

CULTURAL AND SOCIAL DIFFERENCES AS ONE OF THE ASPECTS OF THE INTEGRATION OF FOREIGN SCIENTIFIC AND ACADEMIC STAFF IN THE CZECH REPUBLIC

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Submitted: 2022-09-05

Accepted: 2023-01-12

Published online: 2023-06-30

Abstract

This article aims to provide information about cultural and social differences as an obstacle to integrating foreign staff working in research and higher education institutions in the Czech Republic. The theory was based on the individual concept of the social-ecological perspective, which is disadvantaged by an unfamiliar environment, and the intention of internationalizing tertiary education in the Czech Republic. This questionnaire-based quantitative research was supplemented with open-ended questions to increase its validity. The questions were processed using open coding without counting frequencies. The reason for this was to find out aspects of integration without radical generalization. It mainly dealt with capturing an accurate picture of the respondents' feelings. The answers brought fresh insights into the integration of foreign scientists and academics. The respondents reported on cultural differences and their view of society. Also, they drew attention to problems and barriers in integration at the workplace and everyday life in the Czech Republic. The results revealed the need for standardized support in the form of coordinated integration services to help remove cultural, social, and other barriers arising when working in an intercultural environment.

Keywords: *Acculturation; Adaptation; Foreign staff; Integration; Internationalization; Scientific research institution; University*

INTRODUCTION

In today's globalized world, the migration of highly qualified people is common. In tertiary education, migration concerns scientific research and academic workers (SRAW) (Lowell and Findlay, 2001; Sperduti, 2017). The motivation of an SRAW to migrate is different. It can be caused by the attractiveness of a famous university, location, the need to amplify one's qualifications, gain experience, or involvement in international projects. The reasons can also be personal and economic (Ackers, 2008; Fichtnerová and Vacková, 2021; Marcu, 2014; Ravenstein, 1889; Shachar,

2006; Wiers-Jenssen, 2009). Europe attracts researchers and academics from third countries (Sbalchiero and Tuzzi, 2017). Experts from abroad are a specific group. Their knowledge and skills help to increase the competitiveness of the country they work in (Behle, 2014; Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology, 2020). The Czech Republic supports their migration through internationalizing higher education (Knight and de Witt, 2018). The immigrants leaving their country of origin (Amnesty International, 2020) and migrating for highly skilled work enter a new environment. Such an unfamiliar environment

may emasculate their previous social status and living standard. The European Commission has issued the European Charter for Researchers and the Code of Conduct for the Recruitment of Researchers, regulating the rights and rules for migrating and receiving SRAWs to support them. The Government of the Czech Republic has used indicators to set up a strategic framework that sets measurable and binding goals for the state administration and the quality-of-life concept in the Czech Republic (Office of the Government of the Czech Republic, 2017; Government of the Czech Republic, 2019). This framework supports the integration into a healthy life and the use of opportunities for immigrants in the new country (Maussen et al., 2018).

Vacková (2017) discusses controlled immigration initiated in the Czech Republic by actively selecting qualified third-country nationals. She presents an optimal solution to issues related to financing the pension system, active participation in the EU tax system, and the influx of labour – where the state can save on demanding professional and knowledge preparation (Vacková, 2017). An immigrant needs to adapt as quickly as possible to society's values, language, culture, and working conditions. SRAWs have a high level of education, but like any individual, they undergo a challenging social change that can cause stress, cultural shock, and possibly even health problems. The integration process (orientation in a new environment, language acquisition, acculturation) is managed by each individual according to their individual abilities (Vacková et al., 2016a; Půtová, 2017). It is essential to become familiar with the new environment (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Germain, 1981; Gitterman and Germain, 2008; Shelton, 2018; Smelser and Baltes, 2001). This process affects mental and physical health, overall satisfaction, and the perception of the quality of life (Kondrat, 2013; Škotáková, 2020). Research in the United States (based on the paradigm of work and health ecology) has shown that the work environment supports the quality of life of staff and emphasizes the importance of strategies to improve social ecology through appropriate services (Stokols et al., 1996). Employers should consider the environment and health determinants of SRAWs (Vacková et al., 2016a; Wilkinson and Marmot, 2003) and provide supportive ad-

aptation and integration services to maintain their social, mental, and physical well-being (WHO, 2012).

