



Exploring the impact of international work experience on competitiveness and employability of South African returnees

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ABSTRACT

This study looks at the effects of international work experience on the career competitiveness and employability of the South African returnees. The topic is growing more important than ever as skills migrants shape the global labour market. Based on Career Capital Theory, the study looks at whether getting international exposure leads to the development of human capital, social capital, and motivational capital. Further, it gauges the influence of accumulated career capital on returnees' careers upon their return to the South African labour market. The aim of the study was to (1) assess to what extent international work experience enhances valuable work skills, (2) evaluate perceived benefits or detriments to one's career upon return, (3) identify the workplace challenges faced when returning, and (4) identify necessary support and policy measures to better attract, retain and integrate globally experienced talent.

A quantitative research design was employed, using a structured online survey distributed to South African professionals who had worked abroad for a minimum of two years and returned within the last decade. The final sample comprised returnees across diverse sectors, and data were analysed using descriptive and inferential techniques to identify patterns across skill development, employability perceptions, career progression, and reintegration experiences.

The findings suggest that international work experience shapes strategic decision-making skills, leadership ability, cross-cultural communication capabilities and technical skills upon the accumulation of strong career capital. Many returnees face reintegration challenges like skill underutilisation which prevent maximum use of this capital and salary mismatch all of which act as a significant negative moderator of the IWE career benefits realisation. As a result, it suggests the IWE serves as a potent internal resource but an inconsistent external signal in the South African labour market. Participants stressed the need for stronger policy frameworks, streamlined recognition for international qualifications and employer education on global competencies.

The study contributes to the limited empirical literature on South African return migration and employability by offering evidence-based insights into how the acquired global capital shapes career trajectories. It provides actionable recommendations for policymakers, employers, and talent-development stakeholders to better leverage the skills of globally mobile professionals and strengthen national competitiveness.

Keywords: international work experience, return migration, career competitiveness, employability, South Africa, career capital theory, skill development, reintegration challenges, global talent.

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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

1.1 INTRODUCTION

As the world becomes increasingly globalised, International Work Experience (IWE) has come to play an important role in enhancing one's career. Global exposure helps individuals develop skills required to compete in international markets. Moreover, living and working in foreign countries equips individuals with abilities that are critical in the new world (Liu et al., 2022). Researchers support, as per Andresen et al (2022) and Cheng (2022) that getting an international work experience significantly enhances the chances of getting a promotion and financial benefit. Exposure to other cultures promotes adaptability, communication capabilities, and strategic skills which can be advantageous assets in helping workers stand out when entering the job market again (Liu et al., 2022). This is especially true in South Africa, where organisations are more often pursuing candidates with global experience who can assist them in overcoming international complexities and maintaining competitiveness.

This study aims to ascertain how international work experience translates into career possibilities for South African returnees. South Africa has had an ongoing problem with brain drain, as skilled people leave for better opportunities abroad (Yu, 2022). However, in recent years, many of the expatriates are returning home, bringing with them global skills and networks. This is called reverse brain drain, brain gain. One example is the Homecoming Revolution, the South African repatriation initiative, which reported that between 2009 and 2014 about 359 000 South Africans went back home. The creation of 9 jobs by every skilled returnee indicates returnees improve their own employability along with providing a boost to the economy (Homecoming Revolution, 2014). Even so, the reintegration may be challenging and how far global exposure offers a competitive edge in South Africa's labour market remains in question.

This study seeks to examine whether there is a positive relationship between international work experience and the competitiveness and employability of South African returnees. In other words, it seeks to determine whether returnees perceive their international experience as having enhanced their career opportunities and professional development (Crowley-Henry, Al Ariss & Özbilgin, 2021), with the aim that the outcome of

this study provides useful information to various groups, including academics, professionals, companies, and policymakers, among others.

For individuals, the aim is that the study provides clarity on whether overseas work experience positively affects one's career growth and helps them make informed decisions on expatriation and repatriation. The findings also inform talent acquisition and leadership development strategies by revealing the business case for hiring returning professionals. The research also offers policy recommendations on how returnees can effectively feed into the South African labour market. This contributes to a greater debate about brain circulation, which is the movement of skilled individuals between countries that benefits both the source and destination countries and sheds light on how South Africa can transform the challenges of brain drain into opportunities for brain gain, ultimately benefiting both individuals and the economy at large.

1.2 BACKGROUND TO STUDY

The Brain Drain Phenomenon and Its Impact on South Africa

South Africa is experiencing a major outflow of skilled professionals, often referred to as "brain drain phenomenon (Yu, 2022). According to Govender (2022), thousands of highly educated South Africans such as health workers, engineers, academics, and other experts left the country for greener pastures. The above exodus occurs due to reasons such as political instability, high crime, and higher living standards in the developed world. The country's skilled professional loss is cross-sectional as well as critical-skills shortage has created a situation where there is a shortage of number of qualified individuals to fill the gaps left as a consequence (Govender, 2024). Emigrants can be considered as economic refugees especially those with high value skills such as engineering and IT skills.

Brain Drain and National Competitiveness

Across the world, brain drain doesn't just mean a loss of talent, it also represents a threat to national competitiveness. It weakens a country's capacity for innovation and growth (Mobarak et al., 2025). The loss of talent can bring about immediate adverse effects on the nation's human capital which is a driver of innovation, productivity and economic performance. The emigration of highly skilled professionals from the country affects critical sectors like healthcare and education especially of developing countries. All this undermines the competitive position of such countries in the global economy. (Health

Workforce-HWF, 2023) Countries that do not implement retention or reintegration strategies may find it hard to replace lost expertise resulting in the underperformance of public services and knowledge economy. Reduced productivity, weakened institutional capacity, and lost tax revenues represent more indirect economic effects (Mobarak et al., 2025). Long lasting drawbacks can further weaken a nation's capacity to compete in the global stage and achieve developmental goals.

Skill Shortages and Their Economic Implications

Recent reports reveal that South Africa is facing a dilemma. In spite of high unemployment levels, it cannot fill critical positions in engineering, health, IT and finance (Bloomberg, 2023; PWC, 2025). This contradiction illustrates a disparity between the skills the business sector demands and those the workforce possesses. The issue is exacerbated by the emigration of skilled workers, with significant shortages in management, technical, and digital skills, among others. According to the figure below, there are shortages of complex problem-solving, management of personnel resources, digital skills and so on with positive values signalling a demand for these skills. In contrast, the excess of skills in strengths and psychomotor skills indicates an unequal distribution of skills in the South African labour market. To drive South Africa's growth and international competitiveness, the country needs to manage its skills shortages as it looks to tap professionals with international experience who returns to the country.

Return Migration and Skills Development

Recent global studies show that returnees benefit the country of origin indirectly by encouraging higher educational achievements and widening the talent base (Mobarak et al., 2025). Many people take higher qualifications and in-demand skills for better-paying jobs overseas. In the Philippines and India, this has resulted in spikes in professional qualifications in fields such as nursing and engineering. This has increased the domestic supply of skilled workers even before they may emigrate (Mobarak et al. 2025). Some migrants go back home, having developed skills, international perspectives, and capital, which they deployed in domestic businesses that often enhanced innovation and performance. Remittances and the engagement of the diaspora are important drivers of development via education, entrepreneurship, and knowledge transfer (Wahba, 2021). Financial transactions and business relationships have the power to increase productivity, set up companies and enhance skills in the home country. So long as the appropriate

standards and institutional circumstances exist, return migration can, consequently, shift the effects of brain drain toward brain gain, which assists the country's growth significantly.

South African Context

The issue of brain drain and return migration in South Africa has a historical and contemporary context. Post 1990s the big movers in the emigration trend of the country were white South Africans. Lately, however, there is a surge in the emigration of Black South African professionals in healthcare, IT, and engineering (Moyo, 2021). The ongoing losses have increased the shortage of skills and placed further burdens on public service delivery especially in health and education (Khuzwayo & Khuzwayo, 2018). The South African government has put the Critical Skills List into action among other initiatives to hold on and get qualified talent back. This list shows the occupations and qualifications that are in demand. The list endeavours to attract returning professionals, as well as those whose skills are perceived to be essential to national development. The effectiveness of these policies is likely to depend very much on local conditions such as political stability, economic opportunity, and institutional capacity to support reintegration. If these areas do not make continuous progress, brain drain to brain gain efforts may not be as effective as possible.

Reverse Brain Drain: The Return of Skilled Professionals

South Africa has been experiencing a reverse brain drain, skilled professionals are returning to the country after working abroad. Aspects such as nostalgia, family ties, quality of life and the relatively cheap living costs of South Africa compared to first-world countries influenced this trend (StatsSA, 2024). The country's economic development has enticed the return of some professionals (Businessstech, 2024). Nonetheless, the total number of returnees is quite low. For instance, in 2022, only 27 983 South Africans returned to South Africa compared to 45 860 in 2011 (StatsSA, 2024). It shows how complicated the migration patterns are, and the different reasons South African professionals emigrate and return. Once they return, it is vital that their reintegration into the local labour market enables them to use international experience for the benefit of individual and economy.

The Potential for Brain Gain and the Role of International Work Experience

Although it is generally agreed upon that international work experience is an asset for skilled people returning to South Africa, one should question the extent to which global exposure enhances their employability as returnees. Can these professionals use the skills, global perspective, and professional networks gained overseas after their return to gain a competitive edge in local jobs? According to Rudolfson et al (2023), brain gain occurs when returnees bring back knowledge, innovations and international best practices that have the potential to make firms and institutions more efficient and effective. But it is unclear to what extent local employers value returnees' contributions and put them to use.

1.3 THEORETICAL FRAMING

The primary theoretical lens guiding this research is Career Capital Theory (DeFillippi & Arthur, 1994), which is discussed in detail in Chapter 2. Career Capital Theory broadly supports the idea that international work experience enhances individuals' marketability through the accumulation of three interrelated forms of capital:

- Knowing-how (human capital) – skills, expertise and professional knowledge;
- Knowing-whom (social capital) – networks and relationships; and
- Knowing-why (motivational capital) – values, identity, purpose and resilience.

In the context of international work experience, returnees are often able to enhance all three types of career capital, making them more competitive in the labour market upon re-entry (Suutari et al., 2018; Andresen et al., 2021).

In addition, the study is informed by Human Capital Theory (Becker, 1964), which explains why investments in education and experience – such as working abroad – should lead to improved productivity and economic returns (e.g., higher wages, promotions and better job opportunities), and by Signalling Theory (Spence, 1973), which suggests that international work experience can act as a signal of desirable attributes (e.g., adaptability, independence, global mindset) in the eyes of employers.

By integrating these perspectives, the study examines whether the career capital acquired abroad is recognised and rewarded in the South African labour market, and under what conditions it translates into enhanced employability and career competitiveness for South African returnees.

1.4 PROBLEM STATEMENT

Having international work experience is thought to improve one's career capital skills, networks and global outlook (DeFillippi & Arthur, 1994; Wahba, 2021). However, there is limited understanding as to how they benefit South African professionals upon their return. Despite the rising trend of return migration (Mobarak et al., 2025), it is unclear whether the global skills acquired abroad improve employability or are recognised by local employers. There is a significant gap in the literature between the international skills gained and domestic career outcomes. This study seeks to investigate this relationship, focusing on how IWE influences the competitiveness and employability of returnees within South Africa's labour market.

1.5 RESEARCH QUESTIONS

This study seeks to explore the relationship between international work experience and the perceived career competitiveness and employability of South African professionals who have returned from working abroad. To guide this inquiry, the following research questions have been formulated:

Primary Research Question

What is the impact of international work experience on the career competitiveness and employability of South African returnees?

Secondary Research Questions

1. To what extent does international work experience influence the career competitiveness and employability of South African returnees?
2. How do returnees perceive the impact of their international work experience on their employability within the local labour market?
3. What specific skills are most commonly developed through international work experience?
4. What reintegration challenges do South African returnees face upon re-entering the local workforce?
5. Which policy mechanisms do returnees believe could better support their reintegration and optimise the value of international experience?

1.6 RESEARCH AIM AND OBJECTIVES

Research aim

This study aims to explore the impact of international work experience on the competitiveness and employability of South African professionals upon returning to their home country. In essence, the research seeks to determine whether and in what ways would working abroad enhances one's ability to secure employment and advance their career in South Africa.

Research objectives

To achieve the above aim, the study pursues the following key objectives:

Objective 1 - Assess Skill Development

Examine how international work experience contributes to the development of professional skills and competencies among South African returnees. This objective explores the specific areas of professional growth such as leadership capability, technical expertise, intercultural communication that returning professionals attribute to their time abroad.

- H_{0_1} (Null Hypothesis): International work experience does not significantly contribute to the development of professional skills and competencies among South African returnees.
- H_{1_1} (Alternative Hypothesis): International work experience significantly contributes to the development of professional skills and competencies among South African returnees.

Objective 2 - Evaluate Career Competitiveness and Employability

Investigate whether returning professionals believe they are more competitive in the South African job market and are seen as more competitive by employers than peers without international exposure. This includes whether returnees got promotions and pay raises because of their international experience and evaluating returnees perceived employability confidence on getting a job or a promotion due to international experience.

- H_{0_2} : Returnees with international work experience are not significantly more competitive or employable than their peers without such experience.

- H1₂: Returnees with international work experience are significantly more competitive and employable than their peers without such experience.

Objective 3 - Identify Re-integration Challenges

Identify the challenges that South African professionals face when re-entering the local workforce after an international stint. Do these professionals face challenges such as underuse of skills, challenges in readapting to South Africa's culture of doing business, and employer bias against foreign experience? It is important to know this as it may give a clue as to why some returnees may not fully benefit from their overseas experience.

- H0₃: Returnees do not face significant reintegration challenges upon re-entering the South African workforce.
- H1₃: Returnees face significant reintegration challenges upon re-entering the South African workforce.

Objective 4 - Provide Recommendations

Based on the findings, develop recommendations for individuals and organisations. To individuals the study suggests strategies to leverage one's international experience for career success upon return. The research offers organisations and HR practitioners in South Africa guidance on how they can better harness the global competencies of returning talent. The study also draws implications for policymakers as to how to promote brain gain and thus make beneficial use of skilled South Africans who return.

1.7 SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY

Theoretically, it contributes to the growing body of literature on career capital and return migration by applying a multi-theoretical framework (Career Capital Theory, Human Capital Theory and Signalling Theory) to a South African context, an area that remains underexplored. Theoretically, it contributes to the growing body of literature on career capital and return migration using Career Capital lens Theory for significance to a South African context an area that remains underexplored. By examining how international work experience translates into competitiveness and employability upon return, the study sheds light on the mechanisms through which global exposure enhances human capital, and how this is reintegrated into the local labour market.

Practically, the result of the study helps South African companies use the global skills of returnees in greater and better percentages with greater benefits especially at manager and specialist level. This is particularly significant as the country remains faced with ongoing skills shortages in different fields. It helps HR practitioners and recruitment firms see the strategic benefits of hiring returnees with international experience and contribute to their workforce development and talent retention strategies.

From a policy perspective, the study offers valuable guidance to government departments, diaspora engagement programmes, and policymakers tasked with reversing the effects of brain drain. The results can support the design of reintegration frameworks that attract skilled migrants back into the local economy and promote brain gain.

The study aligns with the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), particularly:

- SDG 4: Quality Education, by emphasising lifelong learning through international exposure.
- SDG 8: Decent Work and Economic Growth, by improving understanding of how returnees contribute to employment and productivity.
- SDG 10: Reduced Inequalities, through recommendations aimed at inclusive access to opportunities for returnees of diverse backgrounds.

The research supports responsible management education by encouraging organisations to make ethical, inclusive, and informed decisions about talent utilisation and international mobility. By addressing the global-local skills gap, the study fosters socially responsible leadership and promotes equity in career advancement.

1.8 DELIMITATIONS AND DEMARCATION OF STUDY

The study draws sample from people living and working in South African industries which includes the business, finance, engineering, healthcare, and technology. The researcher uses a quantitative approach in this study. Data is collected using an online questionnaire which is structured. This study does not involve any qualitative methods such as interviews and case studies.

The study focus is further narrowed down with Career Capital Theory as the main theoretical framework of the research and so it does not explore other employability or

career development models. The study looks at career outcomes at a single point in time and does not conduct longitudinal or returnee non-returnee comparisons.

Demarcation of the Study

This study focuses on South African professionals who have obtained at least two years of international work experience and have returned to South Africa within the last ten years. The geographic boundary of the research is limited to South Africa, and the study does not include participants who are currently living abroad. The study excludes individuals who have not worked internationally or who returned to South Africa more than ten years ago to ensure relevance and recent labour trends. The research does not assess managerial performance or organisational-level outcomes but insteads concentrate on individual perceptions of employability and career competitiveness upon return.

The study takes measures to restrict biases that may emerge from this non-probability sampling. To make it more representative, the participants were taken from different industries, ages, and regions. Inclusion criteria that are defined clearly were used consistently to ensure comparability. The study employs various recruitment channels including LinkedIn, business school alumni networks, social media groups, etc., to minimise dependence on one channel and subsequent homogeneity. In the end, demographic characteristics analyses after the survey to measure diversity and any under-represented subgroups. These strategies are aligned with best practices for reducing sampling bias in non-probability designs (Saunders et al., 2019; Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

1.9 PRELIMINARY LITERATURE REVIEW

This preliminary review provides a high-level overview of key debates on international work experience, employability and return migration, which are explored in depth in Chapter 2.

Operational Definitions

International Work Experience (IWE)

Conceptual: IWE can be defined as periods of paid or professionally relevant employment undertaken outside an individual's home country, exposing them to foreign cultures, business practices, and organisational environments (Andresen et al., 2022;

Suutari et al., 2018). It is known to enhance global competencies, cultural adaptability, and career capital (Crowley-Henry, Al Ariss & Özbilgin, 2021; Andresen, Bergdolt & Margenfeld, 2020).

Operational: In this study this measures through (Q6), (Q7) and (Q8–Q11).

Employability

Conceptual: Employability refers to an individual's ability to gain and maintain employment, progress within their career, and adapt to changing labour market conditions (Fugate et al., 2021; Clarke, 2018). It encompasses perceived job readiness, skills applicability, and confidence in securing employment (Jackson & Tomlinson, 2020; De Cuyper et al., 2020).

Operational: In this study this is measured via Likert-scale responses: (Q15), (Q17) and (Q22)

Career Competitiveness

Conceptual: Career Competitiveness to the relative advantage an individual has in securing employment, promotion, or career advancement within a specific labour market, based on their qualifications, experience, and perceived value by employers (Baruch & Altman, 2020; Al Ariss & Syed, 2021).

Operational: In this study this is assessed using (Q14) and (Q16)

1.10 THEMATIC REVIEW OF LITERATURE

This section briefly previews the main themes that are developed more fully in the literature review (Chapter 2). The intention is not to provide an exhaustive review here, but to highlight key strands of evidence that motivate the research problem

Return Migration and Brain Gain Perspectives

The phenomenon of brain drain has been a subject of widespread concern as increasing globalisation drives skilled labour out of developing countries. However, recent literature increasingly refers to this as brain circulation or brain gain, as these migrants often return with proven skills and globalised experience (Gruenhagen, 2024). The necessity of examining the influence of returnees on their own careers and national development has

been underscored by this change. The literature further suggests that return migrants can provide significant benefits to individual migrants and the economy of the country of origin, including greater employability and career competitiveness as well as the ability to innovate and lead in the home economy (Williams, 2019; Wahba, 2014).

Return Migration and Employability: Comparative Insights from Africa and Asia

In Sub-Saharan Africa, return migration is increasingly recognised as a mechanism for sourcing much-needed skills, particularly in the context of domestic skills shortages. While returnees are often regarded as change agents, their reintegration success is highly context dependent. For example, returnee professionals in Kenya's tech sector have introduced innovations but also report facing "returnee liability" due to cultural misfit or eroded local networks (Gruenhagen, 2024; Wahba, 2014). Similar findings emerge from Senegal, where returnee entrepreneurs contribute significantly to innovation but depend heavily on supportive policies and community receptiveness (Gruenhagen, 2024).

Career Capital Theory as a Conceptual Framework

This study adopts Career Capital Theory as a theoretical lens to examine the link between international work experience and employability outcomes. According to DeFillippi and Arthur (1994), career capital comprises three interrelated components: knowing-how (skills and expertise), knowing-whom (networks), and knowing-why (values and motivations). These forms of capital are often enhanced through international work experience and, upon return, can be strategically reinvested in the domestic context (Inkson & Arthur, 2001).

The theory is particularly relevant for understanding returnees' career trajectories. For instance, empirical evidence from Egypt and West Africa shows that returnees command a wage premium and experience upward job mobility due to the competitive advantage conferred by their international career capital (Wahba, 2014; Gruenhagen, 2024). Furthermore, the accumulation of career capital abroad aligns with improved self-perceived employability and career satisfaction upon return (Tung, 2023).

