothesis mentioned below it is important to consider the context of the study as explained in the introduction above.

## *2.1 Hypothesis*

The two hypothesis under study are:

- H1* There is a positive relationship between cultural distance and expatriate social adjustment.
- H2* There is a positive relationship between cultural distance and expatriate cultural competence.

The null hypothesis is that there is no significant and positive relationship between cultural distance and expatriate social adjustment as well as no significant and positive relationship between cultural distance and expatriate cultural competence. In order to study in depth the relationship between cultural distance and, adjustment and cultural

competence, variables such as age, education and years of experience are included in this study.

The background to the first and second hypothesis is the seminal work by Selmer (2002). The positive relationship between cultural distance and, expatriate adjustment and cultural competence is explained by Selmer (2002) as resulting from the way people selectively perceive their environment; when working in a host country having a similar culture they avoid information that does not match their beliefs of similarity. This is a trap that expatriates from similar cultures may fall into due to assumptions made about the host country culture. In this study the hypothesis are tested in the context of the academic expatriate in the UAE.

### 3 Method

#### 3.1 Sample

We had 103 academic expatriates across different tertiary education institutions in the UAE voluntarily participate in this study. An online questionnaire was used to collect data. Demographic data consisted of age, level of education, job title, professional tenure, previous experience in the GCC and culture of origin. The demographic data on culture of origin was used as an objective measure for cultural similarity.

#### 3.2 Instrument

The measure of cultural competence utilised is that by Schim and Miller (1999). The items are shown in Table 1, appended to this article. This measure has been tested for validity and reliability yielding positive results on both validity and reliability (Doorenbos et al., 2005; Loftin et al., 2013).

**Table 1** Items measuring cultural competence

<i>Items</i>
I find ways to adapt to students' cultural preferences
I welcome feedback from co-workers about how I relate to others with different cultures
I avoid making generalisations about groups of people
I act to remove obstacles for people of different cultures when students identify them to me
I act to remove obstacles for people of different cultures when I identify them
I ask students to tell me about their expectations
I ask students to tell me about their own meanings
I welcome feedback from students about how I relate to others with different cultures
I document cultural adaptations I make with students
I recognise potential barriers to service that might be encountered by different people
I use a variety of sources to learn about the cultural heritage of other people
I seek information on cultural needs when I identify new students
I ask my co-workers not to make comments or jokes about cultural group characteristics in the workplace
I learn from my co-workers about people with different cultural heritages
I have resource books and other materials available to help me learn about students from different cultures

**Table 1** Items measuring cultural competence (continued)

<i>Items</i>
Even if I know about a person's culture, I assess their personal preferences
Language barriers are not the only difficulties for students
Spirituality and religious beliefs are important aspects in many cultural groups
People with a common cultural background often have individual differences
I think that knowing about different cultural groups helps direct my work with students
Students may identify with more than one cultural group
I believe that everyone should be treated with respect no matter what their cultural heritage is
I understand that people from different cultures may define the concept of education in different ways

The adjustment scale by Black and Stephens (1989) was also part of the online questionnaire. This consists of 14 items (Table 2 appended to this article) that are split into three subscales. Seven items for the cultural adjustment subscale, 4 items for the interactional adjustment subscale and 3 items for the work adjustment subscale. Items are measured on a seven-point Likert-type scale ranging from completely adjusted to very unadjusted.

**Table 2** Items measuring adjustment

<i>Items</i>
Living conditions in general
Housing conditions
Food
Shopping
Cost of living
Entertainment/recreation facilities and opportunities
Healthcare facilities
Socialising with host nationals
Interacting with host nations on a day to day basis
Interaction with host nations outside of work
Speaking with host nationals
Specific job responsibilities
Performance standards and expectations
Supervisory responsibilities

### 3.3 Analyses of data

The profile of participants is summarised in Table 3, appended to this article.

**Table 3** Participants' profile

<i>Culture of origin</i>		<i>Years of experience</i>		<i>Age</i>			<i>Rank</i>	
<i>Non-Arab</i>	<i>Arab</i>	<i>Less than 12 years</i>	<i>12 or more</i>	<i>Less than 45</i>	<i>45 to 54</i>	<i>More than 54</i>	<i>Lecturer</i>	<i>Assistant Professor</i>
69.6%	30.4%	49.5	50.5%	37.7%	45.3	17%	50%	50%

The two hypothesis under study are: *H1* – there is a positive relationship between cultural distance and expatriate social adjustment; *H2* – there is a positive relationship between cultural distance and expatriate cultural competence. In the following section the findings of the statistical hypothesis testing are presented. Firstly, the scores of the two independent variables of cultural competence and adjustment are taken as a whole in testing the relationship with the dependent variable of culture of origin (cultural distance and cultural similarity). Secondly, the scores of the two independent variables are analysed separately to test the relationship between culture of origin and social adjustment and, culture of origin and cultural competence. The statistical tool used was SPSS to carry out descriptive statistics and hypothesis testing. Results are shown in the section below.