MATERIALS AND METHODS

This quantitative research used the empirical method. The research tool was a self-constructed questionnaire with 100 questions. With the approval of the project supervisor of COST No. SDZ20152_002, which studied the social and health situation of immigrants in South Bohemia between 2012 and 2015, we used several questions in the questionnaire published in the book "Social determinants of health among foreigners living in South Bohemia" (Vacková et al., 2016b). The study included 221 respondents. The data was obtained in June 2019, when neither pandemic measures in 2020 and 2021 nor the 2022 war crisis in Ukraine restricted SRAW mobility. We used SASD 14.10 (Statistical Data Analysis) and SPSS (IBM Statistical Package for Social Sciences, version 24) to analyse the data. The analyses were supplemented with qualitative research for higher validity. We conducted a qualitative analysis of open-ended responses to additional questions. Additional open-ended questions were processed using open coding without frequency counts in the ATLAS.ti 7 programme. The respondents could express their feelings and opinions on sociocultural differences or discrimination and shortcomings in services for SRAW.

Risk of research: The Czech Statistical Office (CZSO) does not record the category of foreigners working in scientific research institutions or universities in the Czech Republic (risk of determining the total number of international workers in the Czech Republic). Records exist only according to demographic characteristics, work, and trade licenses, without partial differentiation into scientific, professional, or mental workers (CZSO, 2014). Information about the size of the primary group was obtained by contacting the foreign departments of all 26 public universities in the Czech Republic and the Euraxess project in Prague. It is a service centre for foreign scientific research workers at the Centre for Joint Activities of the Czech Academy of Sciences. In addition, an analysis of annual reports on the activities of all public univer-

sities was conducted. It includes recalculated numbers of foreign employees – point 6.5 Academic and Scientific Workers with Foreign Citizenship (average recalculated numbers). The expected target group for the quantitative research was estimated at a maximum of 3,000 foreign staff members living long-term in the Czech Republic.

We gave the values of the chi-square goodness-of-fit test, and the independence test as part of the description of the analysed statistically significant links in the article. We calculated the level of possible deviation for each box of the contingency table to determine the direction of a statistically significant relationship between two traits. In cases of insufficient observations, we applied the Yates correction.

RESULTS

Primary sociodemographic data

The respondents were long-term or permanent residents of the Czech Republic. They included 137 men (62%) and 84 women (38%). 78.7% of respondents were under 44 and 21.3% over 45 (average year of birth 1981). 88% migrated for employment (primarily scientific research and teaching), 8% for study, and 4% for family. 86.8% had a long-term residence permit in the Czech Republic, 10% had a permanent residence permit, and 3.2% had a repeating short-term residence. 61.6% had been in the Czech Republic for up to 5 years, and 38.4% for over 5 years.

The respondents had a PhD degree and higher (69%), or Bc., Mgr. and Ing. degrees (30%), and 2 had other education. Most respondents were scientific, professional, and intellectual workers (88%). Most respondents were from South Bohemia (54 people – 24.4%), followed by Prague (52 people – 23.5%), Olomouc (49 people – 22.2%), South Moravia (31 people – 14%), Pilsen (11 people – 5%), Liberec (7 people – 3.2%), Ústí upon Elbe (5 people – 2.3%), the Moravian-Silesian Region, Hradec Králové (4 people each – 1.8%), Pardubice (3 people – 1.4%), and one person from Vysočina (0.5%). Most respondents were from public universities (173 – 78.3%) or the Academy of Sciences of the Czech Republic (29 people – 13%). The others were from other scientific research institutions (16 people –

7.3%) – two from a state university (0.9%), and one from a private university (0.5%).

Most respondents (Chart 1) were from European countries, *i.e.*, Ukraine 8.6% (19), Slovakia 7.7% (17), Italy 6.0% (13), Spain 4.9% (11), Germany 4.5% (10), and Russian Federation 4.1% (9). Another 64.3% (142) were from the European continent: France (8), Greece (7), Great Britain (6), Poland (5), Portugal (4), Romania (4), Turkey (4), Belgium, Belarus, Croatia, Hungary, Netherlands, Austria, Serbia (two people each), Finland, and Sweden (one person each). Participating respondents from countries outside Europe were from India (19), Iran (13), the USA (10), Mexico (4), Pakistan (4), Egypt, South Africa, Nepal, Taiwan (three each), Armenia, Bangladesh, China, Canada, Costa Rica, Malaysia, Vietnam (two each), Argentina, Brazil, Georgia, Chile, Indonesia, Japan, Colombia, Lebanon, Morocco, Syria, Tunisia, and Venezuela (one each).