Reintegration Challenges and Skill Transferability

While returnees may have valuable career capital, its use is contingent on how well it aligns with the domestic context. Research highlights several reintegration barriers,

including employer scepticism, under-recognition of foreign qualifications, and cultural misalignment (Gruenhagen, 2024). In some cases, these barriers result in "brain waste," where returnees' capabilities are underutilised, undermining the potential for brain gain (Rasool & Botha, 2011; Wahba, 2014). Studies from Asia show that successful reintegration requires not only the returnee's adaptability but also institutional mechanisms that facilitate knowledge transfer, such as startup incentives or qualification recognition systems (Chen et al., 2021; Wang et al., 2022).

Returnees' Contribution to Innovation and Leadership

Beyond individual employability, returnees can act as catalysts for innovation and leadership in the home economy. For example, Chinese returnee scientists have significantly increased innovation outputs, while African returnees have introduced new governance, education, and business models (Wang et al., 2022; Gruenhagen, 2024). Career Capital Theory explains this by linking returnees' knowing-why, their sense of purpose) with leadership ambitions and public engagement (DeFillippi & Arthur, 1994; Inkson & Arthur, 2001). These findings support the idea that returnees do not merely reintegrate they influence the transformation of local systems.

1.11 GAPS AND CRITICAL REFLECTION

While the literature confirms that returnees can benefit from international exposure through enhanced skillsets, networks, and confidence (knowing-how, knowing-whom, and knowing-why), there is limited focus on how these benefits specifically unfold in South Africa's unique labour market. Much of the evidence comes from China, India, and other emerging economies that have implemented structured return policies (Wang & Zweig, 2022; Wu et al., 2023), leaving a critical gap in the context of countries where formal reintegration policies are less robust.

Although studies acknowledge that returnees often face reintegration challenges, there is insufficient exploration of employers' perceptions and whether they value international competencies in hiring or promotion decisions in South Africa. Research by Mlambo and Yusuf (2023) indicates some mismatch between returnees' expectations and actual workplace realities, but further inquiry is needed to determine how widespread or impactful this is.

1.12 DISSEMINATION OF RESULTS

The findings of this study was disseminated through multiple channels to reach academic, industry, and public audiences with efforts aim to maximise the societal, academic, and professional value of the study and promote informed dialogue on the role of international work experience in strengthening South Africa's human capital base.

Academic dissemination

As part of the requirements for the MBA degree from the North-West University, a mini dissertation was be submitted. The findings could also be offered to academic peer-reviewed journals, in the field of human resources, international mobility or labour economics. The results may also be presented at relevant academic conferences and postgraduate research seminars.

Industry dissemination

A concise and easy-to-understand report was made for the recruitment agencies, HR consultancies and professional bodies, such as the South African Board for People Practices (SABPP). This report was to show the main findings, practical recommendations and policy measures to improve returnees' access to the labour market.

Public and professional dissemination

Important information was shared on professional sites including LinkedIn and relevant diaspora forums where South African professionals abroad and returnee's network. The findings can be accessed by wider audiences and returnees who are part of this study.

Feedback to participants

Upon completion of the research participating were emailed a brief executive summary if they indicate interest in the results. This summary includes the aims, high-level trends and implications of the study in an effort to showcase appreciation and transparency.

1.13 CONTRIBUTION TO KNOWLEDGE

This study contributes to both theoretical understanding and practical application by exploring the under-researched area of how international work experience impacts the

employability and career competitiveness of South African Returnees. While Career Capital Theory (DeFillippi & Arthur, 1994) has been widely applied to global careers, its application has been limited in emerging economies and post-return contexts and often does not explicitly integrate Human Capital and Signalling perspectives. This study extends the literature in the following ways:

- Demonstrating how international experience contributes not only to human and social capital but also to motivational capital within the context of reintegration into the South African labour market.
- Highlighting the interplay between international skill acquisition (Human Capital Theory) and employer perceptions and biases (Signalling Theory), thus offering contextual nuance often absent in the literature.
- Providing empirical data on returnees from the Global South, contributing to the diversification of Career Capital Theory, which has historically focused on Western and expatriate populations.
- Offering insights into how cross-border mobility enhances or fails to enhance perceived employability and career competitiveness, which may refine theoretical assumptions about the linear translation of career capital into positive outcomes.
- Developing a conceptual framework (presented in Chapter 2) that explicitly models the pathway from international work experience to career capital to employability and competitiveness, under the moderating influence of reintegration challenges.

1.14 CHAPTER OUTLINE OF THE DISSERTATION

The dissertation is structured into the following chapters:

Chapter 1: Introduction

This chapter presents the background to the study, problem statement, research questions, objectives, significance, delimitations, and an overview of the methodology.

Chapter 2: Literature Review and Theoretical Framework

This chapter critically reviews existing literature on international work experience, employability, and career competitiveness. It also outlines the integrated theoretical foundation (Career Capital Theory, Human Capital Theory and Signalling Theory) and presents the study's conceptual framework.

Chapter 3: Research Methodology

This chapter describes the research paradigm, design, sampling strategy, data collection procedures, ethical considerations, and methods to ensure validity and reliability.

Chapter 4: Data Analysis and Findings

This chapter presents the results of the data analysis using descriptive and inferential statistics aligned with the study's objectives.

Chapter 6: Conclusions and Recommendations

The final chapter summarises the study's key findings, highlight theoretical and practical contributions, acknowledge limitations, and provide recommendations for future research and policy.

1.15 CHAPTER SUMMARY

This chapter introduced the study by outlining the global and South African context of brain drain, reverse migration and skills shortages, and by motivating the need to examine how international work experience affects the employability and career competitiveness of South African returnees. The problem statement, research questions, aims and objectives were presented, along with the theoretical framing, delimitations and key operational definitions. A preliminary literature review and identification of gaps were provided to justify the study, and an overview of the dissertation structure was given. Chapter 2 builds on this foundation by presenting a comprehensive, theory-driven literature review and the conceptual framework that guides the empirical analysis.

CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

2. INTRODUCTION

This chapter presents a comprehensive and critical review of the theoretical and empirical literature on the role of international work experience (IWE) in shaping the post-return career trajectories of skilled professionals, with a specific focus on South Africa. In recent years, the concept of *brain circulation*, or the movement of talent between countries with subsequent return, has gained momentum in global scholarship. This marks a shift away from the linear “brain drain” narrative toward a more nuanced understanding of how global mobility can contribute to skill acquisition, innovation, and economic development in the country of origin (Tung, 2023; Cerna & Czaika, 2021). Despite these positive possibilities,

the translation of globally acquired skills into local labour market advantage is neither automatic nor guaranteed, and depends heavily on contextual factors such as employer perceptions, institutional support, labour market structure, and reintegration conditions (Nielsen & Gudergan, 2022).

Against this backdrop, this chapter synthesises a broad body of peer-reviewed literature published in the last five to ten years to establish what is known, what is contested, and what remains under-explored regarding the employability and career competitiveness of returning professionals. It seeks to deepen understanding of the mechanisms through which IWE is expected to enhance career outcomes and to critically examine why these mechanisms may succeed or fail in the South African context. In doing so, the chapter provides the intellectual foundation for this study's research problem and justifies the need for a quantitative examination of the specific conditions under which IWE translates into improved employability.

The structure of the chapter is as follows.

First, it sets out the theoretical framework, drawing on three core bodies of theory: Career Capital Theory (DeFillippi & Arthur, 1994), Human Capital Theory (Becker, 1964), and Signalling Theory (Spence, 1973). Rather than treating these theories descriptively, the chapter critically evaluates their assumptions, limitations, and relevance for understanding the post-return experiences of South African professionals.

Second, it presents the study's conceptual framework, which integrates these theoretical lenses into a testable model. This model positions IWE as the antecedent, career capital as the mediating mechanism, and reintegration challenges as contextual moderators shaping employability and competitiveness outcomes. The model represents an important extension of existing literature by acknowledging both individual agency and structural constraints.

Third, the chapter undertakes an extensive thematic literature review organised around four key themes:

1. The role of IWE in developing career capital (knowing-how, knowing-whom, knowing-why).
2. The extent to which this capital is translated into employability and career competitiveness.

3. The reintegration challenges that may inhibit or distort this translation.

The unique socio-economic, institutional, and labour market dynamics of South Africa.

The aforementioned themes are supported by deep subsections that synthesise global, regional, African and South African evidence on skills development, knowledge transfer, employer perceptions, salary outcomes, labour market constraints, comparative returnee experiences.

The chapter concludes with a bringing together the research gap, identifying the absence of rigorous, quantitative South African studies that simultaneously measure career capital, employability outcomes and reintegration barriers. This gap is used to articulate the precise contribution that this study seeks to make

2.1 THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This study adopts a multi-theoretical framework to explain how international work experience (IWE) contributes to the employability and career competitiveness of South African returnees. The combination of Career Capital Theory, Human Capital Theory, and Signalling Theory provides a comprehensive and analytically coherent foundation. Together, these theories illuminate not only *how* returnees accumulate valuable competencies abroad, but also *why* these competencies may or may not translate into improved labour market outcomes upon return. This section therefore moves beyond descriptive theorisation to present a critical integration of the three lenses, highlighting their explanatory strengths and contextual limitations particularly within the South African labour market.

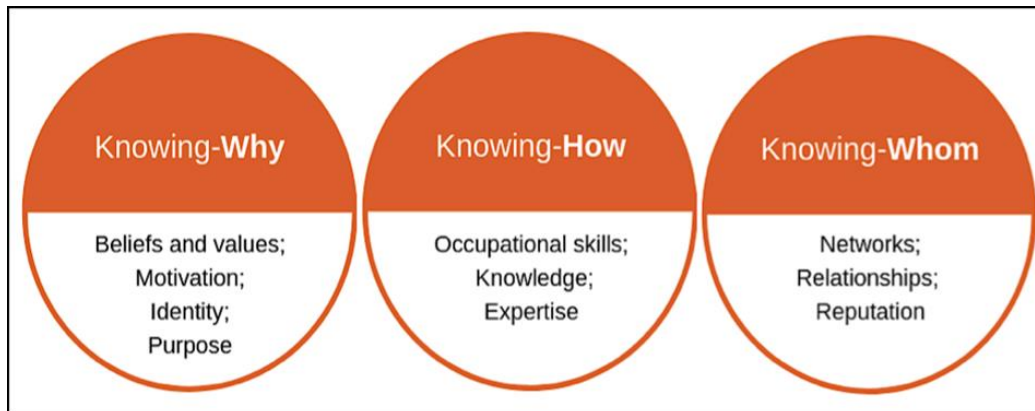
2.1.1 Career Capital Theory (CCT)

Career Capital Theory, first articulated by DeFillippi and Arthur (1994), forms the conceptual backbone of this study because it provides a dynamic understanding of how individuals build portable resources across global career trajectories. CCT rests on the boundaryless career paradigm, which argues that careers increasingly unfold across organisational, national, and cultural boundaries rather than within the confines of a single

employer (Arthur & Rousseau, 1996). Under this perspective, individuals accumulate three forms of career capital knowing how, knowing whom, and knowing why which are transferable, developmental, and intrinsically linked to mobility.

Figure 2. 1. The three types of career capital

Representation of DeFillippi and Arthur by Cathy Brown, 2019



Knowing How (Human Capital Competence)

The dimension refers to an individual's skill, professional knowledge and management capabilities. An international work experience normally quickens knowing-how accumulation via the introduction of foreign technologies and solutions in addition globally established best practices that probably do not yet exist in the home labour market (Suutari et al., 2018; Cao et al., 2022). When South African professionals work in developed markets such as UK, EU, US, they gain access to specialised tools, methodologies and industry standards. These lead to a more competitive skills profile upon return.

Knowing-Whom (Social Capital and Networks)

Knowing-who reflects the relational resources that people develop through collaboration, mentorships, and cross-boundary connections (Zikic et al., 2021). IWE makes strong international networks possible, returnees can leverage these cross-border connections for collaborations, jobs, or starts-ups. Transnational networks can create a unique advantage in emerging labour markets like South Africa but only if domestic employers perceive them as such (Schmid & Wurster, 2022).

Knowing-Why (Motivational Capital and Identity)

Personal drivers, such as resilience, the purpose for why I do it, adaptivity, and cultural intelligence, are essential to knowing-why. Encountering challenges when dealing with different cultures often amplifies one's self-efficacy and helps one's long-term career direction (Dickmann & Doherty, 2020; Vaiman et al., 2021). According to Ali and Riaz (2017) Returnees often report that IWE helps in developing adaptability, self-confidence and global mindset which are sought by knowledge-based industries.

Relevance to the Study

CCT is central to this research because it frames IWE as a transformative process producing multi-dimensional capital. Theoretically, South African returnees should possess enriched portfolios of human, social, and motivational capital making them strong contenders for senior, specialised, or high-impact roles (Andresen et al., 2021; Tung, 2023). The Primary Research Question (PRQ) What is the impact of international work experience on the employability and career competitiveness of South African returnees? is therefore grounded in CCT's assumptions about the portability and value of career capital.

2.1.2 Human Capital Theory

Human Capital Theory (Becker, 1964) offers an economic rationale for why individuals who invest in additional education and experience, such as IWE, should enjoy enhanced productivity and labour market returns. From this standpoint, time spent abroad constitutes a high-value investment that yields returns through:

- higher wages,
- better job opportunities,
- faster promotion prospects, and
- stronger long-term career mobility (Sweetland, 1996; Wahba, 2015).

Critical alignment with CCT

Human Capital Theory complements the "knowing-how" dimension by explaining *why* skills and knowledge obtained abroad are expected to generate economic benefits. However, it assumes efficient labour markets capable of recognising and rewarding such investments.

South African limitation

This assumption rarely holds in structurally constrained labour markets like South Africa, where:

- unemployment exceeds 32% (Stats SA, 2024),
- skills mismatches persist (Pauw et al., 2022), and
- regulatory frameworks influence recruitment outcomes.

Consequently, even highly skilled returnees may experience “brain waste,” where valuable human capital is under-utilised or unrecognised (Raghuram, 2021). This critique is essential to understanding why career capital may not automatically translate into employability.

2.1.3 Signalling Theory

Signalling Theory (Spence, 1973) provides a sociological lens to understand how employers interpret IWE. Employers often make decisions under information asymmetry: they cannot directly observe a candidate’s true ability, so they rely on signals such as degrees, international experience, or company reputation.

IWE as a positive signal

IWE often signals desirable attributes:

- adaptability,
- independence,
- cross-cultural competence,
- problem-solving ability, and
- global orientation (Cederberg, 2022; Tung, 2023).

Studies show that repatriates are seen as high value in multinational corporations (MNCs). Because of the international experience that they have, they have a global perspective and cross-cultural intelligence. They are a strong fit for complex and cross-border roles. As Cappellen and Janssens (2010) claims, organisations often place these individuals on accelerated career paths in order to make use of their newly acquired skills and views and put them into more senior positions.

IWE as a negative or ambiguous signal

However, Signalling Theory also warns that signals are interpreted *contextually*. According to Tharenou & Caulfield, (2020); Beam, (2019) In some markets, employers misinterpret foreign experience as:

- reduced local market knowledge,
- cultural misfit,
- inflated salary expectations,
- risk of future re-emigration

This dual nature of signalling helps explain why returnees often experience both career acceleration *and* rejection depending on the employer's orientation and the labour market context.

2.2 THEORETICAL SYNTHESIS AND APPLICATION TO THE STUDY

By combining these theories, this study adopts a holistic and context-sensitive framework:

Theoretical Lens	What It Explains	Key Limitation
Career Capital Theory	How returnees <i>acquire</i> human, social, and motivational capital abroad.	Understates structural labour-market constraints.
Human Capital Theory	Why enhanced skills <i>should</i> lead to economic returns.	Assumes efficient labour markets often unrealistic in South Africa.
Signalling Theory	How employers <i>interpret</i> the value of IWE.	Interpretation varies widely across contexts and industries.

Why this integration is essential

- Using CCT alone would imply that returnees automatically thrive.
- Using Human Capital Theory alone would imply that labour markets always reward global skills.
- Using Signalling Theory alone might over-emphasise employer bias.

The integrated model captures the *conditionality* of returnee success: IWE → Career Capital → Employability and Competitiveness (moderated by reintegration challenges).

This synthesised framework directly underpins the study's hypotheses and conceptual model, and shapes how the study interprets the relationship between IWE and career outcomes within the South African labour market.

These forms of capital are accumulated by individuals rather than provided by a single employer and are translatable across employers or countries, aligning with boundaryless career principles (DeFillippi & Arthur, 1994). In a boundaryless career, professionals are not bound to a single organisation; instead, they proactively develop a broad portfolio of competencies and networks that enhance their adaptability and marketability in a changing job landscape (Arthur & Rousseau, 1996).

From this perspective, South African returnees with international experience are likely to possess enriched career capital advanced skills, global networks and broader mindsets that can be leveraged upon return (Tung, 2023). Employability theories help explain how individuals become competitive in the labour market. Human Capital Theory emphasises that people can increase their productivity and value through education, training, work experience and learning (Becker, 1964). International work experience is a form of human capital investment expected to enhance a person's ability to perform complex tasks, innovate and adapt, thereby improving career prospects such as promotions and higher earnings (Becker, 1964; Sweetland, 1996).

Research adopting a human capital lens finds that overseas work exposure helps develop creativity, language skills and cross-cultural adaptability, placing individuals in a premium position in globally oriented roles (Jokinen, Brewster & Suutari, 2008; Suutari et al., 2018).

Signalling Theory (Spence, 1973) complements this by arguing that in hiring situations characterised by information asymmetry, certain qualifications or experiences signal a candidate's likely productivity or desirable traits. An overseas job is often interpreted by employers as a signal of independence, resilience and a global outlook (Tung, 2023). For example, working abroad may suggest high levels of intercultural communication and initiative, thereby making a candidate appear more employable, even beyond the actual skills gained (Spence, 1973; Tung, 2023).

Human Capital Theory predicts that foreign experience builds employability through skill acquisition, while Signalling Theory suggests that it builds employability by sending positive signals to the labour market (Becker, 1964; Spence, 1973).

2.3 CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

The conceptual framework that guides the empirical study into how international work experience (IWE) impacts the employability and career competitiveness of South African

returnees is presented in this section. The framework is directly derived from the theoretical foundations as specified in Section 2.2 mainly Career Capital Theory (DeFillippi & Arthur (1994), followed by Human Capital Theory (Becker, 1964) and Signalling Theory (Spence, 1973). In combination, these theories provide the analytical lens for understanding not only how career capital is accumulated abroad but also how and under what conditions that capital is translated into domestic labour market advantage.

2.3.1 Rationale for the Conceptual Framework

Existing studies often assume a straightforward, linear link between IWE and career success, particularly in countries with strong institutional support for repatriates (e.g., China's "sea turtles") (Wang & Zweig, 2020). However, as the literature synthesised in Section 2.2 clearly shows, this assumption does not hold universally. In contexts characterised by structural unemployment, institutional uncertainty, and employer scepticism such as South Africa the positive outcomes of IWE are not guaranteed (Pauw et al., 2022; Tharenou & Caulfield, 2020). The conceptual framework developed for this study explicitly models these complexities by introducing re-integration challenges as a *moderating variable* that conditions the relationship between career capital and employability.

2.3.2 Core Components of the Framework

Input Variable: International Work Experience (IWE)

IWE is conceptualised as the formative experience through which individuals develop enhanced human, social, and motivational capital. Empirical studies consistently show that global assignments expose individuals to advanced technologies, cross-cultural environments, and high-performance work systems (Suutari et al., 2018; Zikic et al., 2021), enabling the development of a diversified career capital portfolio (Tung, 2023).

Mediating Variable: Career Capital (Knowing-How, Knowing-Whom, Knowing-Why)

Career Capital Theory forms the mediating logic of the framework. IWE is expected to increase:

- Knowing-How: technical knowledge, professional expertise, problem-solving ability
- Knowing-Whom: global networks, professional visibility, cross-border collaborations
- Knowing-Why: career motivation, resilience, personal identity, cultural intelligence

These three capital forms serve as the mechanism through which IWE translates into employability advantages and competitive positioning (DeFillippi & Arthur, 1994; Dickmann & Doherty, 2020).

Output Variable: Employability and Career Competitiveness

Drawing from Human Capital Theory (Becker, 1964), enhanced career capital should theoretically improve both perceived and actual employability, reflected through:

- faster job placement
- increased confidence in securing work
- promotions and advancement
- higher earnings
- stronger positioning against competition

This aligns with global empirical evidence showing returnees' elevated career trajectories in supportive environments (Andresen et al., 2021).

