



# PLAYING WITH

# CULTURES

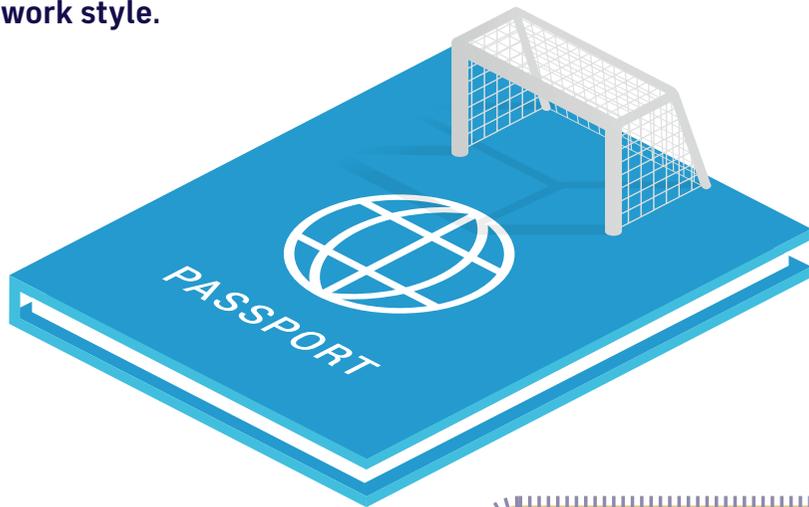
## ADAPTING TO A NEW COUNTRY

This booklet will give you a general understanding of the topic of cultural adjustment and related aspects to support foreign players adapting to their new environment.



# CULTURAL ADJUSTMENT AND WELLBEING

Football is one of the most international work environments today. When transferring abroad, players have to leave friends and family behind, learn a new language, understand another culture, and often encounter a different lifestyle, training and work style.



*"I get a lot of interview requests, but I appreciate the fact that I was asked to think along on a strategic level. Hopefully, this helps players going abroad to better deal with potentially stressful situations."*

Many players describe their cultural adjustment process as a series of ups and downs. This transition can be challenging and can affect a player's well-being as well as their performance on the pitch. Agents, football clubs and Unions all play an important role in providing foreign players with the support they require when moving to a new country.

For this reason, FIFPRO asked a group of recently retired players or active players heading towards the end of their careers about their experiences. All anonymous quotes which are included in the document are excerpts from these interviews. This booklet provides a summary of the main challenges most players face when moving abroad and how these challenges affect their wellbeing and performance.

**THIS HANDOUT INCLUDES A SERIES OF RECOMMENDATIONS ON HOW TO SUPPORT PLAYERS. MOST OF THESE WERE MADE BY THE PLAYERS THEMSELVES.**

In this document, you will find a summary of our findings, categorized by the overarching themes. Each topic concludes with a series of specific recommendations that Players' Unions as well as clubs can work to adopt or enhance in order to assist foreign players to better adjust and ultimately perform at their best, both on and off the football pitch.

When asked what they needed assistance with, players mentioned the following topics the most:

- ▶ **CULTURAL SHOCK**
- ▶ **SOCIAL SUPPORT**
- ▶ **INTERCULTURAL COMMUNICATION**
- ▶ **SHARING EXPERIENCES**
- ▶ **LANGUAGE**
- ▶ **RELOCATION SERVICES AND OTHER SUPPORT**

## RECOMMENDATIONS

Overarching recommendations mentioned by players themselves are:

- ▶ Develop programmes to raise cultural awareness
- ▶ Build a network where international players can connect, share tips and experiences
- ▶ Cooperate with clubs to ensure that players receive adequate relocation support.

***"If you integrate into the new culture earlier, everything becomes a lot easier."***

***"In the past, one of my teammates was not able to adjust well to the new country. He was anxious and was missing his family and this affected his performance on the pitch. Even where I play now, we had a foreign player joining us but he did not manage to adapt. The culture and country were totally different from his. He did not stay long with us. After one year, he left the club. So yes, it happens a lot."***

***"This is very important. Some players cannot manage their career because of the culture and the different habits in a different culture. If they do not settle in properly, it could affect them. We have seen many people that did not succeed because they could not settle in a different culture."***

# CULTURAL SHOCK

Working abroad can be a valuable and enriching experience but it comes with many challenges. When first moving abroad, everything is new and fascinating, but the differences between a player's own culture and the new environment become more visible with time and can lead to frustration and misunderstandings. This is called cultural shock and it can have detrimental effects on a person's ability to feel and be at their best.