Adapting to a new environment

SRAWs stated that at the beginning of their stay in the Czech Republic, they mainly relied on the support of colleagues from their countries of origin, their employer, or the Euraxess project. Different conditions and processes at the workplace were perceived as an obstacle to integration. There was a lack of familiarization with work procedures, forms, and tutorials in English. Respondents also pointed to socio-cultural differences in the workplace and differences in academic and scientific systems compared to their country of origin. The Czech language was a significant obstacle in orientation and communication, even though most of the VET working at universities in the Czech Republic can use English as a “lingua franca” (Barančicová and Zerzová, 2015). Obstacles and perceived differences often concerned arranging basic life needs after arriving in the Czech Republic, *e.g.*, looking for accommodation. Czech citizens were often afraid of accommodating foreigners. Rents were either overpriced, or affordable housing was technically outdated or poorly equipped. Another frequently mentioned problem was registration with a general practitioner/specialist doctor who would take a new foreign patient and, if necessary, communicate in English. SRAWs also experienced difficulties opening a bank account, registering with a

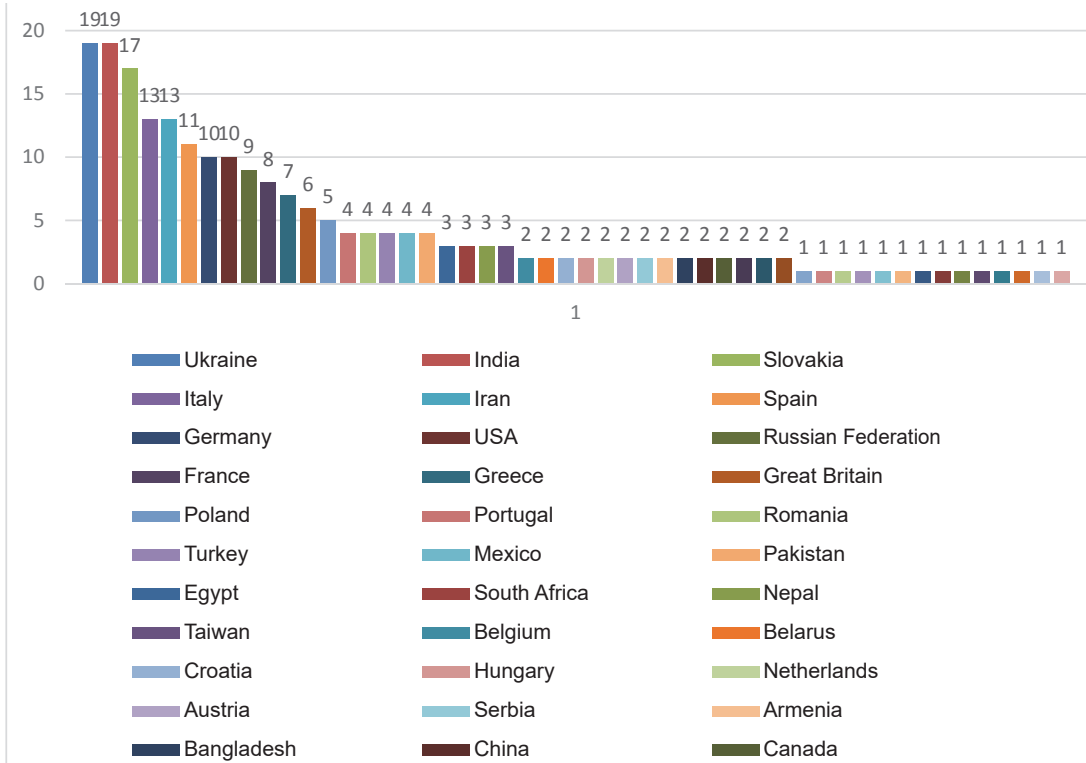


Chart 1 – Respondents’ countries of origin (50 countries)

mobile phone operator, and looking for legal and translation services. The HR department of the employer usually provided advice on taxes, health insurance and social security. Employing foreigners is complicated from the point of view of international agreements in the tax field. HR professionals often have to contact financial authorities, the Czech Social Security Administration, and health insurance companies, or cooperate with specialist companies such as HLB Proxy. SRAWs assessed the quality and range of services (dissatisfied – somewhat dissatisfied - neither satisfied nor dissatisfied – somewhat satisfied – very satisfied) differently. Some were dissatisfied with the complete absence of services, while some expressed satisfaction.