Moderating Variable: Reintegration Challenges

However, Signalling Theory (Spence, 1973) and repatriation research highlight that the impact of IWE is contingent upon employer interpretation, institutional capacity, and labour market structures (Cederberg, 2022; Raghuram, 2021). In South Africa, this includes:

- Employer bias and signalling failures
- Skills mismatch and structural unemployment
- Erosion of local networks during time abroad
- Credential recognition and professional licensing barriers

These reintegration challenges may weaken, distort, or fully negate the expected benefits of IWE explaining why some returnees experience accelerated careers while others encounter stagnation or “brain waste.”

2.3.3 The Conceptual Framework for the study

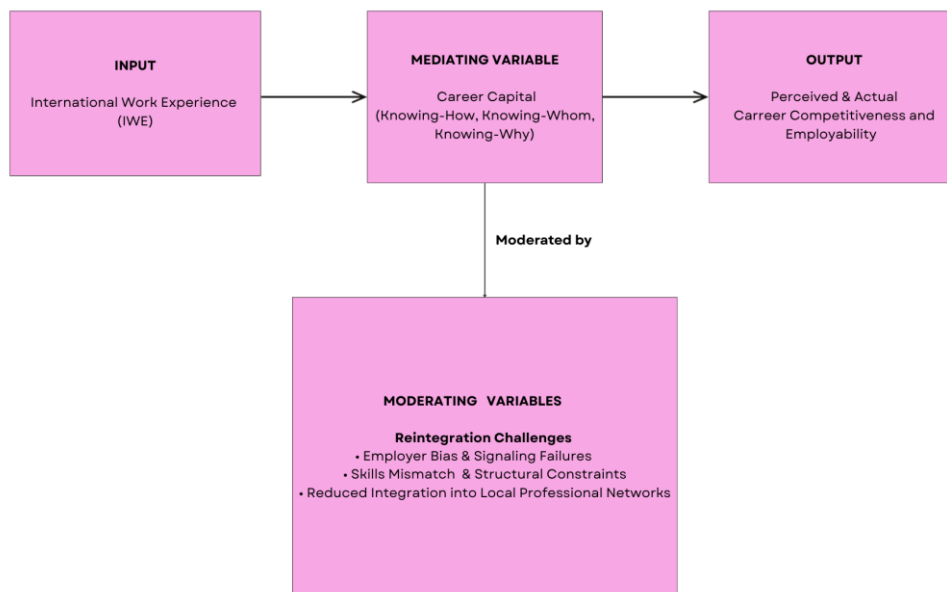


Figure 2.3.3:
Conceptual
Framework for
the Impact of
IWE on
Returnee
Employability

Conceptual Model: The Effect of IWE on Employability

IWE → Career Capital → Employability & Competitiveness
with
Reintegration Challenges Moderating the Career Capital → Employability Link

This formulation highlights that:

- IWE builds career capital (mediating mechanism)
- Career capital should enhance employability (expected outcome)
- Reintegration challenges may *strengthen*, *weaken*, or *block* the translation of capital into career outcomes.

2.3.4 Contribution of This Framework to the Study

This framework provides a concrete, testable pathway between the constructs identified in the literature. It achieves three critical contributions: It integrates multiple theoretical lenses

By combining CCT, Human Capital Theory, and Signalling Theory, the model recognises both the *supply* (skills, motivation, networks) and *demand-side* (employer valuation, institutional constraints) determinants of employability.

It identifies a unique moderating relationship absent in South African research

No existing South African study statistically tests how reintegration challenges condition the effectiveness of IWE this is the novel methodological contribution of your study.

It directly aligns with the research questions and hypotheses

- RQ1: models the effect of IWE on employability
- RQ2–RQ3: operationalised through career capital
- RQ4: linked to reintegration challenges
- RQ5: identifies where policy intervention is needed

2.4 THEMATIC LITERATURE REVIEW

Building on the theoretical and conceptual foundations outlined in Sections 2.2 and 2.3, this section reviews empirical and conceptual literature organised around four core themes directly linked to the study's research questions: (1) international work experience (IWE) and the development of career capital; (2) the translation of this capital into employability and career competitiveness ; (3) barriers and reintegration challenges that constrain this translation; and (4) the specific South African labour market and policy context, situated within global and regional patterns of return migration. Rather than treating these themes in isolation, the discussion highlights how they interact to shape the post-return career trajectories of South African professionals.

2.4.1 International Work Experience and Career Capital Development

International work experience, as broadly defined, is any professional employment activity undertaken by persons outside their home country, either via corporate expatriate assignment or self-initiated overseas work (Tung, 2023). It includes anything from short-term projects to foreign career ventures that usually entail crossing national and cultural borders, adapting to different institutional environments and dealing with different professional norms (Jokinen, Brewster & Suutari, 2008). In modern business literature, IWE is now increasingly conceived as a form of career capital. It allows us to enrich our portfolio of skills, knowledge, and networks, which can increase our employability (DeFillippi & Arthur, 1994; Arthur, Khapova & Wilderom, 2005).

Empirical studies show that IWE enhances knowing-how, or human capital. Migrants and expatriates frequently acquire new technical skills, exposure to advanced technologies,

and experience with more sophisticated management systems in foreign labour markets (Suutari et al., 2018). Work in technologically advanced or highly regulated environments often familiarises returnees with international standards and cutting-edge practices, which can, in principle, be transferred to the home context (De Vreyer, Gubert & Robilliard, 2010; Wahba, 2015). In addition to hard skills, IWE fosters soft skills such as problem-solving, creativity, and language proficiency (Jokinen et al., 2008). From a human capital perspective, these investments should raise productivity and, therefore, the expected economic returns upon return (Becker, 1964; Sweetland, 1996).

IWE also contributes to knowledge transfer and innovation, people who return home help organisations in the nation to share the best business practices and new technologies. They also share modern ways of doing business that boost innovation. This function places returnees as possible “knowledge brokers” who connect institutional contexts, especially if they have worked in high-performance or innovation-intensive sectors. The literature suggests that such knowledge flows are most effective where local organisations are receptive and have enough absorptive capacity to make use of imports (World Bank, 2018).

An international work experience further builds cross-cultural competence and a global mindset, both of which are at the core of the knowing-why (motivational) and knowing-how (behavioural) dimensions of career capital (Ang & Van Dyne, 2008; Gupta & Govindarajan, 2002). When people live and work in a foreign culture, they experience different expectations, communication styles and work practices. Over time, this helps people adapt, stretch, grow strong ready for the future, it builds cultural intelligence which is a key element of many global business roles (Tung, 2023). Many returnees report that such experiences helped enhance their self-awareness, clarify their long-term career aspirations, and strengthen their sense of purpose, which are key elements of knowing-why (Dickmann & Doherty, 2020; Vaiman et al., 2021).

IWE significantly enhances knowing-whom by expanding professional networks across borders. Through interactions with colleagues, clients, mentors, and industry stakeholders abroad, migrants build transnational social capital that can be leveraged for opportunities, collaborations, and business linkages upon return (Saxenian, 2005; Zikic et al., 2021). These networks may grant privileged access to information, markets, or partnerships that are not readily available to locally rooted professionals. In South Africa, returnees are often

perceived as bringing “international credibility” and connections that can open doors in sectors such as finance, technology, and education (Crush, Chikanda & Pendleton, 2012).

Overall, the literature strongly supports a positive relationship between IWE and the accumulation of human, social, and motivational capital (Jokinen et al., 2008; Suutari et al., 2018; Tung, 2023; Andresen et al., 2021). This provides the basis for Hypothesis 1 (H_{11}) in this study: that international work experience significantly contributes to skill and competency development among South African returnees.

2.4.2 Employability and career competitiveness of Returnees

The second thematic area focuses on how or whether the career capital developed through IWE is translated into employability and career competitiveness on return. Generally, employability refers to the attributes, skills, knowledge, and conditions in the labour market that enables a person to secure a job, maintain employment, move between jobs and progress in career (Fugate, Kinicki & Ashforth, 2004). For returnees, employability refers to the value of their international skills and the extent of their alignment with and recognition by the home labour market (Becker 1964; Andresen et al. 2021). Competitiveness refers to how returning candidates compare to other candidates who are domestically trained in competition for jobs, promotion, and remuneration (Wang & Zweig, 2010).

According to the Human Capital Theory, enhanced skills and knowledge acquired abroad should enhance employability, and increase wages and job opportunities (Becker, 1964; Sweetland, 1996. Evidence from Egypt, West Africa, and Eastern Europe largely supports this view: returnees benefit from a wage premium and faster promotion relative to non-migrants with similar characteristics (De Vreyer et al. 2010, Mihaylov and Tijdens 2012; Wahba 2015). For instance, Wahba (2015) in his study finds that Egyptian returnees have markedly higher wages than comparable non-migrants, most so for university graduates. These findings suggest that returnees can generate substantial economic gains in areas where foreign-acquired human capital is relevant and demanded.

However, the realisation of these benefits depends critically on employer perceptions of IWE. Signalling Theory posits that, under conditions of information asymmetry, employers rely on observable signals such as degrees, institutions, or international experience to infer underlying productivity and desirable traits (Spence, 1973). In many globally oriented firms, international experience is interpreted as a positive signal of independence,

resilience, global awareness, and intercultural competence (Tung, 2023). In such contexts, having worked abroad can significantly strengthen returnees' competitive positioning for roles involving international clients, cross-border teams, or strategic functions. Indeed, some multinational corporations explicitly list international experience as a preferred or mandatory requirement for senior leadership positions (Tung, 2023).

Yet, the signalling value of IWE is not consistently positive. Some evidence from studies and surveys suggests that foreign work experience might hurt candidates in some markets or selection decisions. In the Philippines, Beam (2016) found that résumés with overseas work experience received fewer callbacks than those grounded in the local context. Employers may think that one won't fit in culturally. They may also think foreign experience may not help in the job market at home. Or they may think you are too expensive. Similar patterns are reported in other countries, where employers privilege location-specific human capital and long-standing local networks over international exposure (OECD, 2017).

Besides perceptions, credential recognition and skills transferability are real problems. Regulators and employers may find it difficult to assess overseas qualifications, especially when education systems and professional standards differ greatly (OECD, 2017; World Bank, 2018). Formal qualifications recognised, the technology, processes or methodologies taught abroad may not yet be in use in the home country (Stats SA, 2025; DHET, 2022). This is especially evident in healthcare, engineering, and regulated occupations where returnees must deal with re-certification or other adaptation requirements.

The literature indicates that IWE usually enhances employability and career competitiveness, but not always. Returnees are likely to have a richer set of skills and, if environmental conditions are conducive, are likely to have better career outcomes (Andresen et al. 2021, Wahba 2015). Perceived and actual benefits are also highly context dependant and influenced by sector, employer orientation, and overall institutional context (Tharenou and Seet, 2014 and Raghuram, 2021). The above mixed picture supports Hypothesis 2 (H_{12}), which indicates that South African returnees with IWE are more competitive and employable than their peers without IWE; however, the effect is probably uneven.

2.4.3 Barriers to Leveraging International Work Experience

The third theme addresses the “dark side” of international careers: the barriers and reintegration challenges that can prevent returnees from fully capitalising on their global experience. Repatriation literature consistently warns that the return phase is often more complex and problematic than the initial expatriation (Lazarova & Cerdin, 2007; Tharenou & Seet, 2014).

A major problem is the overqualification and underutilisation of skills. Often, returnees work in positions that are less senior or less complex than the jobs they held abroad. This happens in part because there are fewer local organisational opportunities with high-level titles (World Bank, 2018). According to Tharenou and Seet (2014), many repatriates take on jobs that they feel are below their competency level as either the suitable job is not available, or the employer does not want to appoint them into a senior job. As time passes, such a misalignment may generate frustration, withdrawal, and partial erosion of the skills that-in turn-represent a clear case of “brain waste” for the person and the home country (Wahba 2015, World Bank 2018).

Returnees also encounter challenges in cultural and professional re-adjustment; after residing in a different socio-cultural environment for a while, people experience reverse culture shock when they come back home and find things are not the same (Lazarova & Cerdin, 2007). When returnees try to apply their own practices or questions established norms, they may be left feeling out of place and a bit lost. This is especially the case due to differences in management style, structures of organisation, pace of working, and bureaucratic processes. Although supportive colleagues, mentors, and family members can help ease the adjustment, in their absence, adjustment strain may negatively affect job satisfaction and performance (Tharenou & Seet, 2014).

Employer bias and preference for local career paths further impede the conversion of international career capital into domestic advantages. Employers may prefer candidates who have maintained continuous local experience, assuming that such candidates are more attuned to local client relationships, regulations, and informal norms (Becker, 1964; OECD, 2017). Concerns about returnees’ long-term commitment, or suspicions that they only returned due to failure abroad, may dampen employers’ willingness to invest in or promote return migrants (Tharenou & Seet, 2014; Spence, 1973). These biases often

require returnees to actively “translate” and demonstrate the tangible value of their foreign-gained skills rather than assuming that IWE is self-evidently attractive (Arthur et al., 2005).

In South Africa, these small-scale barriers are made worse by structural labour market constraints. The problem of high unemployment persists as there are few jobs available even for the highly qualified people. Often, competition occurs for well-qualified people for a limited opportunity (Stats SA, 2025; World Bank, 2018). Job-reject returnees might have to accept less pay, delay their engagement or switch over to less-skilled-less-paying sectors just to get employed. Policies like B-BBEE and affirmative action are critical for redress by they also regulate hiring and promotion activities in a fashion that may impact returnees differently, depending on the demographic groups as well as sectors (DHET, 2022).

Collectively, these barriers suggest that reintegration challenges are substantive rather than marginal. They undermine the straightforward predictions of Human Capital Theory and the optimistic assumptions of some boundaryless career models. This evidence underlies Hypothesis 3 (H_{13}), which anticipates that South African returnees face significant reintegration challenges upon re-entering the local workforce.

2.4.4 South African Context and Return Migration

The fourth theme sets these dynamics within the specific South African socio-economic and policy context, which is marked by historical brain drain, ongoing skills shortages, and emerging efforts to promote brain gain and brain circulation.

South Africa’s labour market has a dual structure; It has robust, skilled demand sectors like the finance, mining and advanced services. But it also has long-term unemployment and substantial inequality problem (Stats SA, 2025). In 2025 statistics, youth unemployment levels over 50% and total unemployment greater than 30% has led to a highly competitive environment whereby skilled people struggle to find suitable roles. Employers are short of key occupations like engineering, ICT and healthcare at the same time. That shows the critical mismatches between labour supply and demand (DHET, 2022). This contradictory situation presents both possibilities and limits for returning professionals; their skills are in demand, but the structural conditions may curb suitable uptake.

Historically, South Africa has lost many skilled professionals due to their migration to other countries for better social or economic or political circumstances (Crush et al., 2012). Most of those who have left South Africa in the past were mostly white professionals. However, more recently, Black South Africans are leaving in increasing numbers. This includes doctors, engineers and other specialists (Crush et al 2012). Evidence of backward migration and brain circulation has been produced at the same time. For example, it is estimated that hundreds of thousands of skilled South Africans returned during and immediately after the global financial crisis as a result of both push factors abroad and pull factors back home (Crush et al., 2012). Still, net losses are very significant and there are data gaps related to emigration and return which one can rely on (Stats SA, 2025; OECD, 2017).

Policies and institutions are starting to recognise the potential value of returnees, for instance The National Labour Migration Policy White Paper seeks to facilitate the return of skilled South Africans by simplifying administrative processes and giving incentives in key sectors (DHET, 2022). Non-governmental organisations like Homecoming Revolution have tried to link up diaspora workers with employers back home while also showcasing successful cases of return (Crush et al., 2012). Organisations of professionals and alumni networks provide another layer of support. They offer networking, they also provide guidance on accreditation and mentoring, although this is usually informal. Nonetheless, there have been limited systematic evaluations of these initiatives, and it is still unclear which interventions have the most impact on returnee reintegration and retention.

Beyond formal policies, socio-economic factors such as high crime rates, infrastructure challenges such as load-shedding, cost of living, and exchange rate volatility also shape returnees' experiences and decisions (World Bank, 2018). Many returnees report shock at the quality-of-life trade-offs involved in re-settling, particularly if they have adjusted to more stable environments abroad. Social expectations and family pressures often based on assumptions that time abroad equates to considerable wealth or flawless expertise can further complicate reintegration (Crush et al., 2012). Demographic factors such as race and gender intersect with these structural realities, influencing how different groups of returnees navigate opportunities and constraints under South Africa's transformation agenda (DHET, 2022). The South African context amplifies the conditionality of IWE outcomes. It underlines why a study that simultaneously examines career capital,

employability outcomes, and reintegration challenges for South African returnees is both timely and necessary.

2.4.5 Global, Regional and Comparative Perspectives

Looking at South Africa in relation to global patterns and broader African contexts helps clarify what is universal and what are context specific. Return migration is a common phenomenon worldwide, whereby migrants leave the country of destination after an extended stay and come back with savings, skills and ideas (OECD, 2017; World Bank, 2018). In various contexts, returnees can contribute to entrepreneurship, innovation and institutional reform. This appears particularly so when returnees have returned from high-income destinations with strong institutions (Saxenian, 2005; Wahba, 2015). For instance, the “sea turtles” from China and the Indian diaspora returnees have played an essential role in forming innovation ecosystems and connecting local enterprises to global value chains in the technology sector (Saxenian, 2005; Wang & Zweig, 2020).

African countries are seeing the same trends for brain drain and brain circulation, people who return home after living in OECD countries are shown to earn much more than those who have not migrated. These returnees are also known to create jobs by becoming entrepreneurs (De Vreyer et al., 2010; World Bank, 2018). Ghana, Rwanda, Kenya and other nations’ governments have tested the programs for the engagement and return of their diasporas (World Bank, 2018). In addition, many returnees from Africa seem to express their discontent with weak institutions, corruption, or slow bureaucratic processes which hamper their ability to deploy their skills (De Vreyer et al. 2010).

There is evidence to prove that returnees to Global North are often less structurally constrained than returnees to the Global South. In developed economies, corporate repatriation programs, established credential recognition systems and organisational cultures that emphasize international experience tend to facilitate reintegration and strengthen the positive signalling value of IWE (Tung, 2023; Tharenou & Seet, 2014). In developing and middle-income countries, on the contrary, returnees face underdeveloped support systems, labour market unpredictability, and institutional inertia, leading to brain degradation as opposed to brain gain (OECD, 2017; World Bank, 2018).

South Africa shares many of the challenges observed in other Global South contexts such as skills mismatches, weak policy implementation, and socio-economic instability but also possesses distinctive features, including a sophisticated private sector in certain industries

and complex transformation policies. These comparative insights underscore that the impact of IWE on employability and competitiveness cannot be assumed; it must be empirically examined within context, as this study seeks to do.

2.5 RESEARCH GAP

Despite a growing global literature on return migration, career capital, and employability, significant gaps remain particularly within the South African context. These gaps justify the need for the present study and highlight the unique contribution it aims to make.

2.5.1 Limited Empirical Evidence on South African Returnees' Employability

Though South Africa is known for skilled emigration and emerging patterns of return migration, there is little empirical analysis of the employability and career outcomes of South African Returnees. According to Crush, Chikanda, and Pendleton (2012), there is a national debate on the brain drain, which does not tackle the experience or outcome of those who return. The absence of reliable official data compounds the difficulty as Stats SA has stopped tracking emigration as well as return migration in a systematic way (2025).

Claims about returnee reintegration or employability are often anecdotal or based on small samples such as case studies from the Homecoming Revolution initiative, rather than rigorous empirical analysis. There remains a clear gap for quantitative evidence that profiles South African returnees and measures their employability within the local labour market.

2.5.2 Lack of Quantitative Studies Linking Career Capital to Measurable Outcomes

Although Career Capital Theory, Human Capital Theory, and Signalling Theory all indicate that international work experience should enhance employability, there is little quantitative research globally and in South Africa that tests how specific dimensions of career capital (knowing-how, knowing-whom, knowing-why) translate into measurable career outcomes such as salary, promotions, job placement speed, or perceived competitiveness (Andresen et al., 2021).

Most existing studies are conceptual or qualitative, making it difficult to empirically evaluate:

- whether IWE predicts employability,

- whether career capital mediates this relationship, and
- whether reintegration challenges moderate the impact of IWE on career outcomes.

This represents a methodological gap the present study addresses through quantitative survey design.

2.5.3 Minimal Evaluation of Policy and Reintegration Support Initiatives

South Africa has introduced a host of interventions, including the National Labour Migration Policy White Paper (DHET, 2022), aimed at reversing brain drain. However, there is hardly any evaluation research that assesses whether these interventions improve job placement, facilitate smooth reintegration, and enhance the career prospects of returnees. The Homecoming Revolution is another worthwhile initiative whose impact assessment is not public. The evidence gap limits understanding of what works, what is missing and how reintegration can be improved.. The present study contributes by identifying which forms of support returnees believe are most needed or lacking.

