



## Cross-Cultural Adaptation Across Migrant Pathways: Understanding Different Starting Points and Experiences

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### Audience

This exercise is appropriate for:

- Participants in cultural capability / intercultural training, focusing on building individual and organizational capacity to enable culturally responsive service delivery amongst staff working with culturally and linguistically diverse individuals and communities.
- Undergraduate and graduate students in an Intercultural Communication course.

### Goal

The primary goal of this exercise is to demonstrate that not all migrant groups experience adaptation in the same way; their starting position is not always equal, with success influenced by numerous internal and external factors.

To achieve this, the concept of cross-cultural adaptation is introduced, followed by a scenario-based activity where participants are assigned a migrant profile (e.g., skilled professional, refugee, international student, or family reunification migrant) and given a scenario to reflect aspects of their profile as helpful or challenging to their adaptation.

As learning outcomes, by the end of this activity participants will be able to:

1. Apply the concept of cross-cultural adaptation to real-life scenarios.
2. Compare and contrast migrant experiences across different pathways.
3. Analyze internal (individual) and external (structural) factors influencing adaptation.





## Description

### 1. Introduction of cross-cultural adaptation (5-10 minutes)

To set up the activity, cross-cultural adaptation is introduced briefly, highlighting the dynamic process by which individuals build and sustain mutually beneficial and functional connections in the new environment (Kim, 2001). Central to the concept is the placement of adaptation at the intersection of the individual and the environment into which they are entering. Cross-cultural adaptation does not occur in the same way for everyone, for even when people arrive at the same place at the same time, experiences and outcomes may differ.

As the underpinning theoretical framework, cross-cultural adaptation should be explained as a dynamic and multidimensional process influenced by interactions between individuals and the environments they enter. As part of this process, psychological, sociocultural, and communicative adjustments occur, with varying outcomes. These outcomes depend on a range of variables including personal resources, social networks, and structural barriers. Cross-cultural adaptation therefore is relational, and not just an individual undertaking, with adaptation occurring unevenly across different areas of life.

Kim's (2001) model of communication and cross-cultural adaptation may be used to provide a structured framework highlighting internal (personal resources and disposition), and external (situational and environmental) factors influencing adaptation.

### 2. Activity (Group allocation, reading, and group discussion, 15 minutes)

2.1 Participants are divided into four groups; each assigned a character profile:

Chae-Won – A skilled professional with strong technical qualifications through a degree in Information Technology from a top Korean university. She has a strong sense of curiosity and willingness to learn, and some English language proficiency. However, Chae-Won does not have any local professional networks and is unfamiliar with Australian recruitment norms.





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Ahmed – A refugee from Syria with limited formal education. He is a resilient young man who is multilingual, starting to learn English, with a strong sense of community. Ahmed has experienced disrupted education, been exposed to trauma, and is unfamiliar with the Australian labor market and recruitment norms.

Peter – An international student from India with good English skills but no work experience. Peter is pursuing a Bachelor of Commerce at a well-regarded university in his host country. He has strong English proficiency and educational mobility but limited local work experience, and he is uncertain about translating his student status into employment. His visa allows him to work a limited number of hours per week during the semester.

Jasmin – A Nepalese with 5 years of experience as an aged care support worker in Nepal, she holds a Certificate in Individual Support that has been formally recognized in her host country. She has joined her sister through a family unification pathway. She has some English language skills, juggles family responsibilities with 2 young children, and is with her husband who found a position as a warehouse worker. She is concerned that her overseas work history may be undervalued by local employers despite her recognized qualification.

2.2 Participants are then presented with a scenario:

You have moved to a new country three months ago and are looking for work. Consider your personal circumstances and what aspects of your profile are helpful, and what might create challenges in your job search. Consider internal and external issues, including examples of human capital, social capital, and structural barriers that your character might experience.

2.3 Small group discussion

Individually or in groups, depending on group size, address the following questions:

- What are at least three barriers you might be facing?
- What strengths / advantages might you have in your job search?





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- What factors beyond individual effort might influence how successfully you adapt to this situation? Consider personal, social, cultural, and structural factors.

If time permits, participants may also respond using alternative positions:

- An employer
- A policy maker

### 3. Facilitated discussion and debrief (20 minutes)

3.1 Small groups present their answers to the class

3.2 Facilitated group discussion

Participants are invited to share their takeaways from the activity.

Facilitators may consider the following prompts for discussion:

- What role do you think local networks play in assisting migrants adapt to their new environment?
- To what extent does knowledge of the host language play a part in long-term outcomes for migrants?
- What other factors do you think are important to a migrant's adaptation experience? Consider both micro and macro level influences.
- Rate the character's likely adjustment in each domain from 1 to 5 (1=low; 5=high): employment readiness, language confidence, social connection, well-being, and access to services. Where did small group members agree easily, and where did they disagree? What drove the difference?

Facilitators should ensure they link participant responses back to the cross-cultural adaptation model, highlighting that adaptation is shaped by the interaction between an individual and their environment, not just personal motivation or effort alone.

Conclude by noting that while individual agency can play an important role in adaptation,





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factors such as access to opportunities, social support, policies, services, and organizational practices may also influence adjustment experiences and outcomes.

## Time Required

This activity can be completed in 40 minutes (including the time required to explain cross-cultural adaptation).

## Hints for Success

Set up the physical space of the room such that participants in each group can face each other during discussion.

To encourage active participation, allow time for participants to get to know each other in their group as a way to build trust and rapport.

Print out each character profile for each group ahead of time so they have these profiles in front of them as they go through the activity.

During discussion, record themes on a board, grouping them under personal, social, and structural factors.

Always link participant responses back to the adaptation model where possible.

## Supplies Required

White board and markers, and print outs.

## Resources

Bierwiazzonek, K., Vu, D. H., Tong, R., Cheung, M. W.-L., Benningstad, N. C. G., van Duin, E., Lindholm, K., Ward, C., & Kunst, J. R. (2025). A meta-analysis of social and contextual correlates of migrant adaptation to living in receiving societies. *Nature Communications*, 16(1), Article 11231. <https://doi.org/10.1038/s41467-025-67468-z>





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Bierwiazzonek, K., & Waldzus, S. (2016). Socio-cultural factors as antecedents of cross-cultural adaptation in expatriates, international students, and migrants: A review. *Journal of Cross-Cultural Psychology, 47*(6), 767-817.

De La Garza, A. T., & Ono, K. A. (2015). Rethorizing adaptation: Differential adaptation and critical intercultural communication. *Journal of International and Intercultural Communication, 8*(4), 269-289.

Kim, Y. Y. (2017). Integrative communication theory of cross-cultural adaptation. In Y. Y. Kim (Ed.), *The international encyclopedia of intercultural communication*. New York: John Wiley & Sons. doi: 10.1002/9781118783665.ieicc0041

Kim, Y. Y. (2001). *Becoming intercultural: An integrative theory of communication and cross-cultural adaptation*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

### Source

I developed this exercise. Others are welcome to use and adapt it.