We studied the relationship between respondents’ satisfaction with the quality of their employers’ services and the subjective assessment of selected variables (satisfaction with the working environment, feeling “at home” in the Czech Republic, knowledge of

the Czech language, interaction with Czech people, observance of cultural traditions, frequency of use of services, and assessment of the quality of life in the Czech Republic) – Table 1.

We showed a statistically significant connection between assessing the employers’ service quality and satisfaction with the work environment. Respondents who assessed the employers’ service quality as ‘good’ significantly more often stated they were satisfied with their work environment. Respondents assessing the employers’ service quality as ‘poor/average’ were significantly more likely to say they were dissatisfied with the work environment or chose a neutral position (neither satisfied nor dissatisfied). Another statistically significant connection confirmed that respondents who assessed the employers’ service quality as ‘good’ significantly more often stated that they felt “at home” in the Czech Republic. Those assessing the employers’ service quality as ‘poor/average’ significantly

Table 1 – The relationship between the quality of services provided by the employer and selected variables

The quality of the employer's services and...	Value χ^2	df	<i>p</i>	Stat. signif.
Satisfaction with the work environment	27.048	2	<0.001	***
Feeling "at home" in the Czech Republic	7.968	1	<0.01	**
Knowledge of the Czech language	0.848	2	0.655	n. s.
Interaction with people	17.52	2	<0.001	***
Cultural barriers	7.439	2	<0.05	*
Frequency of the use of services	14.219	1	<0.001	***
Evaluation of the quality of life	1.237	2	0.539	n. s.

Notes: χ^2 – chi-square; *p* – test of independence; df – degrees of freedom; n. s. – statistically insignificant difference; * statistically significant difference for significance level $\alpha = 0.05$; ** statistically significant difference for significance level $\alpha = 0.01$; *** statistically significant difference for significance level $\alpha = 0.001$.

more often stated they did not feel "at home" in the Czech Republic. We proved a statistically significant connection between assessing the employers' service quality and social interactions. Respondents who assessed the employers' service quality as 'good' significantly more often stated that their social interactions were excellent. Respondents who assessed their employers' service quality as 'poor/moderate' were significantly more likely to say their social interactions were 'poor/moderate'. With the good quality of services, the respondents did not report any obstacles in cultural traditions. Respondents who assessed their employers' service quality as 'good' were significantly more likely to not report any obstacles in respecting their cultural traditions. Respondents who assessed their employers' service quality as 'poor/moderate' stated significantly more often that the barriers to complying with cultural traditions were more considerable. The service quality often depended on the possibility of using it frequently. We proved that respondents who assessed their employers' service quality as 'good' were significantly more likely to say they used the services. Respondents assessing their employers' service quality as 'poor/moderate' were significantly more likely to say they did not use the service or used it only a little. In other cases, a statistically significant association between the indicators was not demonstrated.

After arriving in the Czech Republic, SRAWs find themselves in a new social and work environment. They may have problems

adapting to the workplace and experience situations that they see as stressful. The employer plays a vital role in adaptation and integration. They take care of the employee and set working conditions to achieve favourable results, such as the working environment and other factors that affect the employee when performing the agreed work and achieving the required performance. The quality of the employer's services or the projects they use, affect the removal of cultural and social barriers and contribute to faster integration into the work process in the Czech Republic. 7.7% of respondents assessed their employers' behaviour as 'bad', 19% as 'neutral', and 73.3% as 'good'. For SRAWs in a new environment, it is important to create social networks by establishing friendships and collegial and neighbourly relationships, which will help them function more effectively and integrate into society (Dvořáková et al., 2008). Psychological counselling centres are available in some institutions to solve psychological problems and negative emotional states, such as stress and culture shock (Řiháková and Filo, 2010). A suitable form of help is the buddy service for SRAWs. This is provided at some institutions by student volunteers under the heading ESN – Erasmus Student Network. SRAWs often get support from their colleagues. Some institutions are introducing emergency hotlines that provide psychosocial help or other necessary contacts, following the model of Western universities (Oxford University, 2021) for crisis resolution. Contacts of institutions and organisations or groups and com-

munities are essential for foreigners to ask for advice. In Prague, the Expat Center is a service where foreigners can find free advice. Mutual information among expatriates works through websites and social networks. There are various groups on Facebook, such as Expats in České Budějovice, which is a private group with more like 500 members. SRAWs can also find support from the Cactus Communications initiative. In line with the UN Sustainable Development Goals, this helps researchers create a fairer, more equal, and more inclusive society (Cactus Foundation, 2020). The goal of helping foreigners to integrate is value alignment and the coexistence of SRAWs with the rest of society.