#### 4 Results

On the scale of cultural competence, overall findings show a moderately higher mean for participants whose cultural origin is non-Arabic (mean = 4.19; SD = .40) when compared to the mean for participants form an Arabic cultural origin (mean = 4.05; SD = .32). This implies that academic expatriates from a cultural background that is different to that of the host country score better on cultural competence than academic expatriates from a cultural background that is similar to that of the host country.

On the scale of cultural adjustment, overall findings show a moderately higher mean for participants whose cultural origin is non-Arabic (mean = 4.16; SD = .34) when compared to the mean for participants form an Arabic cultural origin (mean = 4.06; SD = .21). Similarly to the above implications concerning cultural competence, results imply that academic expatriates from a cultural background that is different to that of the host country score better on cultural adjustment than academic expatriates from a cultural background that is similar to that of the host country. Therefore indicating support for the cultural distance paradox, both for cultural competence and cultural adjustment.

**Table 4** Dependent variables – culture of origin, years of experience, age and rank

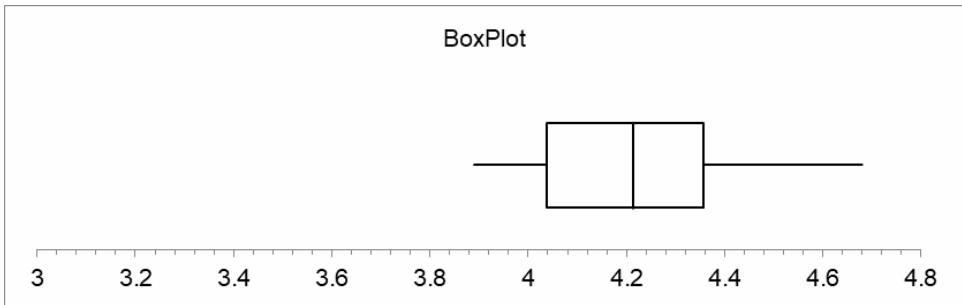
		<i>Culture of origin</i>		<i>Years of experience</i>		<i>Age</i>		<i>Rank</i>	
		<i>Arab</i>	<i>Non-Arab</i>	<i>0 to 1</i>	<i>12 or more</i>	<i>35 to 44</i>	<i>55 and above</i>	<i>Lecturer</i>	<i>Assistant Professor</i>
Cultural competence	Mean	4.05	4.19	3.96	4.13	4.06	4.16	4.13	3.99
	Standard deviation	.32	.40	0.42	0.38	.29	.32	.35	.52
Adjustment	Mean	4.06	4.16	4.01	4.23	4.19	4.32	4.15	4
	Standard deviation	.21	.33	.53	.21	.29	.29	.32	.27

Descriptive statistics for the dependent variable of culture of origin and the separate independent variables of cultural competence and adjustment (Table 4, appended to this article) show that when the independent variables are analysed separately the group of non-Arab expatriates score more on cultural competence and adjustment. Therefore providing evidence for the acceptance of the following hypothesis: *H1*: there is a positive relationship between cultural distance and expatriate social adjustment; *H2*: there is a

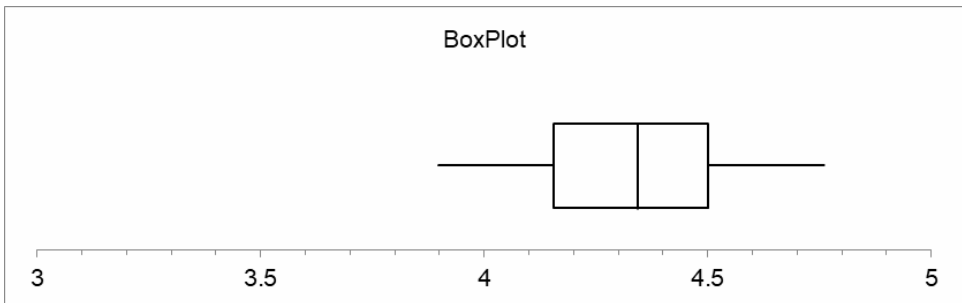


positive relationship between cultural distance and expatriate cultural competence. The standard deviation for the group of expatriates with an Arab culture of origin is smaller for both cultural competence and adjustment showing less variation in scores (Figures 1, 2, 3 and 4 that are appended to this article). Box plots have been used in these figures to graphically display the spread of scores on cultural competence and cultural adjustment for participants from an Arab and non-Arab culture. Box plots confirm that academic expatriates from a cultural background that is different to that of the host country score better on cultural adjustment and competence than academic expatriates from a cultural background that is similar to that of the host country. The box plots also show that there are no outliers in the data.