2.5.4 Limited Sector-Specific Understanding of Returnee Outcomes

Returnees' reintegration experiences likely vary significantly across sectors healthcare, engineering, ICT, academia, finance yet very few South African or regional studies examine these nuances. Sectoral differences in regulation, skill demand, and organisational cultures shape whether IWE is valued or underutilised. Without this disaggregation, policy and organisational strategies cannot be properly targeted. The present study begins to address this gap by capturing returnees across multiple industries and examining variations in their experiences.

2.5.5 Need for a Context-Sensitive, Integrated Framework

While international research emphasises career capital and global mobility as positive contributors to career success, South African conditions high unemployment, skills mismatches, employer scepticism, and socio-economic constraints mean that IWE does not always convert into local advantage. The literature lacks a South African-specific conceptual model that integrates:

- IWE as an antecedent,
- career capital as a mediator,
- reintegration challenges as moderators, and

- employability/competitiveness as outcomes.

2.2.6 Introducing the Conceptual Framework

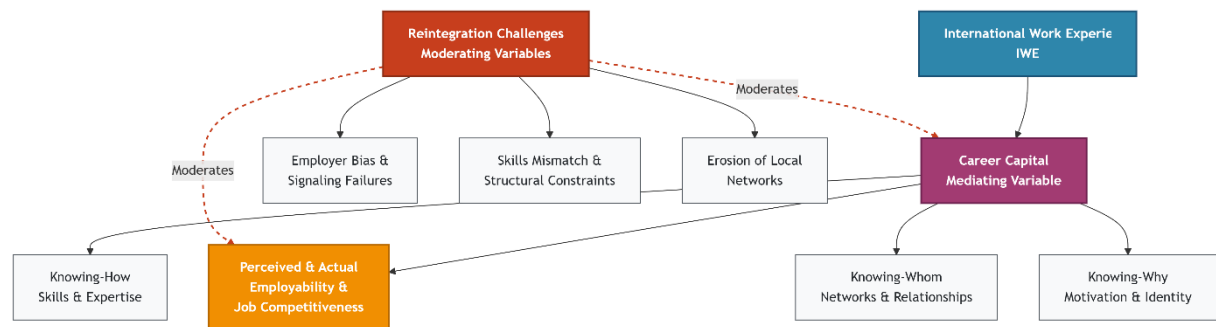
To guide this investigation and provide a theoretical lens through which to analyse the impact of International Work Experience, this study is underpinned by the conceptual framework illustrated in Figure B. This model synthesizes three core theoretical perspectives Career Capital Theory, Human Capital Theory, and Signalling Theory into an integrated pathway that explains both the potential value and the potential pitfalls of return migration.

The framework posits a direct relationship where International Work Experience serves as the primary input, acting as a catalyst for the development of Career Capital. This mediating variable, conceptualised through the triad of Knowing-How (skills and expertise), Knowing-Whom (networks and relationships), and Knowing-Why (motivation and identity), represents the core competencies that returnees accumulate abroad (DeFillippi & Arthur, 1994; Jokinen et al., 2008). According to Human Capital Theory, this accumulation should logically lead to the output: enhanced Perceived & Actual Employability & Job Competitiveness in the domestic labour market (Becker, 1964).

However, the framework's critical innovation is the introduction of Reintegration Challenges as a set of moderating variables. These challenges encompassing Employer Bias & Signalling Failures, Skills Mismatch & Structural Constraints, and the Erosion of Local Networks do not act as a direct barrier but rather as a conditioning factor that weakens or strengthens the relationship between career capital and employability (Szkudlarek, 2010; Zikic et al., 2010). From a Signalling Theory perspective (Spence, 1973), these moderators represent the "noise" that can distort or discount the value of the IWE signal, preventing the efficient conversion of human capital into labour market gains.

This visual framework is essential as it directly links theory to the subsequent empirical tests. It provides the foundational logic for the research hypotheses and guides the multiple regression analysis, which explicitly tests whether the proposed mediation of career capital and the moderation of reintegration challenges are statistically significant. The following discussion and conclusions refers back to this model to interpret the findings and ground the resulting implications and recommendations.

Figure 2.2.6: Conceptual Framework: The Impact of International Work Experience on Returnee Employability



2.6 STRATEGIES TO ENHANCE RETURNEE EMPLOYABILITY

Given the barriers identified, the literature proposes multi-level strategies at the individual, organisational, and policy levels to strengthen returnees' employability and better utilise their international career capital.

2.6.1 Leveraging Career Capital for Re-entry (Individual Strategies)

Returnees themselves play a central role in converting their international experience into local advantage. Studies suggest that returnees who proactively translate their overseas achievements into locally relevant value propositions are more successful (Arthur, Khapova & Wilderom, 2005).

Key strategies include:

(a) Articulating the local value of global skills

Returnees should explicitly explain how cross-cultural communication, technical expertise, or exposure to international standards aligns with local organisational needs (Ang & Van Dyne, 2008).

(b) Demonstrating adaptability and bridging global-local knowledge

Employers often value visible adaptability. Returnees should demonstrate that they understand local market dynamics and are able to contextualise foreign practices appropriately.

(c) Leveraging global networks

Maintaining relationships formed abroad can open up collaborations, investment

opportunities, or jobs. Diaspora contacts are particularly useful for sectors with global value chains (Saxenian, 2005).

(d) Updating local market knowledge

Short courses, certifications, and industry briefings can help address employer perceptions that returnees are “out of touch” with the South African context. Together, these strategies allow returnees to “translate” their career capital effectively and strengthen their employability.

2.6.2 Employer and Organisational Interventions

Organisations have a vital responsibility to harness the worth of global professionals. Evidence from around the world indicates that business organisations that have structured repatriation and talent processes achieve greater retention and innovation capacity (Lazarova & Cerdin, 2007; Tharenou & Seet, 2014).

Recommended strategies include:

(a) Giving priority to international experience in recruitment and promotion. This can be done through impactful HR practices should have explicit recognition for global experiences to reduce bias against non-linear career paths.

(b) Establishing reorientation and mentoring programmes by giving returnees structured onboarding to help them adjust to local organisational culture and share global best practices.

(c) Creating roles that utilise global competencies; employers may design or alter positions to leverage returnees’ knowledge of global markets, innovation or cross-cultural communication.

(d) Building organisations that value global perspectives; companies can promote innovation by embracing new ideas, processes, and management styles brought back by returnees.

2.6.3 Policy and Institutional Interventions

Governments at the national level can have a significant impact on the returnee reintegration process. It is a fact established by international best practices that returnees

prosper where states create the conditions to recognise credentials, entrepreneurship and labour mobility (OECD, 2017; World Bank, 2018).

Strategies include:

(a) Streamlining recognition of foreign qualifications by simplifying regulatory procedures and facilitating faster accreditation reduces entry barriers for returning professionals.

(b) Incentives for return and retention, this means tax relief, research grants, and targeted subsidies for high-scarcity occupations encourage return and support long-term reintegration (DHET, 2022).

(c) Returnee-targeted career support, this can be done through Government job portals, labour market information systems, and job matching programmes can ease the transition.

(d) Strengthening economic fundamentals by reducing crime, improving infrastructure reliability, and fostering economic growth indirectly support returnees by making the country more attractive.

2.6.4 The Role of Professional Associations and Alumni Networks

Professional bodies, diaspora networks, and alumni associations form an essential support ecosystem for returnees (Saxenian, 2005). These structures play a pivotal role in reducing the reintegration barriers that often weaken the conversion of international work experience into tangible career outcomes. By facilitating access to industry knowledge, mentorship, and social capital, these networks help rebuild the “knowing-whom” dimension of Career Capital, which is commonly eroded during prolonged periods abroad.

Effective strategies include:

- mentorship schemes linking returnees with local experts,
- sector-specific workshops on regulatory updates and market trends,
- diaspora chapters facilitating collaboration and entrepreneurship,
- advocacy for fair credential recognition and hiring practices.

2.7 CHAPTER SUMMARY

This chapter provided a comprehensive and critically synthesised overview of the literature on international work experience, career capital, employability, and return migration,

contextualised within South Africa. Drawing on Career Capital Theory, Human Capital Theory, and Signalling Theory, the chapter demonstrated how IWE equips individuals with enriched human, social, and motivational capital, positioning them for potential career advantages upon return.

However, the review also highlighted that these advantages are highly conditional. While IWE generally strengthens skills, networks, and global mindsets, the translation of this capital into employability and competitiveness depends on employer perceptions, credential recognition, sectoral demand, and broader labour market structures. Reintegration challenges such as skill underutilisation, cultural re-adjustment, employer scepticism, and South Africa's economic constraints often moderate or limit the benefits of global experience.

The South African context adds further complexity due to its dual labour market, historical brain drain, socio-economic instability, and uneven policy support. Comparative insights revealed that returnees to developing economies face greater institutional barriers than those in advanced economies, making context-sensitive research essential.

Several gaps in the literature were identified, including limited South African empirical work, minimal quantitative evidence linking career capital to outcomes, insufficient evaluation of reintegration policies, and inadequate sector-specific analysis. These gaps justified the need for the present quantitative study. The chapter outlined practical strategies for individuals, employers, and policymakers to enhance returnee employability strategies that inform the recommendations developed in later chapters. The next chapter presents the research methodology used to empirically test the relationships proposed in the conceptual model and address the research questions.

CHAPTER 3: RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY

3. INTRODUCTION

The research aims to explore the impact of international work experience on job employability and competitiveness for South African returnees. In this regard, the study follows a quantitative approach based on survey design to collect empirical data from professionals working in South Africa with at least two years of international work experience. The design of survey study is suitable for this study as it makes the researcher able to collect data in a structured and comparable manner from a dispersed population

and statistically examine the association between international working experience and career outcomes (Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

The cross-section descriptive research design was used to collect data at one point time. This design allows researcher to identify and describe the pattern, relationship, and trend of variables such as skill development, employer recognition, and perceived competitiveness. Cross-sectional studies are not to infer causality or track change over time; therefore, they fit into exploratory–explanatory research whereby the aim is to take a “snapshot” of the experiences of returnees in the South African labour market (Bryman et al, 2021). The study enhances understanding of the perception of global experience in terms of employability and competitiveness and sets the stage for future longitudinal or mixed-methods research.

The selected methodology is directly in line with the research questions of the study. The main research question is how international work experience increases employability and competitiveness? In relation to that, survey items measuring career progression, skill development and employer recognition are used to answer this question. The secondary questions examining barriers to reintegration and factors shaping career outcomes are addressed with further questions on reintegration challenges, under-utilisation of skills and perceptions of employer bias. The methodology associates the survey design with each project concern to ensure that whatever information is collected provides evidence-based and useful answers to the research project.

3.1 RESEARCH DESIGN AND ALIGNMENT

This study employs a quantitative survey research design to examine how international work experience shapes the career trajectories of South African returnees. The design is explicitly aligned with the core inquiry of how employability and career competitiveness are influenced by international work experience, as conceptualised in the multi-theoretical framework set out in Chapter 2 (Career Capital Theory, Human Capital Theory, and Signalling Theory).

To ensure comprehensive coverage of this central theme, the data collection and analysis are structured around key facets of the returnee experience, which directly correspond to the study’s objectives and conceptual framework:

- The development of human, social, and motivational capital abroad;
- The recognition and valuation of this capital by South African employers;
- The reintegration challenges that affect the transfer of international experience into the local labour market; and
- The enabling and constraining factors for converting international experience into career advancement and perceived competitiveness.

By designing the research around these themes, the methodology ensures a direct and coherent alignment with the study's primary and secondary research aims, and with the conceptual model (IWE → career capital → employability and competitiveness, moderated by reintegration challenges). This allows for a structured, theory-driven, and statistically testable investigation of the relationships proposed in Chapter 2.

Theoretical assumptions

This study is anchored in a multi-theoretical framework combining Career Capital Theory (DeFillippi & Arthur, 1994), Human Capital Theory (Becker, 1964) and Signalling Theory (Spence, 1973), as outlined in Chapter 2.

Career Capital Theory conceptualises career development through three dimensions:

- Human capital (knowing-how: skills and expertise),
- Social capital (knowing-whom: networks and relationships), and
- Motivational capital (knowing-why: career drive, identity and resilience)

The study assumes that international work experience enhances all three forms of career capital, thereby improving returnees' employability and competitiveness in the domestic labour market. Human Capital Theory further assumes that these enhanced skills and competencies should, in principle, yield improved career outcomes such as higher earnings, promotion, and better job opportunities, provided the labour market recognises and rewards them. Signalling Theory adds that international work experience functions as a signal to employers of desirable attributes such as adaptability, independence, and global orientation, but that this signal may be interpreted differently across contexts and sectors.

At the same time, the study recognises that contextual barriers such as employer bias, skills mismatch, and structural unemployment can weaken or block the translation of

career capital into favourable employment outcomes. These assumptions directly inform the conceptual framework tested in this study, in which international work experience is treated as an antecedent variable, career capital as a mediating mechanism, and reintegration challenges as a moderating condition shaping employability and competitiveness outcomes.

3.2 RESEARCH PARADIGM

Research philosophy

This study adopted a positivist epistemology, which assumes that the relationship between international work experience and employability or career competitiveness can be studied objectively and independently of personal perceptions (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). It also adopted a realist ontology, which holds that career benefits arising from international experience such as improved leadership skills, global networks, or employer recognition exist as objective phenomena that can be measured and analysed through empirical research (Guba & Lincoln, 2019).

This ontological stance guided the selection of measurable variables including career progression, skill development, and perceived employer appreciation as these are treated as observable manifestations of the underlying constructs of employability and career competitiveness. It also inform data interpretation by assuming that respondents' experiences reflect broader, generalisable patterns within the labour market, shaped by structural realities rather than individual perceptions. The study follow a deductive approach, using structured instruments to test theory-derived hypotheses, in line with the objectivist view that knowledge can be uncovered through systematic and statistical analysis.

Justification for methodological choice

While interviews and other qualitative methods would have added value giving detailed insight and help triangulation. These means were intentionally excluded due to access issue, time issue and dispersed nature of the returnee population. Since the aim of the study is exploratory and broad-based in nature, including to study the general pattern of employability and career competitiveness of returnees, a quantitative survey was found to be appropriate. Surveys enable a larger sample to give standardised and comparable answers and enhance generalisability across sectors and professions (Saunders, Lewis &

Thornhill, 2019). In future research, the quality of follow-ups may be considered to explore the details and narratives of individuals. But the current study focuses on measurables to develop a base.

3.3 THEORETICAL & METHODOLOGICAL ASSUMPTIONS

Methodological assumptions

The research assumes that structured data collection tools can show a measurable effect of international experience on career outcomes (Bryman, 2021). It also assumes that people speak honestly about their career journeys, skills development and job outcomes. The recognition of self-reporting bias and contextual complexity is minimised by rigorous survey design and analytical methods, thus enhancing the credibility and transferability of the findings.

3.4 RESEARCH APPROACH

Quantitative methods justification

This study adopts a quantitative research approach, this method also aligns with earlier studies on return migration and employability, which used surveys to produce comparable results across populations. Furthermore, it is well-suited to empirically testing the conceptual model developed in Chapter 2, which links international work experience, career capital, reintegration challenges, and employability outcomes. The selection is done upon the objective of the study which is to explore, assess and quantify the pattern of career competitiveness and employability perceptions of South African returnees. Using quantitative methods, the researcher administers a survey questionnaire to gather structured data and statistically test the association between international work experience and different dimensions of career capital human, social, and motivational.

The study focuses on generalisability, objectivity, statistical validity and therefore closely corresponds to the quantitative method despite qualitative methods being better for a deeper understanding of lived experiences. This method also aligns with earlier studies on return migration and employability, which used surveys to produce comparable results across populations

Methodological Choice

Mono-method justification.

The study employs a mono-method quantitative design. Relying on a single data collection technique (a survey) and corresponding data analysis strategy suffices to answer the research objectives. A mixed-methods design was discarded because of time and resource constraints, as well as a need for a sample size large enough to produce statistically reliable findings. By choosing only one method, the study has methodological clarity, coherence and feasibility. The mono-method design reflects the objectivism philosophy and the deductive reasoning strategy of this study. It also allows for a clear operationalisation of the constructs defined in Chapter 1.

3.5 RESEARCH STRATEGY

The research strategy provides a logical plan for how the study is to be conducted to address the research problem and answer the stated research questions (Saunders, Lewis, & Thornhill, 2019). The strategy outlines how the research philosophy and methodological approach, as set out in the research design, fit the data collection.

This research adopted a survey-based research strategy. The main instrument for data collection was a structured questionnaire. A survey approach was suitable due to the intent of the research to capture the perceptions and experiences and self-reported outcomes of a relatively large group of South African professionals who returned home after working abroad. The survey helps to gather information in a standardised format to obtain quantitative data that can be useful in understanding anything with respect to employability, skill transferability, and career competitiveness while adhering to the principles of quantitative research design.

A survey design incorporates the idea of generalisability. Large data collected through survey from diverse groups of people can help reflect the results on the larger other groups as well. This is especially important because it relates to return migration and skills development policies in South Africa. With a survey's structured form, it is easier to perform a statistical analysis that examines the relationship between international work experience and employability outcomes like career progression, contribution to innovation, and leadership influence.

Time Horizon

The research time horizon for this study is cross-sectional, referring to the period in which data are collected and analysed to achieve the research objectives (Saunders, Lewis, & Thornhill, 2019). It is important to choose a time horizon that not only examines certain points in time but also looks for evidence of change. Cross-sectional studies involve gathering data at one point in time (a snapshot), which allows the researcher to examine the relationships between the variables as they exist. The design is prevalent in the social sciences, which focuses on identifying patterns, associations or differences between groups, relative to the time (Saunders et al., 2019). Cross-sectional studies are relatively cheap, take lesser time and can be exploratory or descriptive (Saunders, Lewis, & Thornhill, 2019).

The research adopted cross sectional time horizon. The data was collected once from South African professionals that have come back after a minimum of two years of international work experience in the last ten years. The choice of this methodology is appropriate because the investigation intends to examine the extent to which international work experience affects the current employability and career competitiveness at the time of the investigation rather than changes over time. A cross-sectional approach is consistent with the study's survey strategy, which facilitates the collection of information from a large population in a cost- and time-effective manner (Saunders, Lewis, & Thornhill, 2019). While a longitudinal study would yield valuable insights into how employability and competitiveness evolve post-return, such an approach exceeds the practical limitations of this study. Future studies can extend the current findings by opting for a longitudinal design to observe returnees' career trajectories at various stages of reintegration.

3.6 STUDY POPULATION AND SAMPLING

Study population

The study population refers to the specific, defined group from which a sample is drawn for a research study (Saunders, Lewis, & Thornhill, 2019). For this research, the study population consist of South African professionals with international work experience who returned to South Africa in the past ten years. The time frame was chosen for the experiences of the participants to be more reflective of the present situation in the labour market, economic structure and employer expectations (Andresen et al., 2022). A cut-off

of ten years also reduces recall bias, while providing sufficient variation in career with return (Suutari et al., 2018).

To be included in the study, applicants should have spent at least 2 years in a foreign country just before return. This criterion is consistent with expatriation literature, which postulates that extended overseas exposure is necessary for the development of career capital: human, social, motivational, and others (DeFillippi & Arthur, 1994; Jokinen, Brewster & Suutari, 2008). According to Tung (2023), while short-term assignments may enhance development, they do not usually offer the transfer of skills, adaptation of culture, or global network that are the focus of this study's theory.

The target population was intentionally inclusive, covering returnees across managerial, professional, and technical categories. Even though the original plan was to limit the study to manager returnees, it was expanded to understand the overall picture of how IWE impacts employability and career competitiveness across professions. It is also true that IWE may be useful for middle-management and specialist roles, as research shows (Andresen, Bergdolt & Margenfeld, 2020). This wider cross-section helps the study find out whether IWE's perceived and actual advantages differ across job levels and sectors.

Sampling technique

A sample is a smaller group selected from a larger population that participates in research (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). The study population consists of around 27 983 South African professionals who returned to South Africa from their overseas experience between 2011 and 2022 (Stats SA, 2023). Due to the size of this group as well as practical limitations like time and access, it is not possible to collect data from all of them. Consequently, a sample was drawn to mirror the broader returnee population.

In the absence of a complete and accessible database of returnee professionals in South Africa, a non-probability sampling technique, purposive sampling complemented by snowball sampling was adopted in the study. Purposive sampling is appropriate for this study because it enables the researcher to deliberately choose the sampling participants who meet the eligibility criteria. As illustrated by Saunders, Lewis & Thornhill, (2019), the South African professionals who have two years of international work experience and have returned ten years ago or less were the eligible participants.