The respondents described situations they considered culturally unfriendly, critical, stressful, and even culturally shocking after arriving in the Czech Republic. It is positive that only 41 (18.6%) respondents out of 221 described this issue. The adaptation process and getting used to Czech society and culture were particularly difficult for foreigners from non-European countries. According to respondents' answers, Czech people appear suspicious or even xenophobic towards foreigners, and problems often arise in shops and services due to the language barrier. It is obvious that Czech people are more closed, and it takes longer for them to establish friendly relations with a foreigner. SRAWs also mentioned differences in the situations tolerated by Czech society, incl. gender. The statements in Diagram 1 illustrate the feelings of some SRAWs.

The Latin term *discriminare* means to differentiate, which is the harmful discrimination of people based on belonging to a group regardless of individual abilities. The reasons may be race, religion, age, health, gender,

sexual orientation, political affiliation, etc. (Police of the Czech Republic, 2009; Office of the Public Defender of Rights, 2012). The first article of the Charter of Fundamental Rights and Freedoms states: "People are free and equal in dignity and rights. Basic rights and freedoms are indefeasible, inalienable, time-barred, and irrevocable" (Czech National Council, 1993). Discrimination is prohibited by the Charter of Fundamental Rights and Freedoms and other laws, norms, and rules (Police of the Czech Republic, 2009). Direct discrimination is a different treatment, and indirect discrimination disadvantages another person (Šabatová et al., 2020).

If a SRAW experienced discrimination or another critical and stressful situation, it was reflected in the subjective evaluation of selected variables (satisfaction with the working environment, assessment of their employers' service quality and the quality of living standard in the Czech Republic), as shown in Table 2.

A statistically significant connection between experiencing discrimination and satisfaction with the work environment was shown. Respondents reporting discrimination expressed less satisfaction with their work environment. Respondents who did not experience discrimination expressed significantly greater satisfaction with the work environment. It is also true that respondents not reporting discrimination were significantly more satisfied with their living standards in the Czech Republic. No statistically significant connection with their employers' service quality was demonstrated.

SRAWs met the criteria for the difference. Therefore, they were asked to describe specific situations where they experienced discrimination during their stay in the Czech

Table 2 – The association of discrimination experience with selected variables

Discrimination experience and...	Value χ^2	df	p	Stat. signif.
Satisfaction with work environment	8.271	2	<0.05	*
Employers' service quality	2.436	1	0.122	n. s.
Assessment of the quality of living standard	7.802	2	<0.05	*

Notes: χ^2 – chi-square; p – test of independence; df – degrees of freedom; n. s. – statistically insignificant difference; * statistically significant difference for significance level $\alpha = 0.05$; ** statistically significant difference for significance level $\alpha = 0.01$; *** statistically significant difference for significance level $\alpha = 0.001$.