## PRACTICAL IMPLICATIONS FOR PLAYERS

Research has shown that homesickness and cultural shock can negatively impact the players' mental well-being and, ultimately, their performance on the field. Raising awareness about the negative emotions that may arise when transferring abroad can help players prepare themselves better and implement strategies for faster adjustment to the new culture.

*"I used to get homesick. You leave training. You're home. You cook your food, by yourself in a room. There is no one to talk to. That was my life."*



## RECOMMENDATIONS

- ▶ **Mental-health support:** include topics like homesickness, loneliness, and cultural shock in mental health programs.
- ▶ **Educational programmes:** provide educational programmes that can help players and their families adjust.
- ▶ **Cooperation:** identify and cooperate with organizations that provide this type of training or let players know about their existence (i.e. list of trusted local organisations and contacts).

# SOCIAL SUPPORT

The most discussed topic was the importance of having a social support system. The sudden loss of social life and developing a new one in another city was deemed hard by most players. COVID-19 has accelerated the issue, making it increasingly more difficult for players to adapt to a new country and build a supportive social network.

## PRACTICAL IMPLICATIONS FOR PLAYERS

Research has shown that people who have family and friends to rely on in times of trouble are more likely to be satisfied with their health and perform at their best in their daily life. Since professional football players work uncommon hours, building a new social circle can be challenging. It can affect a player's experience in general, but it can be particularly problematic when dealing with setbacks like a severe injury. The partner or family of the player can also struggle socially if they don't have a determined structure to meet new people, such as a job, especially when language also constitutes a barrier. All these factors affect the players' wellbeing and experience in the new league.

"This could be a big step for the Players' Unions: try to connect foreign players from different clubs with each other to help them adapt."

*"When I was playing at Shakhtar there were other Brazilian footballers, but here at Man City there aren't any. When I was at Shakhtar, I had Brazilian teammates and I used to spend time with them, but here I'm alone. So yes, I miss Ukraine sometimes."*

*- Brazilian player Fernandinho after making the move to Manchester City.*

## RECOMMENDATIONS

- ▶ **Players network:** form a networking group by connecting foreign players with each other, both offline and online.
- ▶ **Nation-specific network:** connect players with their respective embassies and local diaspora communities.
- ▶ **Families network:** create a social support system for the family or partner of a player via networking groups and contact lists.
- ▶ **Meeting opportunities:** organize meetings or events for foreign players, connect players with the same nationality or similar regional context, when possible.

# INTERCULTURAL COMMUNICATION

**Culture matters. Culture affects the way we communicate and the way we interpret the verbal and nonverbal communication of others. What is considered a well-intentioned message in one culture may be disrespectful or inappropriate in another culture. Being aware of the different cultural perspectives and communication styles is vital for a positive integration and to avoid misunderstandings.**

## **PRACTICAL IMPLICATIONS FOR PLAYERS**

Players need to become aware of the communication styles, cultural nuances and societal trends that dominate their new cultural environment. Without this knowledge, players risk continuous miscommunications as well as cultural missteps. In recent seasons, we have seen that language that may be considered acceptable in one country, can lead to fines and backlash in another, affecting both the club, player, their reputation and career prospects.



*"The message I posted after the match on Sunday was intended as an affectionate greeting to a friend. I am completely opposed to racism and deleted the message as soon as it was explained that it can be interpreted differently. (...) I accept the disciplinary sanction knowing I am foreign to English language customs, but I do not share the point of view."*

*- Cavani about the Instagram Post that caused a 3-match ban and £100,000 fine.*



*"Generally, players from my country are culturally used to a hierarchical relationship under which there is no choice but to obey the directions of a coach or senior staff. When I moved here it was important for me to learn the cultural differences in these relationships and how to think and speak out for myself."*

## RECOMMENDATIONS

- ▶ **Information package:** welcome new foreign players with an 'information package' with insights on cultural differences, predominant cultural norms (what is considered accepted, what not) and current societal trends which can have an impact on a player's personal and professional life.
- ▶ **Cooperation:** collaborate with organizations that specialize in working and dealing with cultural differences.
- ▶ **Dialogue:** keep a dialogue with foreign players to identify which areas of support are not being covered by the clubs. Enhance cooperation and provide services that can bridge the gap, when appropriate.