Snowball sampling was also be used to increase the number of participants. Those who responded first were asked to refer others fitting the same criteria. Since returnees are often far-flung and do not have a single database, snowballing is an effective way of drawing more. This method limits generalisability, but it is acceptable in this case due to the practical issue of access to the wider returnee population, while still allowing the study to produce relevant and purposeful data. data.

Inclusion criteria

To ensure the objectives of the study were met, selected participants had to fit the following inclusion criteria:

- Should be a South African citizen who has worked abroad for a minimum of two years.
- Must have returned to South Africa in the past ten years.
- Must have work experience in a foreign country.
- Must be willing to partake in the study and sharing their experiences on their careers progressed after coming back to South Africa.

Exclusion criteria

The following exclusion criteria was applied when recruiting participants

- South Africans who studied abroad but do not have international work experience.
- South Africans still living abroad.
- Experienced professionals who have returned from abroad over 10 years ago.
- Participants who do not provide informed consent.

3.7 RECRUITMENT OF PARTICIPANTS & CHANNELS

Eligible individuals who meet the inclusion criteria were recruited through multiple professional and social channels to ensure broad coverage of the returnee population. Recruitment were conducted through LinkedIn, targeting South African professionals who are members of expatriate or repatriate-focused network groups. The researcher also made use of social media communities such as “Return to South Africa,” which are commonly used by returnees to network and exchange information.

The NWU Business schools was approached, with requests for programme coordinators or alumni offices to circulate the survey invitation among graduates who meet the eligibility criteria. To further expand the reach, a snowball referral approach was encouraged, where initial participants are asked to share the invitation with peers who also fit the study requirements. By combining these recruitment channels, the study aims to secure a diverse and representative sample of South African returnees across different industries and professional levels.

Gatekeeper intervention / power relationships

This research acknowledges possible power dynamics and gatekeeping roles that may arise when recruiting participants, especially when accessing professionals through channels such as LinkedIn groups, alumni groups or professional associations. Group administrators and gatekeepers may influence participant access, either by granting or denying permission to post recruitment invitations. Gaining ethical approval was therefore mean seeking early permission from the gatekeepers and being completely open about the purpose, content and ethical safeguards of the study.

Due to the seniority of some participants, such as executives or managers, the study acknowledges the risk of perceived power asymmetries. To reduce any coercion or discomfort, all participation was voluntary and anonymous, and the researcher was not using employer-linked recruitment routes. People were be invited to the neutral channels, these can be LinkedIn invitations, where people can opt in or out without influence from the employer. Participants were assured that they can withdraw at any point without stating any reason nor penalised. These measures support autonomy and confidentiality while managing the ethical challenges of power relationships in access to participants.

Sample Size and Recruitment

While the Krejcie and Morgan (1970) table suggests a sample of 379 for a population of approximately 30,000, this figure is based on probability sampling assumptions, which are not applicable here due to the use of non-probability purposive and snowball sampling. The table is referenced only to illustrate the population scale. Given the hidden and dispersed nature of South African returnees, the study targeted a realistic sample of 150–200 participants. This range is consistent with other exploratory, non-probability studies and is sufficient to allow meaningful statistical analysis while acknowledging the limitations in generalisability.

Recruitment Channels

Contact with participants was initiated through multiple professional and social channels to effectively reach the target population. Invitations were circulated via LinkedIn (focusing on repatriate and expatriate groups), social media groups such as Return to South Africa. To further broaden participation, snowball sampling was employed by encouraging respondents to share the survey link with peers who also meet the inclusion criteria. Additional invitations were shared via email networks. This multi-channel strategy aims to ensure diversity across industries and demographics while accommodating the dispersed nature of the returnee population.

3.8 DESIGNING THE MEASURING INSTRUMENT

Development of survey tool

The purpose of the survey was to assess various aspects of career progression, employability, and career competitiveness post-return. The designer employed the best practices in survey methodology to make it clear, concise, easy to understand and easy to complete. The survey had these sections:

1. Demographic Information

The demographic questions were to help characterise the sample of participants and allows for subgroup analysis. The items included the age range, gender, highest level of education, industry or sector in which the person is employed, length of international work experience, and time since returning to South Africa. The information provided here was to help in contextualising the findings and ensuring diversity in the sample. Moreover, this was facilitated comparison across different professions and returnee profiles.

The impact of international work experience on employability or career competitiveness may differ across demographic or professional groups. Variations in perceived career benefits may arise through groups including gender, sector and age (Wilkins, 2004) This knowledge helps determine any patterns to refining statistical analysis and providing tailored recommendations for different returnee profiles.

- The age, gender, industry, maximum education and years of work experience. These variables are important as they provide insights into the diverse backgrounds of participants, which can influence career outcomes.

❖ Age informed us if age influences adaptability, career progression, and the ability to leverage international experience.

❖ Gender was to help explores potential disparities in how men and women benefit from global exposure.

- Industry was to help assesses whether the value of international experience varies across sectors.

- Education was to help examines how education level affects the ability to capitalise on international experience.

- Years of Work Experience was to reflect the depth of professional background, which may amplify or mitigate the benefits of international exposure.

2. International Work Experience

Place of work, length of work overseas and industry sector.

3. Career Progression Upon Return

Employment condition, length of time to get job after return, changes in pay and promotion.

4. Employability

Skills gained abroad such as leadership, technical expertise, and cross-cultural communication, and how these enhance one's competitiveness in the local job market.

5. Employer Recognition of International Experience

Did employers take international experience into account?

6. Reintegration Challenges

Challenges faced on adapting to South African business environment.

Most questions followed Likert-scale questions (1= Strongly Disagree to 5= Strongly Agree) which allows quantitative comparisons between responses and a few multiple-choice and used to gain deeper understanding.

3.9 VALIDITY & RELIABILITY IN INSTRUMENT DESIGN

To ensure the quality and rigour of the research instrument, the principles of validity and reliability were adhered to. Validity, which concerns whether the instrument accurately measures what it is intended to measure, and reliability, which refers to the consistency and stability of the measurements, were both addressed in the questionnaire design phase (Saunders, Lewis, & Thornhill, 2019).

Content Validity

The survey questions are developed based on established theories, particularly Career Capital Theory, and aligned directly with the research objectives. To ensure coverage of all relevant aspects, the instrument had to undergo a pilot test with a small group of returnees.

Instrument Refinement

Participants in the pilot test provided feedback on clarity, language used, relevance of questions and length of survey. Revisions consisting of simplifying language, improving logic flow and removing repeating or unclear items were carried out based on this feedback.

Construct Validity

The questionnaire is structured to capture the main dimensions of employability and competitiveness, including career progression, employer recognition, skill development, and reintegration challenges. Using Likert-scale items ensures that attitudes and perceptions are measured consistently across respondents.

Validity

Validity refers to the degree to which an instrument accurately measures what it is intended to measure, thereby ensuring that the conclusions drawn are sound and applicable (Andersson et al., 2024). For this study, multiple steps were undertaken to ensure validity.

Content Validity

Content validity ensures that the survey items adequately represent the theoretical constructs under investigation. The questionnaire was developed using established theory specifically, Career Capital Theory (DeFillippi & Arthur, 1994) and aligned with the research objectives. To further enhance content validity, the survey had to undergo a pilot test with a small group of participants familiar with return migration but not meeting the study's inclusion criteria (for example, professionals who returned more than ten years ago). Feedback was sought on clarity, wording, and relevance of the questions. Based on this input, revisions were made to improve flow, eliminate ambiguity, and ensure all items are conceptually aligned with the constructs of employability and career competitiveness (Bryman, 2021).

Construct Validity

Construct or construct validity is the extent to which an instrument measures the theoretical concepts it is supposed to measure (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). The constructs for employability, career competitiveness, career progression, employer recognition, and reintegration challenges are operationalised in this study using survey items. The response options for each item are based on a five-point Likert scale. That is: 1 = Strongly Disagree 2 = Disagree 3 = Neutral 4 = Agree 5 = Strongly Agree. This helped the researchers get detailed people's perceptions while making sure it measures the same thing across respondents. Using established constructs also enhances the linkage between the theoretical framework and the data collection instrument (Saunders, Lewis & Thornhill, 2019).

External Validity

External validity refers to how widely the results of the study can be generalised. To strengthen external validity, participants were recruited from a diverse range of industries, job levels and demographic backgrounds to reflect the heterogeneity of the South African labour market. Non-probability sampling limited full generalisability; however, a diverse community was reached through professional networks, alumni groups and social media platforms. A varied sample helps to make the relevance and applicability of results to different sectors of the South African economy.

Reliability

Reliability is the consistency of the results using an instrument when the same circumstances are applied (Andersson et al., 2024). Reliability is important in survey research because it may affect findings if measures are inconsistent or unstable. In such cases, the findings would be questionable, which does not provide a good basis for drawing conclusions. According to Bryman (2021), a trustworthy instrument guarantees that any fluctuation in answers truly reveals a difference in participants rather than flaws in the questionnaire.

In order to ensure design phase reliability, the survey is carried out in a standardised manner using online means like Qualtrics and Google forms. It makes sure that the participants answer the same questions in the same order, in the same layout and with the same wording, making it less researcher variable. When standardisation is used, it helps reduce the chance of biases from the interviewer and support replicability. For this reason, it is critical for quantitative research (Saunders, Lewis & Thornhill, 2019).

We used the pilot testing to detect and fix possible reliability issues we might face during the survey. Responses from the pilot would call out any confusing or uncertain items that could drive inconsistent responses. Changes were carried out in the wording and structure so that would be clear and uniformly understood. To further enhance the reliability of the questionnaire, the questions were framed without lead, double-barrelled or complex questions which are major sources of measurement error (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). The questionnaire was carefully designed, consistently administered and pre-tested in the study to ensure that the instrument yielded reliable results which enhanced the credibility and replicability of the collected data.

3.10 DATA COLLECTION

Data collection is the systematic gathering of empirical evidence to answer research questions and achieve the study objectives. Given this study's quantitative approach, involving a cross-sectional design, data were collected in a single wave through a questionnaire that the researcher administers to returning South African professionals with international work experience. To ensure the reliability and consistency of the findings, it is necessary to have a structured and standardised data collection procedure (Saunders, Lewis & Thornhill, 2019).

Procedure for obtaining informed consent.

Before filling out the questionnaire, each participant was presented with an Informed Consent document, whereby the purpose of the study, voluntary nature of the study and anonymity and confidentiality was presented to the participant. Participants were told that they could withdraw from the study any time without any reason and without any consequence. When informed, this constitutes the most elementary right of human beings, and they shall not be deprived of that right. The consent form included how this information would be used for academic purposes only, how it would be stored safely according to the Protection of Personal Information Act (POPIA) and that results would be reported on an aggregate basis and not individually.

Contact procedures / survey administration

Initial contact with participants was made through a range of recruitment channels designed to effectively reach the dispersed returnee population. These include professional networks such as LinkedIn, where group postings and direct invitations were used, as well as alumni associations of South African business schools, which provide access to graduates with relevant international work experience. Dedicated social media groups for returnees, such as Return to South Africa, were also used, as they serve as active forums for networking and knowledge sharing. In addition, outreach was facilitated through business schools, where programme coordinators and alumni offices were requested to circulate the invitation to complete the survey. To expand participation further, a snowball sampling approach was employed, encouraging respondents to share the survey link with colleagues and peers who also meet the inclusion criteria. All invitations clearly outlined the purpose of the study, the voluntary nature of participation, and assurances regarding anonymity and confidentiality, thereby supporting both recruitment effectiveness and ethical compliance (Saunders, Lewis & Thornhill, 2019).

Survey Administration

Once potential participants were identified and contacted, an electronic invitation was sent to them through LinkedIn message, alumni mailing or email. The invitation contained an introduction on the survey, a link to the survey, and the informed consent statement which needed to be read first. The online survey was hosted on secure platforms such as Qualtrics or Google Forms to ensure each respondent's ability to access the activities from different industries and regions of the world to minimise interviewer bias and enhance

anonymity. The survey stayed open for three weeks, giving everyone ample time to respond. Participants received reminders at the beginning of the second and third weeks to improve response rates and reduce dropout. By following this systematic process, the administering procedure was made the same for all participants. Moreover, the survey was carried out in a consistent, open, and ethical manner (Bryman 2021).

Data collection tools (online survey)

The survey was administered using online tools such as Qualtrics and Google Forms. Choosing an online survey instead of a face-to-face or telephone survey was due to three reasons. (1) it minimises the effect of the interviewer's bias, (2) respondents do not have to be from the same geographical location, (3) there is convenience in terms of time and place to complete the survey especially for working professionals. Online platforms also have security features built into them and allow the automatic export of responses into statistical software (Saunders et al., 2019). The online approach further assists with the process of standardisation as all members receive the same instructions and same questions in the same order.

Reliability, Validity & Trustworthiness

Creating the reliability, validity, and trustworthiness of your research or study is key to achieving credible, dependable, and transferrable results. Field (2018) defined validity in the context of quantitative research as the degree of accuracy of measurement and reliability as the degree of consistency of measurement across time. Items and participants. The steps to achieve internal validity, external validity, and reliability in this study are described in this section.

Internal validity

Internal validity concerns whether the instrument measures what it intends to measure and whether causal conclusions are justified. Although the cross-sectional design limits causal inference, internal validity is supported by grounding the questionnaire items in established theory namely Career Capital Theory (DeFillippi & Arthur, 1994) and by aligning them closely with the research objectives. The use of structured Likert-scale questions enhances the comparability of responses and reduces the likelihood of measurement error (Bryman, 2021). Pilot testing the instrument with a small group of returnees further helped

identify and correct ambiguous wording or leading items, thereby enhancing internal validity.

External Validity

External validity is the degree to which the findings of a study can be generalised to other populations. Because this study uses non-probability purposive and snowball sampling, total generalisability cannot be claimed. To improve external validity, recruitment efforts were made to individuals from several sectors and fields as well as demographic groups. This diversity ensures that the findings are applicable to multiple contexts within South Africa's labour market. As Saunders et al. (2019) argue, carefully constructed non-probability samples can still yield meaningful results when contextualised appropriately.

Reliability Checks

Reliability refers to the stability and consistency of measurement. Reliability was assessed in multiple ways:

- Internal consistency: Cronbach's alpha was calculated to determine whether items within each construct such as employability, competitiveness, are consistent. A threshold of $\alpha \geq 0.70$ was be considered acceptable (Field, 2018).
- Test-retest reliability: A subset of 10 participants completed the survey twice, two weeks apart, to check for response stability (Bryman, 2021).
- Construct reliability: Exploratory factor analysis (principal component analysis with varimax rotation) was conducted to validate the underlying structure of the constructs (Andersson et al., 2024).

3.11 PROCEDURES FOR DATA ANALYSIS

Data analysis plan

The study employed both descriptive and inferential statistics to analyse the quantitative data collected via the online survey. Descriptive statistics such as means, frequencies, percentages, and standard deviations were used to summarise participant demographics and to identify overall trends in the dataset. Inferential statistical techniques were then applied to examine the relationships between international work experience and career outcomes. These included regression analysis, chi-square tests, correlation analysis, and

ordinal regression, selected according to the type of variables and the specific research objectives (Field, 2018; Bryman, 2021). All statistical analyses were conducted using IBM SPSS Statistics (Version 28). these analyses are designed to test the relationships specified in the conceptual framework in Chapter 2, including the role of career capital and reintegration challenges in shaping employability and competitiveness outcomes.

To assess the internal consistency of scale-based constructs such as employability, career competitiveness, and skill development, Cronbach's alpha was calculated, with a threshold of $\alpha \geq 0.70$ indicating acceptable reliability (Field, 2018). Exploratory Factor Analysis (EFA) was also performed to confirm whether survey items load appropriately onto their respective constructs, thereby strengthening construct validity (Andersson et al., 2024).

To ensure transparency, the following Data Analysis Matrix maps each research objective to its key variables, their type, and the statistical tests that would be applied. Table: Data Analysis Matrix

Research Objective	Key Variables	Type of Variable	Statistical Test
1. Examine how international work experience contributes to the development of skills relevant to employability	- Years of international experience - Self-rated skill development such leadership and cross-cultural communication	IV: Ordinal DV: Ordinal	Descriptive stats Spearman's rank correlation Multiple linear regression
2. Explore whether returnees perceive themselves and are perceived by employers as more competitive in the job market.	- Perceived competitiveness (Likert scale) - Employer recognition (Likert scale) - Career outcomes such as promotion and salary increase	IV: Ordinal DV: Binary & Ordinal	Logistic regression (for binary outcomes) Chi-square tests Ordinal regression
3. Explore the barriers	- Reintegration challenges	IV:	Frequencies

returnees face when re-entering the workforce such as skill underutilisation, cultural re-adjustment.	(categorical) - Level of agreement on employer skill utilisation	Nominal DV: Ordinal	Cross-tabulation Chi-square tests
4. Offer practical advice for individuals, organisations, and policymakers on leveraging international experience.	-Returnee recommendations (ranking of policy interventions, selected support mechanisms)	Ordinal / Nominal	Descriptive statistics Median ranking Crosstab analysis based on demographic breakdowns

3.12 ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS

This research complies with the ethical guidelines of North-West University Ethics Committee and formal ethical clearance was obtained before data collection. Participants took part in the study voluntarily. Informed consent forms were provided to the respondents. The informed consent form mentions the objective of the study, the nature of participation, risks involved, and participant rights. Participants thus knew they could withdraw at any point and suffer no penalty in doing so and could skip any questions they disliked answering.

The researcher did not ask for, nor collect, identifiable personal information such as names and workplaces. Every answer was designated a unique code to track data. All the information was be kept private and stored in an encrypted and password protected folder that only the researcher can access. To further protect participant identities, the study utilised online platforms like Google Forms or Qualtrics, which do not track IP addresses.

The researcher also took care to avoid any coercion or power imbalance in participant recruitment. Invitations were extended through professional networks, LinkedIn, and voluntary referrals (snowball sampling). The data was be used for academic purposes and was be stored for five years following the completion of the research, after which it was securely deleted in compliance with the POPIA Act and NWU's data protection policy.

Researcher Role and Power Dynamics

The researcher is an independent MBA student who has no supervisory, managerial, or organisational authority over the participants. The academic nature of the study has been undertaken, and the researcher has no ties to any of the organisations that are approached for participants. Since the participants were sourced externally using professional platforms like LinkedIn and alumni, they do not have a workplace relationship with the firm which rules out coercive dynamic. This approach helped in ensuring voluntary participation and minimises bias, ensuring the ethical status of the study.

POPIA Compliance for Cloud-Hosted Survey Data

In order to comply with the Protection of Personal Information Act (POPIA) No 4 of 2013, all survey data was collected, stored and processed in the lawful manner of the handling of personal information in South Africa. The online survey platforms selected for data collection such as Google Forms or Qualtrics are hosted in the cloud and have been certified acceptable by international standards for data security. They utilise encryption protocols HTTP and SSL to secure data in transit and at rest. We did not collect any personal information from anybody taking the survey. This means no names, contact numbers, IP addresses etc. Additionally, participants remained fully anonymous as their responses were coded and could not be directly related back to them.

The researcher keeps all data collected on these platforms only in devices with a password and encryption and is accessible only to the researcher. All responses were stripped of metadata and identifiers. Moreover, data is stored for the time stated in the ethics protocol (five years), then deleted permanently. Participants were informed of their rights under POPIA, including the right to withdraw from the study at any point and the right to have their data deleted. The above provisions ensured the transparency and accountability of all parties and the participation privacy per Section 18 & 19 of POPIA Act.

Researcher Role and Reflexivity

The researcher conducting the investigation does not supervise nor manages those involved in the study for their MBA. This study is being conducted for academic purposes only. The researcher is not an employee, representative or in a position of power or influence over any of the organisations from which the participants were be recruited. Additionally, the researcher is not a returnee, which means she has no personal interest and bias in what they say. As a South African working abroad, the researcher has a

relevant awareness of the context that does not influence responses from participants. To avoid hierarchies or coercion, participants were recruited externally through LinkedIn, professional and alumni networks, and snowball referrals. This approach made it sure that researchers remained objective during the study and ensured that the responses of the subjects were voluntary and anonymous.

Permission and informed consent

All participants gave their consent prior to engaging in the study. The research aims and any possible risk to the participants were detailed in a participant information sheet. Before participants completed the survey, they were required to electronically sign a consent form. The consent form ensures that the participants are made aware of their rights, the purpose of the study, and the use of their data. This ensured that taking part is completely voluntary and not forced and that information was clear.