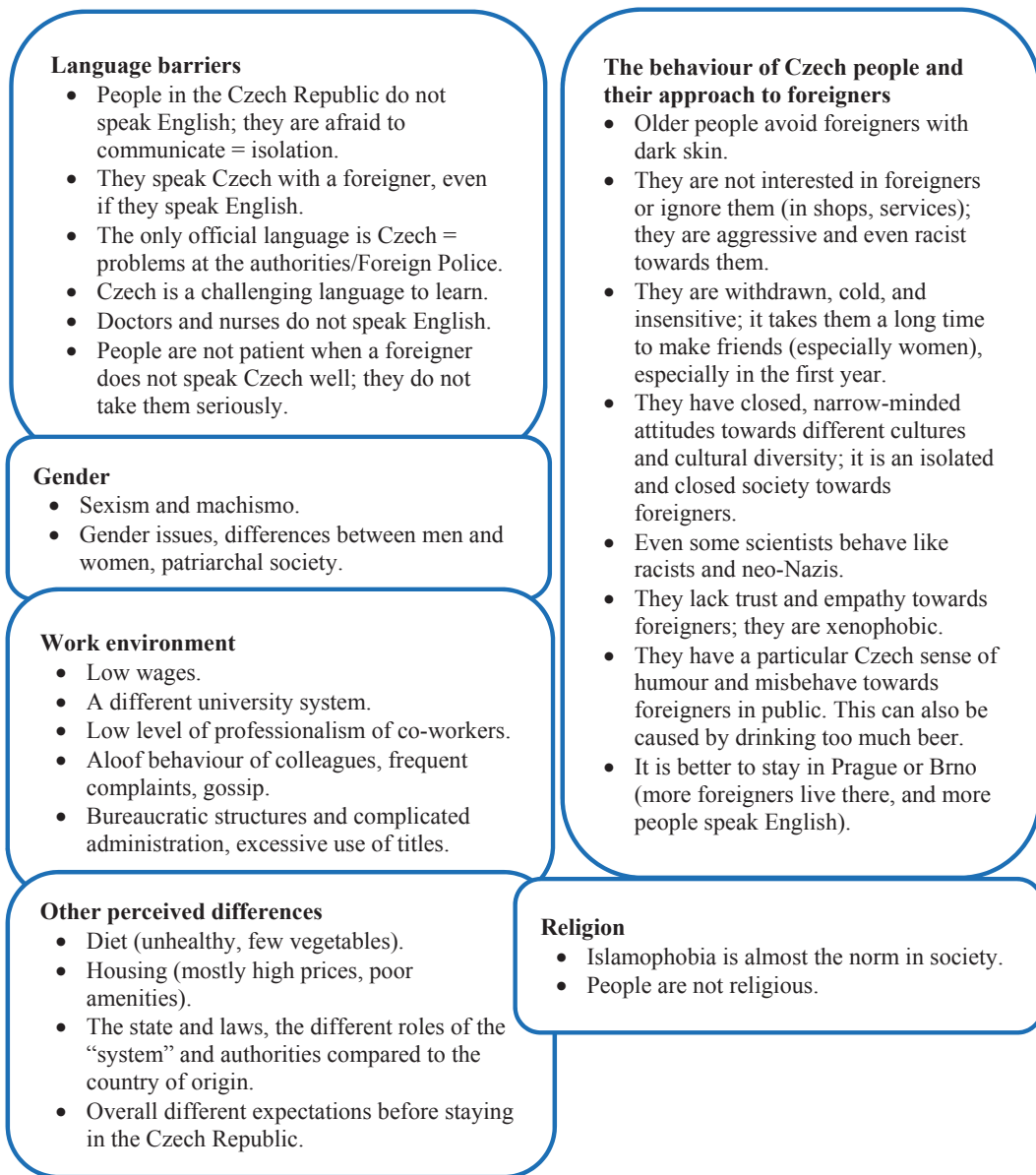


Diagram 1 – Issues and differences

Republic. 74 (33.5%) respondents decided to share these experiences. The cases were not always clearly discriminatory but probably stressful. They spoke about the prejudices and unwelcoming behaviour of some people. Many were related to the language barrier, sexist behaviour, stalking, or discrimination

based on nationality. The situations occurred in the professional environment and everyday life, e.g., in shops, services, or when looking for accommodation and treatment in medical facilities. Diagram 2 offers a description of the discriminatory situations.