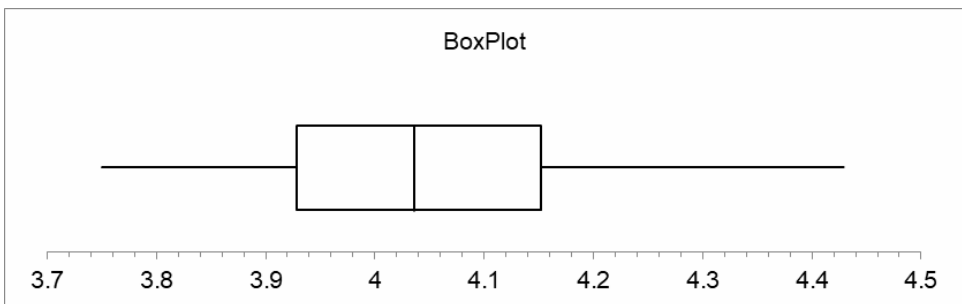
**Figure 1** Box plot – cultural competence and Arab culture

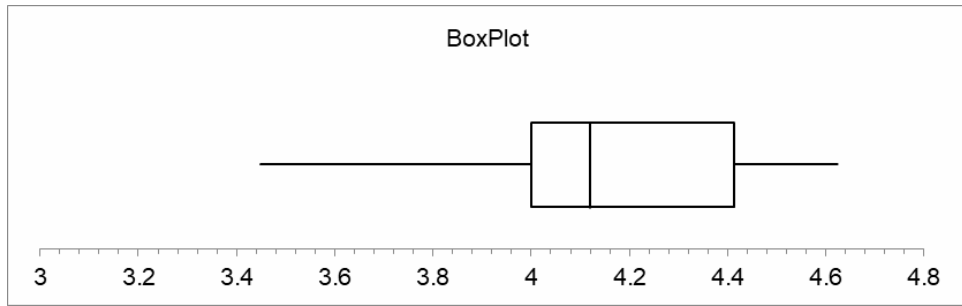


**Figure 2** Box plot – cultural competence and non-Arab culture



**Figure 3** Box plot – adjustment and Arab culture



**Figure 4** Box plot – adjustment and non-Arab culture

Hypothesis testing for both groups of participants (from a non-Arab culture and from an Arab culture) for the adjustment scale, at a 95% confidence level, results in a t-value of 2.034, with a p-value of 0.490, which is less than  $\alpha = 0.05$ . There is enough evidence to accept the following hypothesis: *H1*: There is a positive relationship between cultural distance and expatriate social adjustment. The margin of error is of .11. In addition, as reported by one way ANOVA there was a statistical significance between the groups of Arabs and non-Arabs ( $F(1, 6) = 5.35, p = 0.04$ ). The result is less than  $\alpha$  at 95% confidence level.

Hypothesis testing for both groups of participants (from a non-Arab culture and from an Arab culture) for the cultural competence scale, at a 95% confidence level, results in a t-value of 2.24, with a p-value of .034, which is less than  $\alpha = 0.05$ . There is enough evidence to accept the following hypothesis: *H2*: There is a positive relationship between cultural distance and expatriate cultural competence. The margin of error is of .23. In addition, as reported by one way ANOVA there was a statistical significance between the groups of Arabs and non-Arabs ( $F(1, 26) = 5.03, p = .0337$ ). The result is less than  $\alpha$  at 95% confidence level.

The effects of the dependent variables of age, years of experience and rank on the independent variables of cultural competence and adjustment could not be significantly tested within the specific groups of participants from an Arab culture and a non-Arab culture due to the sample size. However the effects of the dependent variables of age, years of experience and rank on the independent variables of cultural competence and adjustment were still tested across all participants irrespective of their culture of origin. However, also in this case, sample size limitations did not allow for hypothesis testing.

Results in Table 4 show that for both cultural competence and adjustment academic expatriates with more years of experience (12 years or more), older in age (45 years or more) and within the rank of Lecturer have higher scores. Therefore cultural competence and adjustment when measured separately follow the same patterns. With regards to years of experience the least consistent from both sets of scores for the independent variables are for the group between 0 and 1 year of experience who also scored least on cultural competence and adjustment. Also the scores for Assistant Professor on cultural competence are not consistent and have a high standard deviation.