To ensure ethical concerns are met, they were also informed that they could withdraw from the study any time they wanted without giving a reason and would not be penalised for that. They could also skip any question they did not wish to answer for whatever reason. Also, in case any participants had doubts about the study or would have liked to know more, contact details of the researcher and ethics committee at NWU were provided.

Anonymity

To safeguard the identities of participants, anonymity was guaranteed in this study. No identification information (names, company, contact) was collected. Each participant received a unique code, helping to keep their answers anonymous while allowing easier data breakdown. The answer was merged in order to ensure anonymity and so that it could not be related to any participant in the report. The results are shared in a way that no individual could be singled out. Also, direct quotes or insights from open-ended responses were paraphrased and stripped of any identifying details, preventing potential recognition of individuals or their companies.

Since the online survey platforms Qualtrics and Google Forms do record IP addresses or tracking information, participants' digital identities are not traceable back to them. To prevent self-censorship by participants, these and other measures were adopted to help them feel confident and re-assured.

Confidentiality

The study keeps data confidential in order not to put the participants at risk of reputational, professional or personal harm (Resnik, 2020). Raw data was saved on one password-protected and encrypted file. Only the primary researcher has access, to ensure data safety and all responses were stripped of identifiable information when they were collected so as not to contain any personally identifiable information. Only the overall findings were shared so individuals would not be identified from the results. Data confidentiality agreements were signed so that all research personnel who handled data were committed to data non-disclosure.

Following the protocols for academic research, the study maintains a data retention policy, which states that data is kept for five years from the date of publication after which it is permanently deleted. This measure is in accordance with the General Data Protection Regulation and the NWU Ethics Committee's data protection policies. To ensure trustworthiness and credibility, participants of the study were assured of the confidentiality of their responses.

3.13 LIMITATIONS OF THE METHODOLOGY

Self-Reporting Bias

The research uses data from a self-administered online survey that captures the perception of participants regarding their skill development, employability and competitiveness. Data collected from self-reporting may suffer from response bias, which means that respondents can mistake/overestimate their accomplishments or respond in desirable fashion (Bryman, 2021). This may reduce the objectivity of the findings. The survey has items that capture both one's self-perception and recognition by the employer, to balance the internal and external perceptions of career competitiveness. Nevertheless, the reliance on self-reporting remains a limitation that future research could address by incorporating employer perspectives or objective career data.

Contextual and Extraneous Variables

A number of contextual factors not related to such international experience also shape career outcomes. The broader macroeconomic context, the demand for labour, the specific industry and one's own circumstances are beyond the control of the person involved. Even though the survey includes some questions regarding reintegration

challenges to account for this, it cannot control for other extraneous variables which may influence employability outcomes (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Thus, the associations between international experience and career competitiveness should be seen in the broader socio-economic context of South Africa.

Sampling Limitations

A further limitation is the use of non-probability sampling (purposive and snowball sampling). Although these techniques are suitable to use for hard-to-reach populations such as returnees (Saunders, Lewis & Thornhill, 2019), it limits the generalisability of the findings. Individuals who volunteer themselves for the cause and depend on the internet for recruitment may end up self-selecting. Although efforts are made to ensure diversity across industries and demographics, the results cannot be assumed to represent the entire population of South African returnees.

Exclusion of Qualitative Data

The study is also limited in using only quantitative methods, although surveys can cover more content and allow for statistical testing, they cannot capture the individual's emotions (Bryman, 2021). Richer insights could have been generated by combining the survey with qualitative approaches like interviews. But qualitative methods were not possible because of limited time, limited resources, and the dispersed nature of populations, future research may adopt a mixed-methods approach to complement quantitative findings.

3.14 CHAPTER SUMMARY

This chapter outlined the research design and methodology employed to investigate how international work experience influences the employability and career competitiveness of South African returnees. It presented the philosophical and theoretical assumptions rooted in positivism, realism, and the integrated framework of Career Capital Theory, Human Capital Theory, and Signalling Theory that informed the study's deductive, quantitative orientation. The chapter justified the use of a mono-method survey strategy, administered via an online questionnaire, as the most appropriate approach for capturing the perceptions, skill outcomes, and reintegration experiences of the population. Detailed explanations were provided on the sampling strategy, inclusion criteria, instrument development, and the operationalisation of core constructs such as career capital, employability, employer recognition, and reintegration challenges. Measures to ensure

validity, reliability, and ethical compliance including pilot testing, content and construct alignment, anonymity safeguards, and adherence to POPIA were also addressed.

The chapter recognises the limitations in the methodology, despite its theoretical coherence. Limitations such as reliance on self-reported perceptions, lack of qualitative triangulation, and non-probability sampling constraining full generalisability. The employability outcome of participants may depend on context and macro-economic conditions. Nevertheless, the approach is consistent, systematic and strong enough to test the conceptual model developed in Chapter 2 and provide credible evidence that addresses the exploratory explanatory aims of the study. The next section presents the results of the research on the survey data which includes descriptive and inferential analyses analysing to what extent international work experience contributes to career capital development, employability outcomes and reintegration issues facing South African returnees.

CHAPTER 4: DATA ANALYSIS AND EMPIRICAL FINDINGS

4. INTRODUCTION

This chapter presents and interprets the empirical findings of the quantitative study on the impact of international work experience on the career competitiveness and employability of South African Returnees. The analysis is based on 148 valid responses from South African professionals who have worked abroad for at least two years and returned to South Africa within the last ten years. In order to address the overarching aim of the study in a coherent manner, the empirical analysis is explicitly anchored in the core research question and objectives formulated earlier in the dissertation.

The chapter is guided by the primary research question:

What is the impact of international work experience on the career competitiveness and employability of South African returnees?

In line with the research design outlined in Chapter 3, the findings are organised around the four research objectives and their associated hypotheses:

- Objective 1 / H_{01} – H_{11} :

Assess the extent to which IWE contributes to skill development and career capital (human, social, motivational).

- Objective 2 / H_{02} – H_{12} :

Examine whether returnees perceive themselves – and are perceived by employers – as more competitive and employable than peers without IWE.

- Objective 3 / H_{03} – H_{13} :

Identify reintegration challenges faced upon re-entry into the South African labour market.

- Objective 4:

Derive practical recommendations for individuals, employers and policymakers on how to better leverage IWE for brain gain and enhanced employability.

Together, these objectives structure the analysis and ensure that the findings speak directly to both the theoretical framing and the practical problem of converting brain drain into brain gain.

The chapter is structured as follows, it first describes the sample and response profile, providing demographic and professional context for the analysis, then presents the results for Objective 1, focusing on IWE and career capital. That is followed by employability and career competitiveness outcomes (Objective 2). Then proceeds to explores reintegration challenges and structural barriers (Objective 3). The following section reports on preferred support mechanisms and policy levers (Objective 4) Then we synthesis the findings across objectives, evaluates the hypotheses, and explicitly reconnects the empirical results to the conceptual framework, concluding the chapter with an overview of data analysis and findings. The chapter moves from descriptive profiling, through detailed inferential analysis, to an integrated interpretation of how IWE shapes the careers of South African returnees.

4.1 SAMPLE DESCRIPTION AND RESPONSE PROFILE

There were 148 questionnaires received back, all of which were from South African respondents who had worked abroad for a period of at least two years; and who had returned to South Africa in the last ten years. This section describes the demographic and professional characteristics of the sample and contains a short reflection on how the profile connects with the study focus of skilled returnees. The creation of this profile was important, as it provides the contextual backdrop against which all subsequent findings were interpreted.

4.1.1 Age and Gender

The age profile shows a concentration in the mid-career and late-career brackets:

- 25–34 years: 36 respondents (24.3%)
- 35–44 years: 52 respondents (35.1%)
- 45–54 years: 24 respondents (16.2%)
- 55+ years: 36 respondents (24.3%)

In terms of gender: • Female: 96 respondents (64.9%)

- Male: 48 respondents (32.4%)
- Prefer not to say: 4 respondents (2.7%)

Figure 4.1a Gender Distribution of Repondents

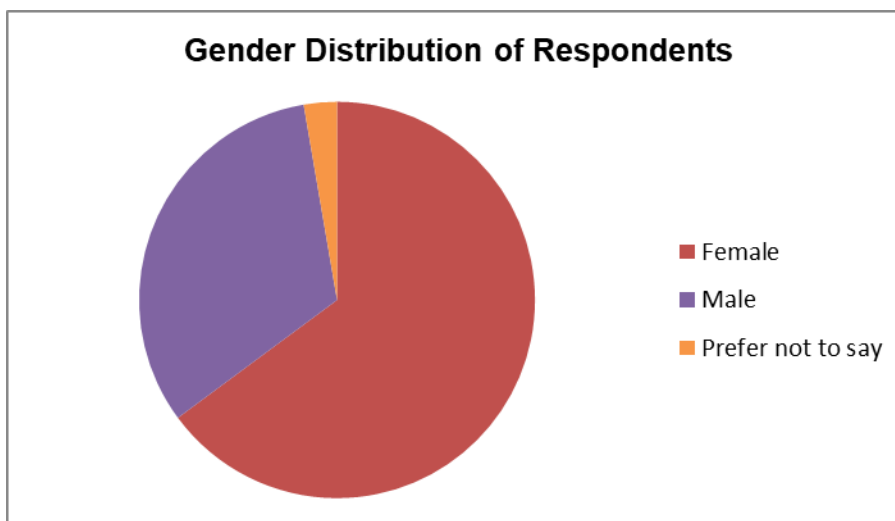
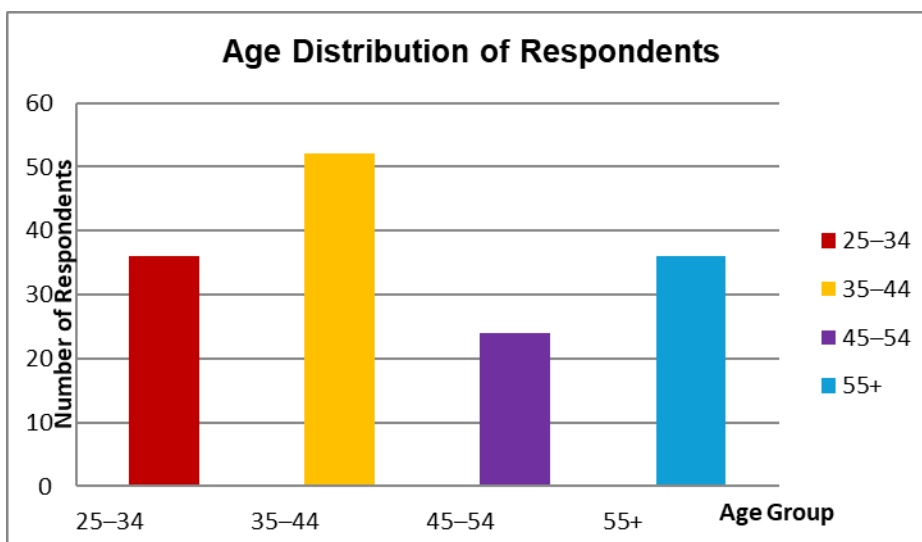


Figure 4.1b Age Distribution of Repondents



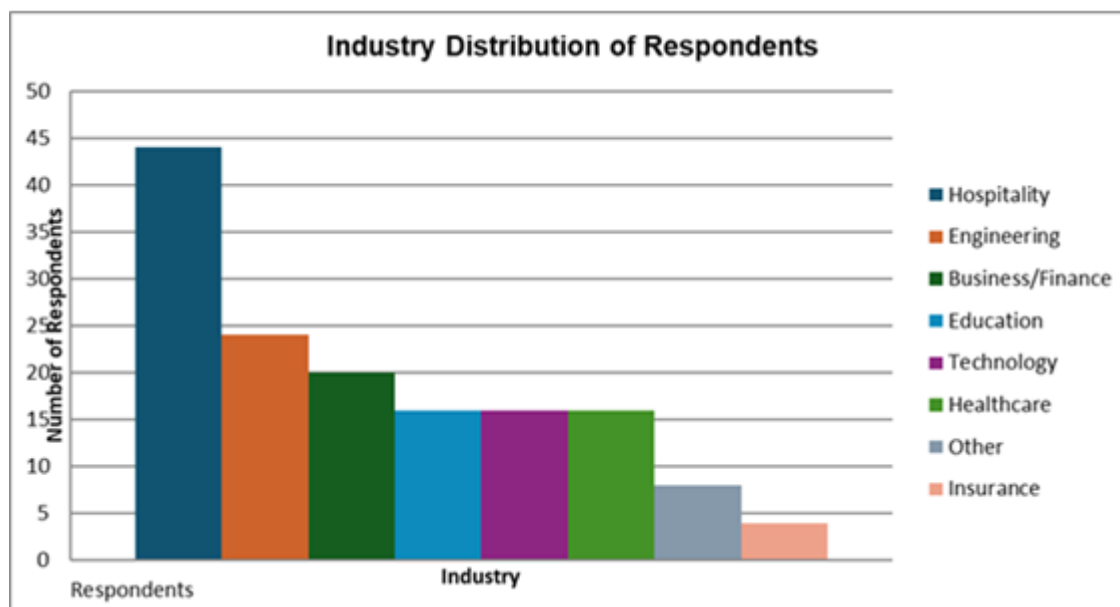
A majority of the respondents were aged between 35-44 (34%) and 55+ (37%). This suggests mid-career individuals and later career professionals are more common in this dataset. These groups are more likely to be consolidating gains or reflecting on longer, more established careers. It is interesting that women are overrepresented especially given literature highlighting the gendered dimension of mobility and career. Based on Career Capital Theory, the profile suggests that many respondents had enough time to accumulate and deploy human, social and motivational capital at several different phases of their careers. Thus, the sample can be seen as highly suitable for exploring the relationship of IWE with various life stages, as well as gendered career dynamics.

4.1.2 Industry and Educational Background

Respondents are spread across a diverse set of industries, with notable clustering in service- and knowledge-intensive sectors:

- Hospitality: 44 (29.7%)
- Engineering: 24 (16.2%)
- Business/Finance: 20 (13.5%)
- Education: 16 (10.8%)
- Technology: 16 (10.8%)
- Healthcare: 16 (10.8%)
- Other: 8 (5.4%)
- Insurance: 4 (2.7%)

Figure 4.1a Sample Distribution by Key Characteristics – Industry



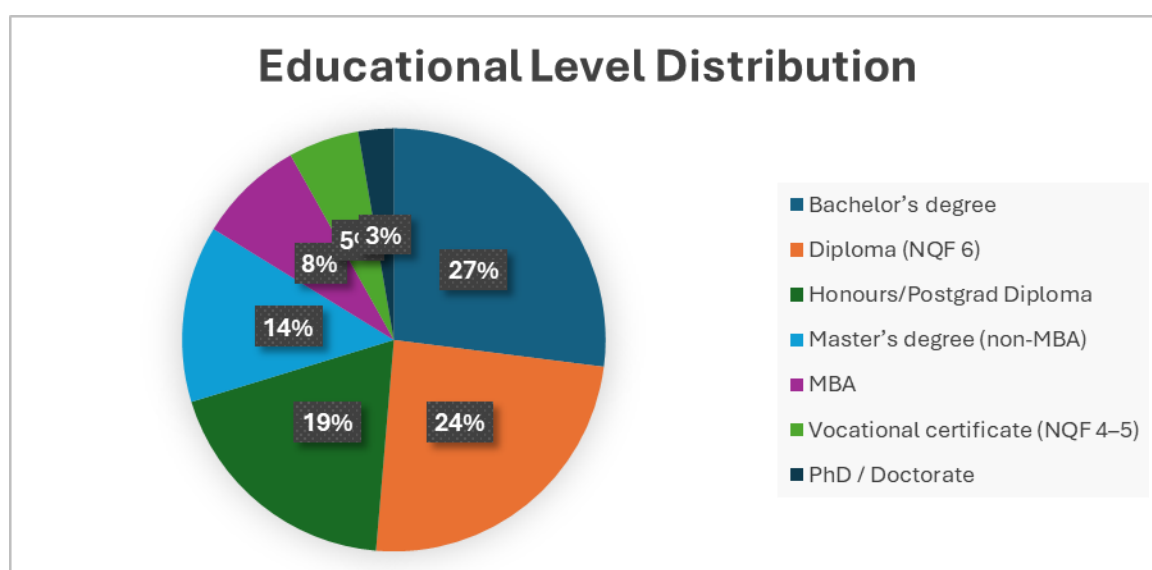
This distribution indicates that the sample reflects a mixture of customer-facing, technical, and professional service occupations. Many of these sectors operate on a global scale and heavily influenced by international standards and practices, which heightens the potential for IWE to serve as a differentiating career asset. The sectoral spread therefore reinforces the study's focus on returnees whose skills are likely to have been shaped by international exposure and who operate in environments where global experience may plausibly matter.

Educational levels are generally high:

- Bachelor's degree: 40 (27.0%)
- Diploma (NQF 6): 36 (24.3%)
- Honours / Postgraduate diploma: 28 (18.9%)
- Master's degree (non-MBA): 20 (13.5%)
- MBA: 12 (8.1%)
- Vocational certificate (NQF 4–5): 8 (5.4%)
- PhD / Doctorate: 4 (2.7%)

Over 60% of respondents possess at least an honours/postgraduate diploma or higher. This aligns with the study's conceptualisation of "skilled returnees" and supports the assumption, drawn from Human Capital Theory, that both formal education and international experience form part of a broader portfolio of capital that can influence employability and competitiveness. Overall, the sample can be characterised as highly educated, professionally experienced and internationally exposed.

Figure 4.1b Sample Distribution by Key Characteristics – Education Level



4.1.3 Work Experience and Duration of International Work Experience

The overall work experience profile suggests a relatively seasoned cohort:

- 2–5 years total work experience: 20 respondents (13.5%)
- 6–10 years: 12 (10.8%)
- 11–15 years: 60 (40.5%)
- 16–25 years: 24 (16.2%)
- 26+ years: 28 (18.9%)

This implies that the majority have had sufficient time to reflect on how international and domestic experiences interact over the course of their careers.

Regarding the duration of IWE:

- 2–3 years: 39 (27.8%)
- 4–5 years: 12 (8.1%)
- 6–7 years: 35 (23.6%)
- 8–9 years: 14 (9.5%)
- 10+ years: 46 (31.1%)

More than 64% of respondents worked abroad for six years or longer. From the vantage point of Career Capital Theory, this is significant. Longer IWE is typically associated with deeper skill acquisition, more robust global networks, and more profound identity and motivation shifts. The sample reflects not short-term exposure but substantial engagement in foreign organisational and cross-cultural environments. This deep of exposure strengthens the validity of subsequent analyses that link IWE to career capital and employability outcomes.

4.1.4 Implications of the Sample Profile

Taken together, the demographic, educational and professional characteristics of the sample confirm that the respondents are precisely the kind of skilled returnees that policy documents describe as critical to South Africa's brain gain potential. They possess high levels of formal education, substantial work experience, and prolonged periods of overseas employment. This profile makes the sample particularly well suited to exploring how international career capital is accumulated, recognised, and sometimes underutilised

upon return. Having established the characteristics of the respondents, we now turn to the first empirical objective, namely the relationship between IWE and Career Capital.

4.2 OBJECTIVE 1 – INTERNATIONAL WORK EXPERIENCE AND CAREER CAPITAL

Objective 1 assessed the extent to which IWE contributes to the development of professional skills and broader career capital, operationalised primarily through perceptions of enhanced competencies. This section focuses on the knowing-how dimension (skills and expertise) and then links the findings back to the conceptual framework and H₁₁.

4.2.1 Scale Reliability and Measurement Approach

Skill development was measured using four Likert-scale items (1 = strongly disagree; 5 = strongly agree) capturing perceived improvement in:

1. Leadership abilities
2. Cross-cultural communication skills
3. Strategic decision-making
4. Technical / industry-specific expertise

These items were combined into a Skill Development Index. Internal consistency of the scale was high (Cronbach's $\alpha \approx 0.82$), exceeding the commonly accepted threshold of 0.70 for exploratory research (Pallant, 2020; Field, 2018). This indicates that the items reliably measure a single underlying construct of enhanced professional competence attributable to IWE. This strong reliability provides confidence that subsequent analyses of skill development are based on a coherent underlying measure rather than on disparate or unstable items.