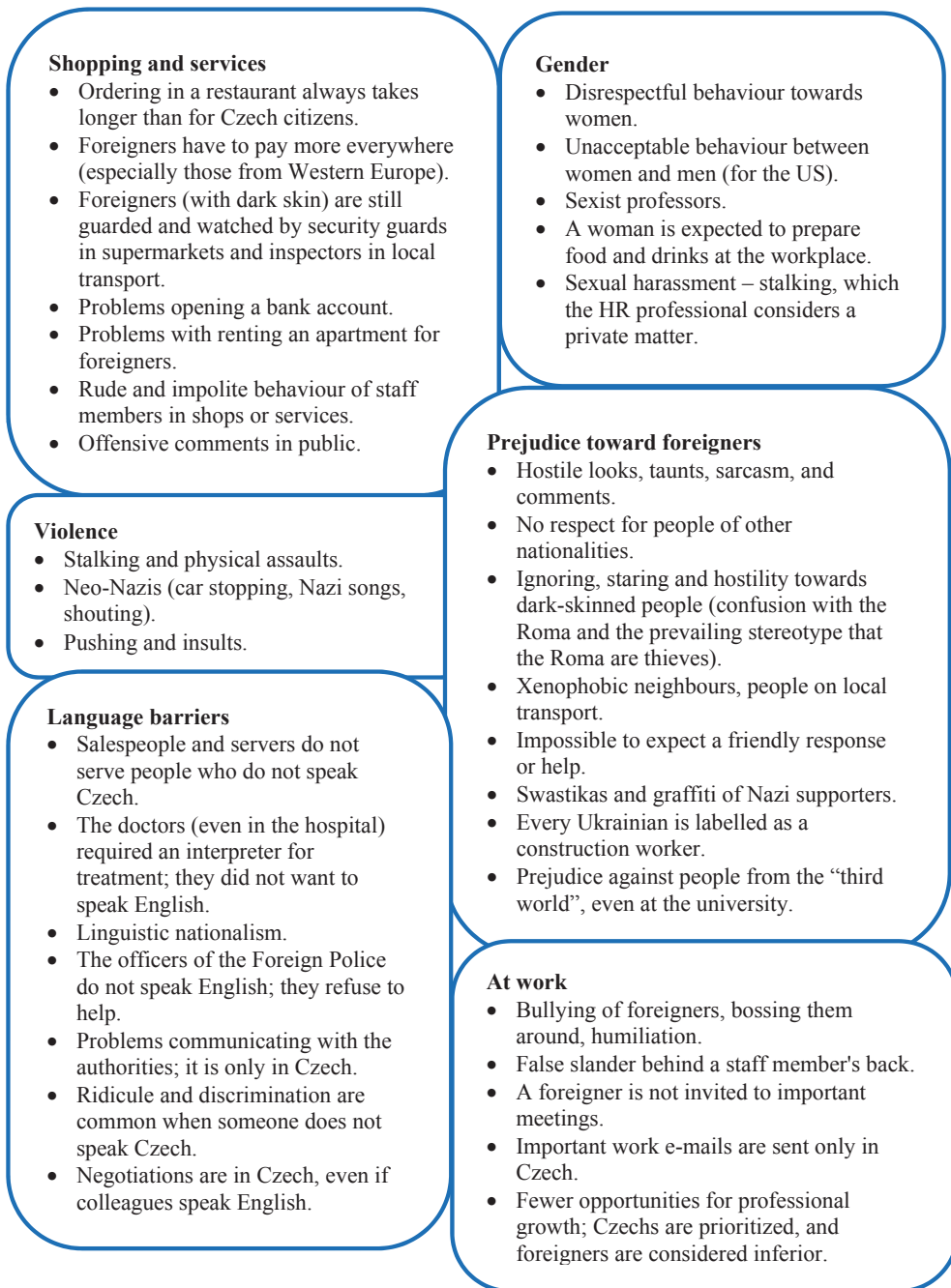


Diagram 2 – Situations related to discrimination

DISCUSSION

Although there was no information available on the total number of SRAW workers in the Czech Republic, a sufficient number (221 respondents) were willing to share their perceptions of social and cultural differences and the obstacles they encountered during their stay in the Czech Republic. Their effort to contribute to the research was evident. Their goal is to improve the situation of other foreign colleagues interested in coming to work in the Czech Republic. Globally, studies have focused on the economic perspective of the migration of highly qualified labour (Boeri et al., 2012; Teney, 2019). Existing studies primarily deal with highly educated people working in foreign countries and the benefits for the economy. Still, they do not address the problems of adaptation or integration of foreigners in a new workplace. Bauder (2015) describes the international migration of academics. He focuses on the development of the university labour market. In the Czech Republic, VET has not yet been studied from this point of view. Previous studies have mainly concerned socially excluded groups of foreigners, e.g., the Vietnamese and Ukrainians. They studied social determinants influencing their quality of life and health in the Czech Republic (Vacková et al., 2016a). This is the first critical feedback that should lead to further research and implementation of evidence-based practice in internationalization and integration strategies.

This research was based on social or environmental ecology theories and its effect on individuals disadvantaged by emigrating to a foreign environment (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Germain, 1981; Gitterman and Germain, 2008). We confirmed that the positive influence of an environment helps one to better realize their abilities and skills. Thereby, people maintain the quality of their professional and private life. This was confirmed by Duda (1991) and Špirko (1999) in their environmental philosophy. Culturally stressful situations can have consequences for human dignity and, finally, health (Havelková and Slezáčková, 2017).