# SHARING EXPERIENCES

Many players stated they had bad experiences with agents or clubs more than once during their career. Stories circulate about clubs not paying salaries on time or players living in poor conditions. However, most players only hear about a club's reputation after signing for a club, preventing them to be prepared and make informed decisions.

*"I don't even know whom to speak to. Maybe there can be a department with an anonymous helpline where you can explain your situation. Perhaps it already exists, but I'm not aware of it."*

*"What I would like is a place where we can neutrally share information. So, if I'm in contract negotiation and all I'm hearing is one thing, is there another person that I can reach out to and say: hey, I just want your thoughts, I don't need you to get involved, but does this feel right?"*

## PRACTICAL IMPLICATIONS FOR PLAYERS

Players often risk making uninformed decisions when signing for a new club, especially if agents do not disclose important information on the contexts players will find themselves involved in. The lack of information can lead to otherwise avoidable stressful circumstances.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

- ▶ **Peer-review system:** create a peer-reviewing system where players can safely share their experiences with clubs amongst each other and the Union in anonymous ways.
- ▶ **Mentorship line:** connect retired players with younger players—ideally, someone who is from or worked and lived in the same country as the mentee.
- ▶ **Union helpline:** set up a helpline where players can reach out anonymously to ask for advice when dealing with problems abroad. If already in place, proactively inform players about it.

# LANGUAGE

It seems that clubs are well aware of the significance of language support. Some provide players with interpreters; others arrange language courses. Yet, there are examples where these are not appropriate to the players' needs or are still not in place at all.

## PRACTICAL IMPLICATIONS FOR PLAYERS

It has been shown that the average football player needs around six months to a year to adjust. Yet, international transfers can occur much more frequently. For this reason, interviewees questioned whether it's always helpful to learn the host country's language. Learning a new language can be a physically and mentally exhausting process. In some cases, it can be more beneficial to learn a language that helps you communicate in the host country while also improving your career prospects, like English.

*"The language barrier, especially the first year, was tough and I did not receive any support in that sense. [...] The Unions could find ways to help players integrate into the new culture as quickly as possible. The best way is through language."*

*"The clubs know that if they have a group of foreign players that speak the same language, they will rely on each other. The clubs rely too much on this foreign player community. But it is not the players' responsibility to provide this type of support."*

## RECOMMENDATIONS

- ▶ **Language courses:** offer language courses or collaborate with academies that provide both offline and online courses that include the local language, as well as English or other widely spoken languages. This can be useful both to foreign players relocating to your country or local players who want to prepare themselves for future international transfers.



# RELOCATION SERVICES AND OTHER SUPPORT

The practical matters surrounding the player's transfer to the new country should be taken care of by the club. However, this kind of support or service was often reported to be insufficient or not available at all.

## PRACTICAL IMPLICATIONS FOR PLAYERS

Interviewees shared several stories where it proved difficult for them, their partner or family members to obtain a permit, a car, apartment and similar services. Younger players often need more assistance understanding their rights and their employers' responsibilities. They reported needing assistance with financial management and in understanding available educational opportunities in the host country.

*"When I arrived, my wife was pregnant. So, we needed a lot of extra help to understand our new situation: the health system, insurance, finding a hospital, finding a specialist. All these aspects were added on top of everything else that you have to deal with when you migrate."*

## RECOMMENDATIONS

Identify what services clubs are providing to player relocating and if these services are appropriately meeting the players' needs (visas, partners' visa, apartment, car, schools etc.).

- ▶ **Dialogue and cooperation:** maintain a dialogue with newly transferred players to understand if their needs are being met and collaborate with organizations that provide extra relocation services.
- ▶ **Checklist:** develop a unified checklist of practical matters that need to be taken care of.
- ▶ **Career guidance:** provide career guidance to foreign players and map or offer educational opportunities, including opportunities for family members and partners.

***"When we, as players, move to a new country,  
we need to understand where we go.  
But the same is true for the other side.  
Unions, leagues, clubs... they also need to  
understand where their players come from.  
We need to meet in the middle."***



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