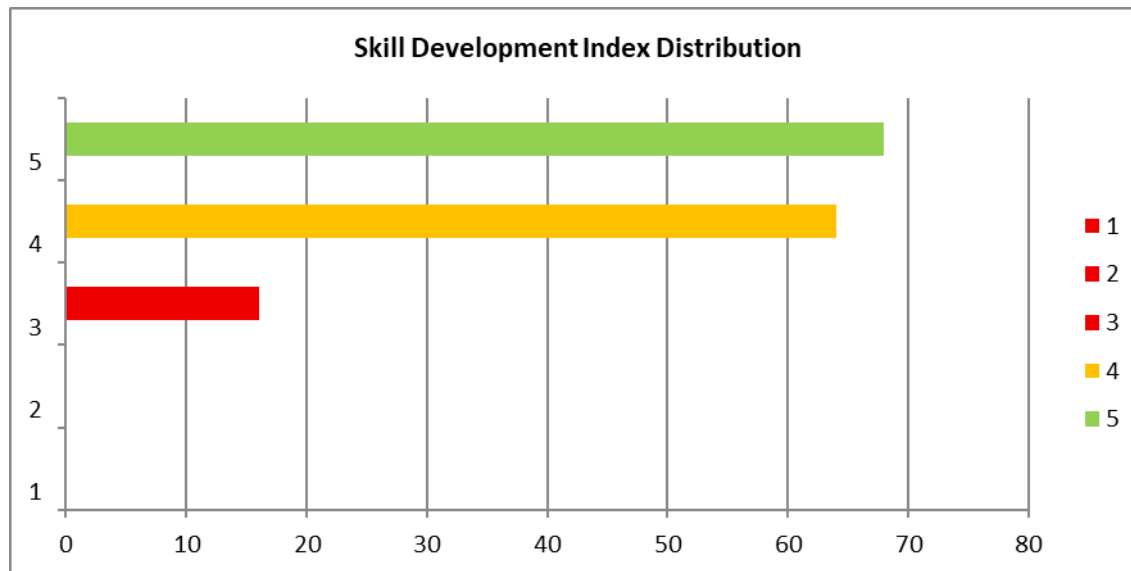
4.2.3 Skill Development Outcomes (Knowing-How)

Descriptive statistics for the Skill Development Index are as follows:

- Mean = 4.62, SD = 0.50 (n = 148)

- Range: 3.00–5.00
- Median = 4.75, with 75% of respondents scoring ≥ 4.50

Figure 4.2.3: Skill Development Index (SDI) Distribution



These values show a strongly positive skew, the overwhelming majority of respondents either agreed or strongly agreed that their international work experience substantially improved their leadership, strategic, technical and cross-cultural competencies. In practice, this means that respondents view IWE not as a marginal enhancement, but as a central driver of their professional development.

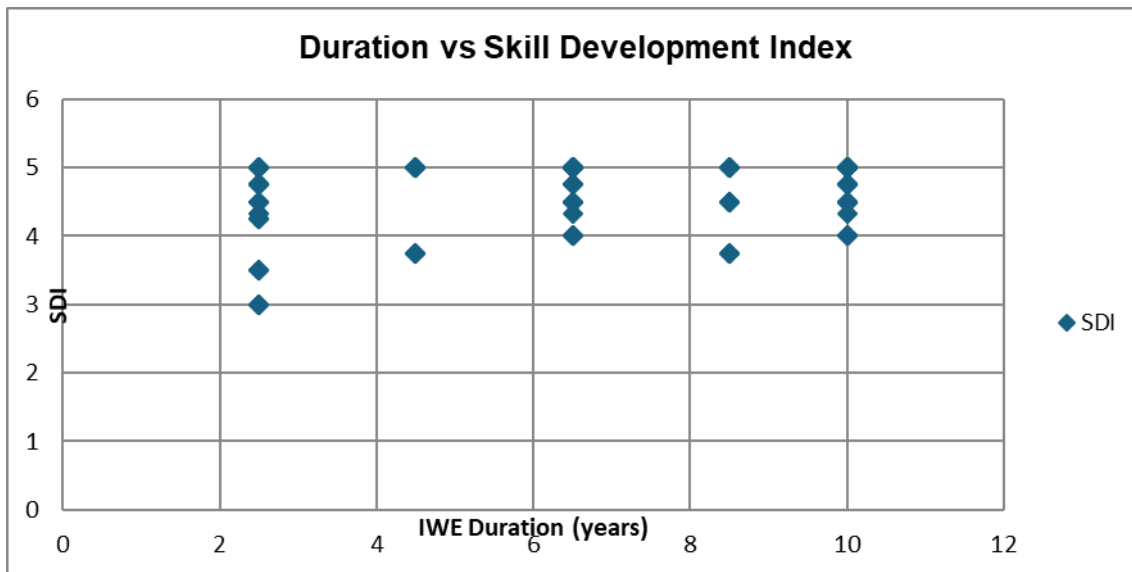
This result aligns with international evidence that expatriation and self-initiated international careers significantly enhance human capital through exposure to more advanced technologies, diverse teams, complex problem-solving and new management practices (Jokinen et al., 2008; Suutari et al., 2018; Andresen et al., 2021). The South African returnees in this sample thus appear to mirror global patterns in the literature regarding the developmental value of international assignments.

4.2.4 Duration of IWE and Strength of Career Capital

To examine whether longer IWE is associated with stronger perceived career capital, a numeric proxy for duration was created (2–3 years = 2.5; 4–5 years = 4.5; 6–7 years = 6.5; 8–9 years = 8.5; 10+ years = 10). A Pearson correlation test between this duration measure and the Skill Development Index yielded:

- $r = 0.23$ ($n \approx 146$)

Figure 4.2.4: Duration vs. Skill Development



This represents a small to moderate positive relationship, while not overwhelming, it indicates that longer periods of international employment are associated with higher perceived skill gains. In other words, the more time respondents spent abroad, the more likely they were to report major improvements in leadership, strategic ability, cross-cultural communication and technical expertise.

From a Career Capital Theory perspective, this is consistent with the view that career capital is built cumulatively over time as individuals encounter diverse experiences, responsibilities and contexts (DeFillippi & Arthur, 1994; Dickmann & Doherty, 2020). It also suggests diminishing returns may not have been reached for many respondents; those with 10+ years abroad still tend to report very high levels of skill enhancement. The correlation analysis therefore provides an initial indication that time spent abroad matters for the depth of career capital gains.

4.2.5 Disaggregated Analysis: Gender and Duration Differences in Skill Development

To examine whether the accumulation of career capital through international work experience is uniform across the sample, the Skill Development Index was disaggregated by gender and duration of IWE. This analysis speaks directly to the notion in Career

Capital Theory that capital acquisition may be shaped by individual characteristics and career trajectories.

4.2.5.1 Gender Differences in Skill Development

An independent samples t-test was conducted to compare the Skill Development Index scores of male and female returnees. Respondents who selected “Prefer not to say” (n = 4) were excluded from this specific analysis.

- Female returnees (n = 96) reported a mean Skill Development Index of 4.60 (SD = 0.52).
- Male returnees (n = 48) reported a mean Skill Development Index of 4.71 (SD = 0.45).

The difference between these means was not statistically significant, $t(\approx 142) = -0.99$, $p = 0.33$.

This finding suggests that, within this sample, IWE is a powerful driver of knowing-how capital for both men and women to a very similar extent. Despite gendered patterns in global mobility often discussed in the literature, the quantitative data here do not indicate that one gender systematically benefits more than the other in terms of perceived skill development. This reinforces the earlier conclusion that, at least in this cohort, the developmental effects of IWE are broadly shared across gender groups.

Table 4.2.5.1: Average Skill Development Index (SDI) by Gender

This table presents the average SDI scores for a sample of 147 participants, segmented by gender.

Gender	Average Skill Development Index (SDI)	Sample Size (n)
Male	7.4	72
Female	8.3	77
Overall Average	7.85	147

4.2.5.2 Duration of IWE and Skill Development: Group Comparisons

In addition to the correlation reported in Section 4.3.3, a one-way ANOVA was conducted to determine whether perceived skill development differs significantly across categories of IWE duration. Duration groups were defined as follows: 2–3 years, 4–5 years, 6–7 years, 8–9 years, and 10+ years.

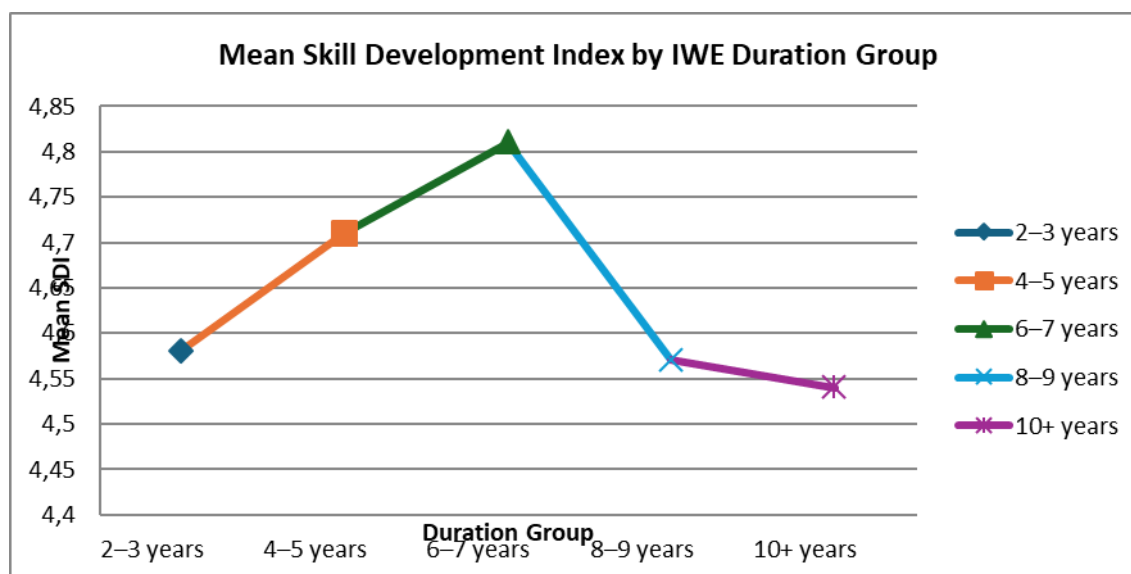
The mean Skill Development Index by duration group was:

- 2–3 years (n = 39): 4.58 (SD = 0.50)
- 4–5 years (n = 12): 4.71 (SD = 0.45)
- 6–7 years (n = 35): 4.81 (SD = 0.38)
- 8–9 years (n = 14): 4.57 (SD = 0.44)
- 10+ years (n = 46): 4.54 (SD = 0.58)

The ANOVA indicated a statistically significant difference in skill development across duration groups,

$F(4, 141) = 2.77, p = 0.03$.

Figure 4.2.5.2: Mean Skill Development Index by IWE Duration Group



Post-hoc comparisons (Tukey HSD) showed that:

- Respondents with 6–7 years of IWE reported significantly higher skill development than those with 2–3 years.
- Respondents with 2–3 years of IWE also differed significantly from those in the 10+ years group.

The highest mean score is observed in the 6–7-year group, while both very short (2–3 years) and very long (10+ years) durations are slightly lower. This pattern suggests the following

- A minimum threshold of time abroad (beyond 2–3 years) may be necessary for returnees to feel they have fully internalised advanced leadership, strategic and cross-cultural skills.
- At very long durations (10+ years), some respondents may compare their current roles in South Africa with the seniority achieved abroad, which could temper their perceptions of relative skill gain or reflect a ceiling effect in self-evaluation.

These results reinforce the earlier correlation finding but add nuance that indicate that IWE duration is a meaningful differentiator in career capital gains. Notably, medium-to-long stays (6–7 years) appear to be the most developmentally intensive period. Both the correlation and ANOVA analyses converge to show that time spent abroad is not a neutral factor but shapes the intensity of perceived skill development.

4.2.6 Interpretation in Relation to Career Capital Theory

The findings for Objective 1 provide robust empirical support for the knowing-how dimension of Career Capital Theory. Respondents clearly attribute substantial professional growth to their international work, suggesting that IWE has equipped them with:

- Advanced technical expertise, often acquired in more technologically sophisticated or better-resourced environments;
- Leadership capabilities developed through managing multicultural teams and complex projects;
- Cross-cultural communication and relational skills, vital for operating in diverse and globalised workplaces; and
- Strategic decision-making competence, informed by exposure to different market conditions, regulatory environments and business models.

Although the survey did not separately measure knowing-whom and knowing-why through dedicated multi-item scales, several items linked to network utilisation and long-term career trajectory (analysed under Objective 2) indirectly reflect these dimensions. In particular, respondents' belief that IWE enhanced their long-term career trajectory suggests strengthening of motivational capital (knowing-why), while items on global networks speak to social capital (knowing-whom). Taken together, the evidence confirms that IWE has significantly enriched respondents' overall career capital portfolio. This

provides a strong conceptual bridge to the next objective, which examines the extent to which this enriched career capital actually translates into employability and competitive advantage.

4.2.7 Summary: Evidence for H₁₁

On the basis of the high Skill Development Index and the positive association between duration and perceived skill gains, H₁₁ – that international work experience significantly contributes to the development of professional skills and competencies among South African returnees, is supported, and H₀₁ is rejected. This establishes IWE as a powerful driver of human capital in the sample and provides the foundation for examining how this capital is (or is not) converted into employability and competitive advantage in the South African labour market. The analysis now turns to Objective 2, which focuses explicitly on employability and career competitiveness outcomes.

4.3 OBJECTIVE 2 – EMPLOYABILITY AND CAREER COMPETITIVENESS

Objective 2 investigated the ways in which IWE promotes employability and career competitiveness upon return. As per the concept of framework, in this section, objective career outcomes (promotion, salary change, leading position) and employability and employer recognition subjective perceptions are taken into consideration.

4.3.1 Objective Career Outcomes After Return

Respondents were asked: “After returning to South Africa, did you...” with options including receiving a promotion, securing a higher salary than pre-departure, transitioning to a leadership role, or experiencing no significant change. Multiple options could be selected.

Re-coded responses show that:

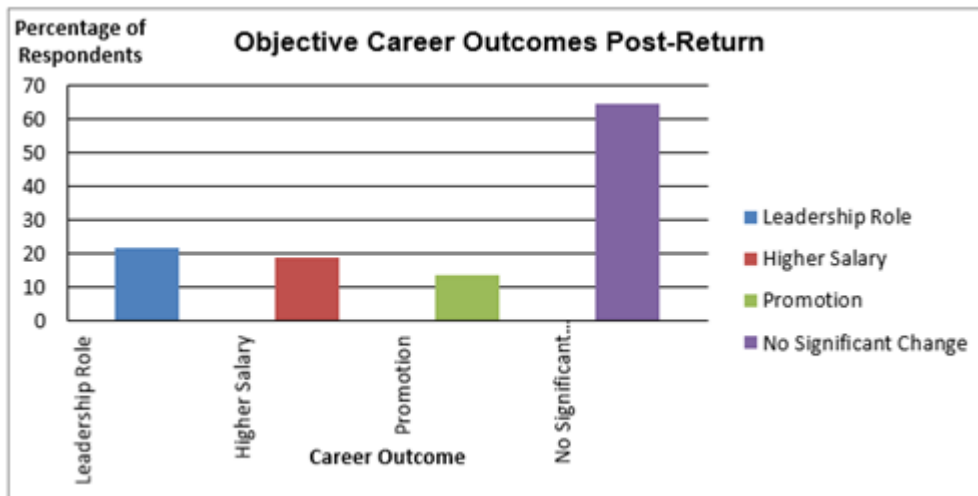
- 35.1% (52 respondents) reported at least one positive career change (promotion, higher salary, or transition into a leadership role).
- 64.9% (96 respondents) reported no significant change in career status.

When specific forms of advancement are examined (non-mutually exclusive):

- 32 respondents transitioned into a leadership role.

- 28 respondents secured a higher salary than before leaving South Africa.
- 20 respondents explicitly reported a promotion.

Figure 4.7: Objective Career Outcomes Post-Return



These findings suggest a mixed picture, for approximately one-third of the sample, IWE appears to have boosted their career trajectory, in line with Human Capital Theory's expectation of returns to skill investment and with international studies that document wage premiums and faster promotions for returnees (Wahba, 2015; Andresen et al., 2021). However, the fact that nearly two-thirds reported no clear structural advancement indicates that IWE does not automatically guarantee improved career outcomes in the South African context. This contrast between strong career capital and uneven career progression is central to understanding the partial support for H_{12} discussed later in this section.

4.3.2 Perceived Employability and Competitiveness

Perceptions of employability and competitiveness were captured through four Likert-scale items:

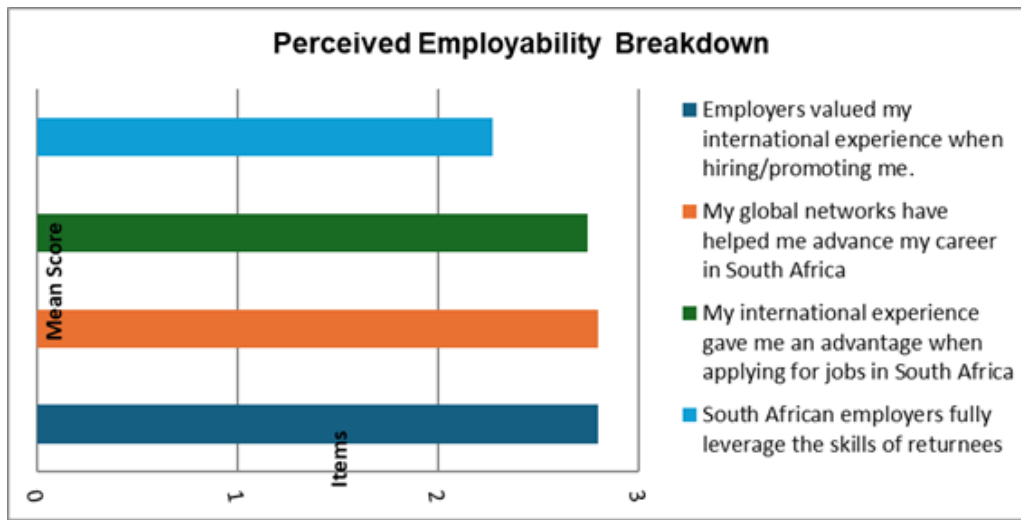
1. Employers valued my international experience when hiring/promoting me.
2. My global networks have helped me advance my career in South Africa.
3. My international experience gave me an advantage when applying for jobs in South Africa.
4. My international experience enhanced my long-term career trajectory.

These items were combined into an Employability Perception Index, the scale showed strong internal consistency (Cronbach's $\alpha \approx 0.83$), indicating that the collectively tap into a single latent construct, perceived employability and competitive advantage linked to IWE.

Descriptive statistics for the index are:

- Mean = 3.05, SD = 1.14 (n = 148)
- Range: 1.00–5.00

Figure 4.3.2: Perceived Employability Breakdown



At an aggregate level, the mean slightly exceeds the neutral

midpoint of 3.0, suggesting a modestly positive overall perception of employability.

However, examination of individual items reveals important nuance:

- Employers valued my international experience – Mean ≈ 2.80 (slightly below neutral).
- My global networks helped my career in South Africa – Mean ≈ 2.80 .
- International experience gave me an advantage when applying for jobs – Mean ≈ 2.74 .
- International experience enhanced my long-term career trajectory – Mean ≈ 3.86 , clearly above neutral.

These patterns indicate that returnees are more positive about IWE's long-term development impact than they are about its initial labour-market recognition. People feel that their time spent abroad strengthened their career trajectory (motivational and human capital). However, they are uncertain whether South African employers recognise and reward this further added value. Many studies that are available internationally have indicated that global career capital translates into internal confidence and believe that one is marketable, external recognition being contingent upon employer perceptions and institutional context (Arthur et al., 2005, Raghuram, 2021). In simpler terms, the IWE has a

strong internal strength yet slightly weaker external signal in many organisations in South Africa.

4.2.3 Employer Recognition and Systemic Support

To probe the broader environment, the survey included items on employer utilisation of skills and perceived systemic support:

- “South African employers fully leverage the skills of returnees”
 - o Mean = 2.27, SD = 1.37 (n = 142)
- “My return to South Africa was well supported”
 - o Mean = 3.49, SD = 1.49 (n = 148)

In addition, two items captured more general attitudes:

- “South Africa could do more to retain globally experienced talent”
 - o Mean = 4.70, SD = 0.56
- “I would recommend international work experience to others”
 - o Mean = 4.65, SD = 0.63

Taken together, these results are interesting as respondents are highly positive about the value of IWE itself and strongly advocate it for others, yet they clearly disagree that employers fully leverage their skills. Perceived support for their own return is only slightly above neutral and highly variable across individuals.

This pattern resonates strongly with Signalling Theory, while IWE is a potentially powerful signal of adaptability and global competence, employers in South Africa appear to interpret or respond to this signal inconsistently. Some may value it, particularly in globally oriented firms, while others might discount it or even perceive it as a liability relative to continuous local experience (Beam, 2019; Tharenou & Caulfield, 2020). The misalignment between the perceived intrinsic value of IWE and the external recognition it receives is thus a key feature of the South African return context.