It has been statistically proven that SRAW's satisfaction with the work environment is related to the quality of their employers' services and the feeling of being "at

home", interacting with Czech citizens and assessing the quality of life during the stay in the Czech Republic. Dissatisfied respondents who did not feel "at home" negatively assessed the quality of their living standards in the Czech Republic. SRAWs who are satisfied with their work environment are more likely to achieve greater independence, quality work performance, and integrate more quickly into mainstream society. The research described cultural and mental differences as perceived by SRAWs who had been raised with different social values or had a different religion. Less than a fifth of respondents described critical situations that negatively affected their personalities. Respondents assessed the mentality of the Czech population as aloof and cold towards foreigners, and Czech society as very conservative. The language barrier caused various life obstacles at work, offices, shops, and services, or in the healthcare sector. Respondents of both sexes mentioned unpleasant gender bias and remnants of patriarchal behaviour. According to their statements, some experiences involved xenophobia and even racism.

Based on the strategies of the Ministry of Education and Culture, strategic tools are implemented to support the management of human capital from abroad through European Commission projects. One example is the HR Award project, which provides an international standard for quality assurance in managing and developing human resources in science and research (Horizont 2020, 2018). Strategic 21st-century management should reflect emerging dilemmas and multicultural values to avoid dogmatic prejudices and labelling people into predetermined categories (Nešpor, 2018). Improving intercultural working conditions is a way for the Czech Republic to increase its international appeal for foreign experts. The feedback from SRAWs was essential. Internationalisation at home means setting quality working conditions and services. Employing institutions must be aware of the situations that their SRAWs experience. Such experiences affect their mental and physical condition, work performance, and integration into Czech society. SRAWs will not find a standardised system of integration services at institutions in the Czech Republic. There is often a lack of services that would help them overcome socio-cultural bar-

riers, as well as those offering other services needed for everyday life (e.g., escort to the Foreign Police or the Department of Asylum and Migration Policy, translation services, suitable housing, school facilities for children, employment for a partner, a general or specialist doctor, legal, banking, and other services). The existence/offer of services varies from institution to institution. The Personnel Department and the Department of Foreign Affairs usually assist SRAWs. However, they are often willing foreign and Czech colleagues who do this in their spare time.

A suitable work environment supported by a service system would positively affect the integration of SRAWs. We can be inspired by the system of coordinated social rehabilitation services proposed by Pfeiffer et al. (2014). This system helps disadvantaged people in a foreign environment. The concept will be effective if it is comprehensive and includes the principles of temporal and environmental timeliness, comprehensiveness, continuity, coordination, synergy, and availability.

The services should form a compact structure in connection with external partners regarding accommodation, legal services, translation, banking, and other necessary services, e.g., searching for school facilities for children and treatment in medical facilities (which will, in particular, help female researchers or their families). The presented article should inform about the current situation of SRAWs and their perception of socio-cultural differences and obstacles during their stay in the Czech Republic. It should stimulate the implementation of the integration services for SRAWs. It is necessary to help eliminate stressful situations and psychological barriers. The position of SRAWs should not be perceived as marginal. The data regarding their integration should be regularly obtained and evaluated, further monitored, discussed, and studied.

CONCLUSION

The study provides information about an aspect of the integration process of foreign sci-

entists and academics in the Czech Republic, namely how the new work environment (university or scientific research institute) they come to work in affects them and how some of them perceive socio-cultural differences during their stay in the Czech Republic. Their employers' behaviour and service quality are of great significance/influence. Negatively perceived differences and obstacles can be the reason for the deterioration of their quality of life and health. Ultimately, it can affect their professional growth and the competitiveness of the institutions of the Czech Republic on a global scale.

The obtained information should result in more significant efforts to improve the quality of the working environment, and introducing a standardised integration services system for SRAWs in synergy with the necessary external resources should be considered. The concept of complex integration services should lead to removing obstacles that may be caused by (not only) sociocultural differences during integration into everyday life in society.

Further scientific research on the approaches and conditions for arriving foreigners and all aspects of their integration process is necessary. The result will be fewer foreigners who feel dissatisfied or experience a lower quality of life. Improving the rules for an intercultural working environment and coexistence within international teams will help to attract more foreign experts to the Czech Republic, support the acquisition and arrival of experts/highly qualified workforce on a larger scale, and strengthen excellence in science and research.

Data availability statement

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the author upon reasonable request.

Ethical aspects and conflict of interests

The authors have no conflict of interests to declare.

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