## 5 Discussion

### 5.1 *Main findings*

The main finding of this study is that there is a positive relationship between cultural distance and, expatriate social adjustment and cultural competence when the latter two independent variables are analysed separately. Self-initiated academic expatriates working in the UAE from a non-Arab culture have gone through a process of personal, social and work adaptation leading to feelings of comfort towards the environment and better functioning more than their Arab counterparts. In addition non-Arab expatriates have incorporated into their everyday practice their cultural learning more than their Arab counterparts.

The majority of studies in literature adopted a measure of adaptation when investigating culture and academic expatriates, the current study adds value as it adds the measure of cultural competence to the measure used by previous studies. Whilst authors, such as O'Grady and Lane (1996) Hemmasi and Downes (2013), and Vromand and van Engen (2013), found evidence supporting the hypothesis and theoretical framework of this study that there is a positive relationship between cultural distance and expatriate social adjustment others, such as Babiker et al. (1980), Furnham and Bochner (1986), Ward and Kennedy (1993), and Isakovic and Whitman (2013), found evidence in support of the null hypothesis (there is no significant and positive relationship between cultural distance and expatriate social adjustment). On cultural competence, research so far is limited and existing literature mainly takes a narrow perspective researching language competence. Existing research (Welch et al., 2005; Peltokorpi, 2010; Abugre and Debrah, 2013; Inocian et al., 2015) leans in support of the null hypothesis of this study.

Overall findings in this study on adjustment and competence support the above literature that states that there is a positive relationship between cultural distance and adjustment. This result reveals that academic expatriates from an Arab culture working in the UAE are going through a process of selective perception and dissonance as explained by Selmer (2002) in the theoretical framework of this study. Academic expatriates from an Arab culture who are working in the UAE are selectively perceiving their environment avoiding information that does not match his/her beliefs of similarity. As a result problems in adjustment may occur. Also with reference to the theoretical framework by Selmer's (2002) the phase of unfreezing in the process of change, as theorised by Kurt Lewin (1951), is being slowed down for academic expatriates from an Arab culture because differences in culture are passing unnoticed.

### 5.2 *Limitations*

A limitation in this study may be the imbalance between participants from an Arab cultural origin and those from a non-Arab cultural origin. Further research may be carried out on samples that are larger and more balanced between the two groups. Larger samples may also allow for further investigation into the ages, gender, length of experience and rank within each specific cultural group and how these influence adjustment and cultural competence.

Generalisability of research results may be considered to be a further limitation of this study. The aim of this study is not to claim that results may be generalised to the entire group of academic expatriates or to the entire Arab culture. Results are not applicable to

all types of expatriates and academic expatriates. However they may be of interest to readers and researchers interested in the cultural distance paradox in the specific context of the UAE. Further research that spans different contexts and cultures, as well as explores differences within same cultures, is a recommendation that results from this research.

### *5.3 Implications*

Practical implications of this study are for the recruitment and selection of academic expatriates as well as orientation training. Similarity in culture of origin according to the findings of this research is not a valid selection criteria. In addition orientation programmes should not discriminate between expatriates of similar or different cultures to the host country culture. Further research on the cultural distance paradox is recommended in a host country having a different culture.

The importance of the academic cadre's preparedness to address issues related to culture cannot be stressed upon enough particularly in the sub-group of academic expatriates. An implication of this study is that cultural preparedness needs to be addressed also amongst academic expatriates whose culture closely resembles that of the culture they are teaching in. Culture remains relevant irrespective of one's own culture of origin. Culture also remains a relevant topic for further research in the specific field of academic expatriates.

## **6 Conclusions**

Overall findings in this study on adjustment and competence support the above literature that states that there is a positive relationship between cultural distance and adjustment. This result reveals that academic expatriates from an Arab culture working in the UAE are going through a process of selective perception and dissonance as explained by Selmer (2002) in the theoretical framework of this study. Academic expatriates from an Arab culture who are working in the UAE are selectively perceiving their environment avoiding information that does not match his/her beliefs of similarity. As a result problems in adjustment may occur. Also with reference to the theoretical framework by Selmer's (2002) the phase of unfreezing in the process of change, as theorised by Kurt Lewin (1951), is being slowed down for academic expatriates from an Arab culture because differences in culture are passing unnoticed. These findings have fundamental implications for all types of organisations and not just Universities who are recruiting, selecting and training expatriates.

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