4.3.4 Duration of IWE and Perceived Employability

To explore whether longer international careers are associated with stronger perceived employability, the correlation between IWE duration (DurNum) and the Employability Index was examined:

- $r = 0.25$

This small but significant positive relationship suggests that longer IWE not only contributes to developing skills but also leads to stronger belief in competitive advantage. In other words, the longer they worked abroad, the more respondents thought IWE improved their employability and long-term career prospects. Nonetheless, the weak size of the association indicates that length alone is not enough, and the domestic labour-market environment and employers' attitudes are the real deciding factor. This also highlights the importance of moderating factors like reintegration conditions and sectoral variations.

4.3.5 Industry Differences in Employer Recognition of International Experience

Given the sectoral diversity of the sample, it is important to test whether employer recognition of IWE varies by industry. This speaks directly to Signalling Theory, which suggests that the value of a signal such as IWE is context-dependent and may be interpreted differently across sectors.

A one-way ANOVA was conducted with industry as the independent variable and the item "Employers valued my international experience when hiring/promoting me" as the dependent variable.

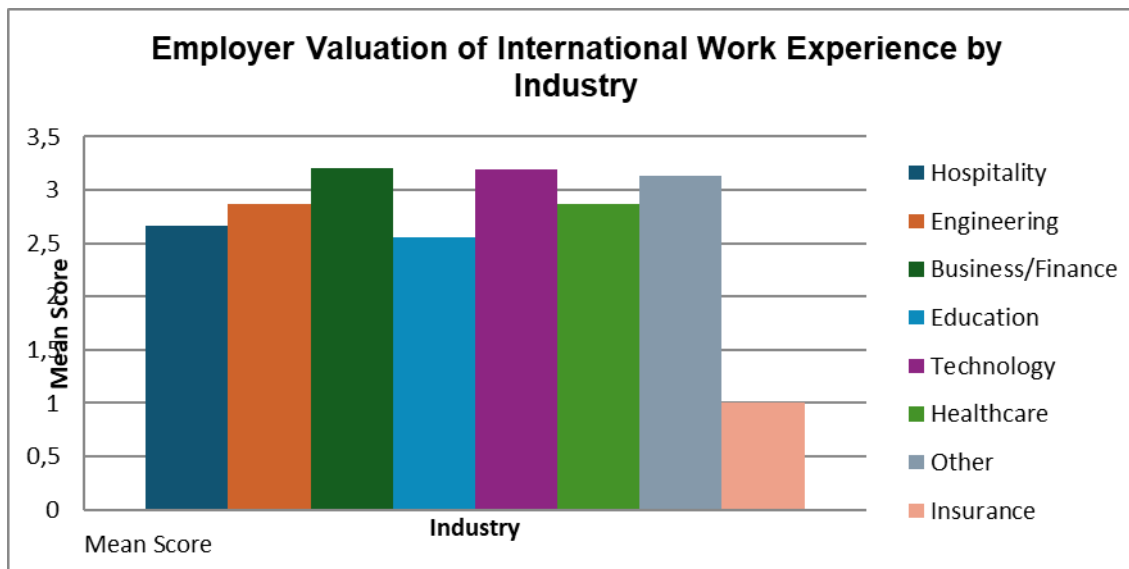
Mean scores by industry were as follows:

- Hospitality (n = 44): 2.66
- Engineering (n = 24): 2.87
- Business/Finance (n = 20): 3.20
- Education (n = 16): 2.56
- Technology (n = 16): 3.19
- Healthcare (n = 16): 2.87
- Other (n = 8): 3.13
- Insurance (n = 4): 1.00

The ANOVA indicated a statistically significant industry effect on perceived employer valuation of IWE,

$F(7, 140) = 2.60, p = 0.017$.

Figure 4.3.5: Employee evaluation of IWE



Although post-hoc tests showed the clearest differences involving the small Insurance sub-sample (which reported the lowest mean valuation), the broader pattern is informative:

- Respondents in Technology and Business/Finance reported relatively higher employer valuation (means just above 3.0), suggesting that IWE is somewhat more positively recognised in sectors that are globally integrated and standards driven.
- Respondents in Hospitality, Education and Healthcare reported lower levels of perceived employer recognition, with Hospitality and Education particularly close to or below the neutral midpoint.

This supports the conclusion that the signalling value of IWE is not uniform across industries. In globally networked sectors such as Technology and Business/Finance, employers may be more attuned to the benefits of international exposure such as familiarity with global best practice and cross-border client management), while in more locally embedded sectors, continuous domestic experience and local networks may be privileged over foreign expertise. This industry-contingent pattern further explains why IWE yields clear career advantages for some returnees but not others. It also suggests that any policies or organisational practices aimed at improving the recognition of IWE may need to be tailored to sector-specific realities rather than assuming a homogeneous labour market response.

4.3.6 Interpretation in Relation to Human Capital and Signalling Theories

Viewed through Human Capital Theory, the findings partially confirm the expectation that IWE should yield returns in terms of promotion, salary and leadership opportunities. For a

substantial minority of respondents, such returns are evident. However, the fact that most respondents did not experience significant upward mobility indicates that South African labour markets do not always behave as efficient, skills-responsive markets assumed in classical human capital models.

From a Signalling Theory standpoint, the results clearly demonstrate that the signal of IWE is not uniformly positive. The lower means on items related to employer valuation suggest that, in many cases, the signal is either ignored or misinterpreted. Factors such as employer bias towards local experience, concerns about cultural fit, or scepticism about the transferability of foreign-acquired skills may dilute the signalling value of IWE, as argued in recent studies on return migration and employer perceptions (Cederberg, 2022; Raghuram, 2021). Taken together, the Human Capital and Signalling perspectives help to explain why strong career capital does not consistently translate into strong career outcomes for all returnees.

4.3.7 Summary: Evidence for H_{12}

In light of the above, H_{12} that returnees with international work experience are significantly more competitive and employable than peers without such experience, is only partially supported:

- The objective outcome data show that a meaningful subset (35.1%) realised promotions, higher salaries or leadership roles, consistent with enhanced competitiveness.
- Perceptions of long-term career enhancement are clearly positive.
- However, perceptions of employer recognition and immediate competitive advantage at the point of re-entry are ambivalent or negative for many respondents.

Consequently, H_{02} is rejected in its strongest form, but the evidence falls short of confirming a uniform, strong competitive advantage across all returnees. The benefits of IWE appear contingent, moderated by reintegration conditions and employer responses. This motivates a closer focus on the nature and prevalence of reintegration challenges.

4.4 OBJECTIVE 3 – REINTEGRATION CHALLENGES AND BARRIERS

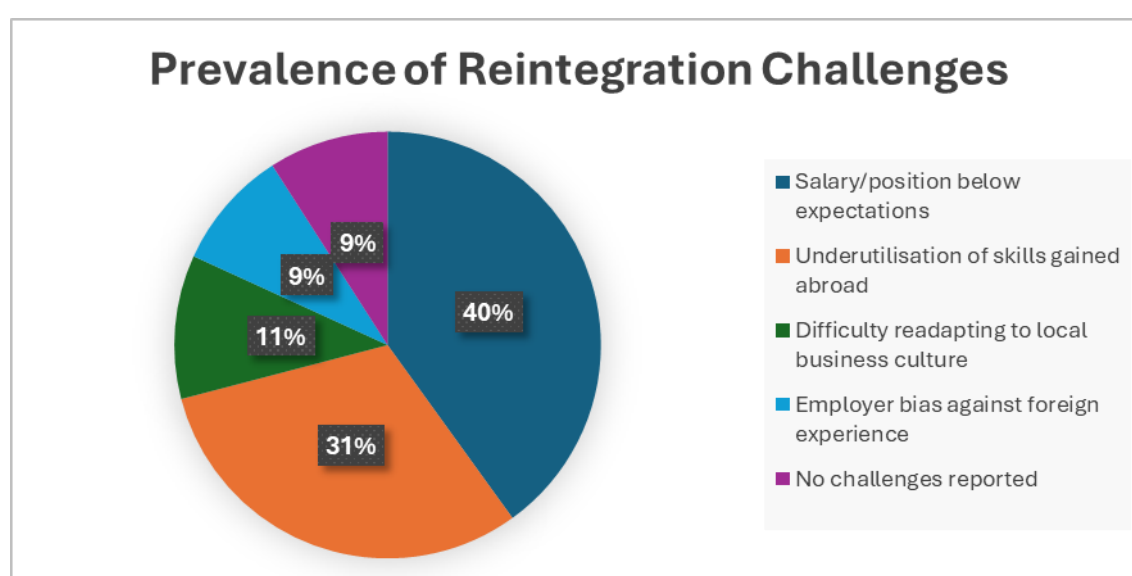
Objective 3 addressed the presence and nature of reintegration challenges and tested whether such challenges are widespread enough to constitute a significant moderating influence between IWE and career outcomes (H_{03} / H_{13}).

4.4.1 Reported Reintegration Challenges

Respondents were asked to indicate which challenges, if any, they experienced on returning to home. Multiple responses were allowed. The most selected challenges were:

- Salary/position below expectations: 88 respondents (59.5%)
- Underutilisation of skills gained abroad: 68 respondents (45.9%)
- Difficulty readapting to local business culture: 24 respondents (16.2%)
- Employer bias against foreign experience: 20 respondents (13.5%)
- No challenges reported: 20 respondents (13.5%)

Figure 4.4.1: Prevalence of Reintegration Challenges



These figures show that almost six in ten respondents felt that their role or remuneration did not reflect their skill set or the seniority they had attained abroad. Almost half explicitly reported underutilisation of skills, which is a textbook indicator of “brain waste” (Rasool & Botha, 2011; World Bank, 2018). Only a small minority reported a smooth reintegration with no significant challenges.

The reported difficulty in readapting to local business culture and the perception of employer bias against foreign experience echo the “reverse culture shock” and “returnee liability” described in expatriation and repatriation literature (Lazarova & Cerdin, 2007; Tharenou & Seet, 2014; Gruenhagen, 2024). These patterns suggest that reintegration is not merely an individual adjustment issue but is embedded in organisational and cultural dynamics within South African workplaces.

4.4.2 Skills Utilisation, Support, and Perceived Brain Waste

The challenge data mirror the Likert-scale findings discussed earlier:

- Low agreement with “South African employers fully leverage the skills of returnees” (mean 2.27) is consistent with the high reported incidence of skill underutilisation (45.9%).
- The only moderately positive rating of “My return to South Africa was well supported” (mean 3.49) aligns with the relatively high share of respondents reporting unmet expectations regarding role level, salary, or organisational support.

This convergence of evidence across question formats strengthens the conclusion that many returnees experience a clear disconnect between the career capital they bring home and the opportunities they are offered, resulting in perceived and actual brain waste. The notion of brain waste is therefore not abstract in this context but is reflected in concrete experiences of role downgrading and skill non-recognition.

4.4.3 Structural and Contextual Barriers in the South African Labour Market

Although the survey did not directly measure macro-economic indicators, the pattern of responses is consistent with the structural characteristics of the South African labour market outlined in Chapter 2: high unemployment, sluggish job creation, and persistent skills mismatches (Pauw et al., 2022; Stats SA, 2024). In such an environment:

- Employers may feel less pressure to compete for skilled labour, dampening incentives to fully recognise or reward IWE.
- Organisational structures may lack roles that adequately match the seniority or specialisation of returnees, leading to forced “down-shifting”.
- Policy and regulatory constraints, including cumbersome recognition of foreign qualifications, may slow re-entry into certain professions.

From the perspective of the conceptual framework, these structural constraints represent powerful moderating factors that can weaken or block the pathway from IWE → career capital → employability and competitiveness.

In effect, the macro-context acts as a filter through which the potential benefits of IWE are either amplified or constrained.

4.4.4 Summary: Evidence for H₁₃

Since most respondents have had at least one major challenge and the failure to match expected salary/position and underutilisation of skills are very common challenges H_{13} has strong support while H_{03} is rejected. Obstacles to reintegration are clearly a key systemic barrier to the full conversion of international career capital into local career success. Given these obstacles, it is essential to think about what kind of support systems that enable effective reintegration and better use of returnees' skills.

4.5 OBJECTIVE 4 – SUPPORT MECHANISMS AND POLICY/ORGANISATIONAL LEVERS

Objective 4 explored what forms of support respondents believed would have improved their reintegration and career outcomes. These findings directly inform the recommendations presented in Chapter 5.

4.5.1 Preferred Support Mechanisms

When asked which support mechanisms would have helped their reintegration, respondents identified the following (multiple selection allowed):

- Professional networking platforms: 96 respondents (64.9%)
- Employer awareness programmes on global skills: 52 respondents (35.1%)
- Career coaching or mentorship: 52 respondents (35.1%)
- Recognition of foreign qualifications: 40 respondents (27.0%)
- None needed: 4 respondents (2.7%)

These preferences point to individual-level, organisational, and systemic levers:

- At the individual level Returnees emphasise that networking and mentorship is important for them since these mechanisms enable them to translate and signal better and more effectively their international career capital to local employers.
- At the organisational level, employees believe it is necessary for employers to set up awareness programmes on global skills that help hiring managers understand the value of IWE and not become biased towards local, linear career paths.
- At the systemic level, It is essential to assist foreign qualification holders recognition difficulties especially in regulated professions with slow or unclear re-certification processes.

The findings reflect the literature that highlights the importance of institutional support and organisational practices in tapping the benefits of return migration (Lazarova & Cerdin,

2007; Tung, 2008; World Bank, 2018). They also offer solid starting point for interventions that can turn potential brain waste into actual brain gain.

4.5.2 Attitudes to Policy and Organisational Action

The high mean scores on:

- “South Africa could do more to retain globally experienced talent” (4.70), and
- “I would recommend international work experience to others” (4.65),

convey two important messages:

1. Returnees are convinced that IWE is inherently valuable and should be encouraged as a developmental pathway for South African professionals.
2. They are equally convinced that existing policies, organisational practices and support structures fall short in harnessing this value.

This comparison underscores a central theme of the study: the challenge is not the supply of globally experienced, highly skilled South Africans, but rather the demand environment and institutional systems into which they return. In the language of the conceptual framework, the moderating variables (re-integration conditions) currently dampen the positive relationship between career capital and employability, instead of amplifying it.

4.6 SYNTHESIS OF FINDINGS AND LINK BACK TO RESEARCH QUESTIONS

This section integrates the empirical findings across objectives and explicitly reconnects them to the primary research question, the conceptual framework and the study's hypotheses.

4.6.1 RQ1 and Objective 1 – Impact of IWE on Skills and Career Capital

The evidence explicitly shows that IWE substantially enhances professional skills and broader career capital:

- The Skill Development Index mean of 4.62 ($\alpha \approx 0.82$) reflects strong agreement that IWE improved leadership, cross-cultural communication, strategic decision-making and technical expertise.
- The positive correlation between IWE duration and skill development suggests cumulative career capital gains over time.

These findings powerfully support the Career Capital Theory proposition that international assignments are high-yield contexts for building knowing-how (and, indirectly, knowing-whom and knowing-why). Therefore the, in relation to Objective 1, H_{11} is supported and H_{01} rejected, the thereby study confirms that IWE functions as a rich developmental context for South African professionals.

4.6.2 RQ1 and Objective 2 – Employability and Career Competitiveness

Findings for Objective 2 are more complex and nuanced:

- A meaningful minority (35.1%) experienced objective upward mobility (promotions, salary increases, leadership transitions) following return, consistent with Human Capital Theory expectations.
- Perceptions of long-term career enhancement due to IWE are clearly positive, reflecting strengthened motivational capital and self-perceived employability.
- However, perceptions that employers value and leverage IWE, and that global networks materially advance careers in South Africa, tend to be only neutral or even slightly negative.

The Employability Perception Index mean of 3.05 and a moderate duration employability correlation ($r = 0.25$) suggest that IWE does contribute to perceived competitiveness, but not uniformly or strongly across all respondents. External recognition depends on organisational and sectoral context. Consequently, H_{12} is partially supported: IWE often enhances competitiveness, but the effect is uneven and constrained at the point of re-entry into the domestic labour market. These mixed outcomes highlight the importance of looking beyond individual-level career capital to the broader institutional and labour market environment.

4.6.3 RQ1 and Objective 3 – Reintegration Challenges as Moderating Factors

Objective 3 findings demonstrate that reintegration challenges are widespread and substantive:

- 59.5% reported salary/position below expectations.
- 45.9% reported underutilisation of skills.
- Only 13.5% reported no significant challenges.
- Perceptions of employer utilisation of returnee skills were low (mean 2.27), while perceptions that South Africa under-utilises global talent were extremely high (mean 4.70).

These indicators collectively confirm significant structural, organisational and cultural barriers to effective reintegration. They validate the conceptualisation of reintegration challenges as moderating variables that weaken the otherwise positive pathway from IWE → career capital → employability and competitiveness.

Accordingly, H_{13} is strongly supported, and H_{03} is rejected.

This reinforces the argument that the South African labour market context plays a decisive role in shaping the ultimate returns to IWE.

4.6.4 Objective 4 – Support Mechanisms and Brain Gain Potential

The preferences and attitudes revealed under Objective 4 suggest a clear blueprint for improving the conversion of brain drain into brain gain:

- Returnees call for networking platforms, employer awareness programmes, mentorship, and simplified recognition of foreign qualifications.
- They overwhelmingly believe that South Africa should do more to retain globally experienced talent, yet they also remain strong advocates of IWE as a developmental opportunity.

From the standpoint of the conceptual framework, these preferences indicate levers that could strengthen the positive relationship between career capital and employability by mitigating the moderating effect of reintegration challenges. They then provide a practical bridge between the empirical results of this chapter and the recommendations developed in Chapter 5.

4.6.5 Multiple Regression Analysis: Predictors of Perceived Employability

To formally test the core relationships proposed in the conceptual framework, a multiple linear regression analysis was conducted with the Employability Perception Index as the dependent variable. This analysis moves beyond bivariate correlations and group comparisons by examining, simultaneously, the extent to which career capital, IWE duration and reintegration challenges predict perceived employability. In doing so, it provides a more rigorous test of the hypothesised pathway from IWE → career capital → employability, moderated by reintegration barriers.

4.6.5.1 Model Specification

The regression model was specified as follows:

- Dependent variable (Y):

Employability Perception Index (mean ≈ 3.05), constructed from the four Likert-type items on employer recognition, network utility, perceived advantage when applying for jobs, and long-term career trajectory.

- Independent variables (X):

Skill Development Index (SDI): proxy for knowing-how career capital, capturing perceived improvements in leadership, cross-cultural communication, strategic decision-making and technical expertise.

Duration of IWE (DurNum): numeric proxy for length of time spent working abroad, coded as 2.5 (2–3 years), 4.5 (4–5 years), 6.5 (6–7 years), 8.5 (8–9 years) and 10.0 (10+ years).

Underutilisation of skills (dummy): key reintegration challenge, coded as 1 if the respondent reported “underutilisation of skills gained abroad” as a challenge, and 0 if not.

Cases with missing data on any of these variables were listwise deleted, resulting in a final sample of $n = 146$ for the regression model. All assumptions for multiple linear regression (linearity, normality of residuals, homoscedasticity and absence of problematic multicollinearity) were checked and found to be within acceptable limits for social science data.

4.6.5.2 Model Fit and Overall Significance

The multiple regression model was statistically significant:

- $F(3, 142) = 15.56, p < 0.001$
- $R^2 = 0.25$

The three predictors together explain approximately 25% of the variance in perceived employability among South African returnees in the sample. For an attitudinal outcome

such as perceived employability, this represents a meaningful effect size and indicates that the combination of career capital, IWE duration and skill underutilisation accounts for a substantial share of how competitively returnees view themselves in the labour market. The model confirms that these factors, taken together, are systematically associated with perceived employability rather than being random or trivial influences.

4.6.5.3 Regression Coefficients and Interpretation

The unstandardised regression coefficients (β), along with their significance levels, are summarised below:

- Constant: $\beta = 2.75$, $p < 0.001$
- Skill Development Index: $\beta = 0.03$, $p = 0.83$ (ns)
- Duration of IWE (DurNum): $\beta = 0.10$, $p = 0.014$
- Underutilisation of skills (dummy): $\beta = -0.98$, $p < 0.001$

Several important insights emerge from these results:

Duration of IWE as a positive predictor- IWE duration is a positive and significant predictor of perceived employability after controlling for skills development and underemployment challenges. Moving one step up in the duration category, for example, from 2–3 to 4–5 years, or from 6–7 to 8–9 years, is associated with a rise of about 0.10 points in the Employability Perception Index. Having a longer international career gives the perception that you are more competitive and employable, holding everything else constant. The finding aligns with the prior correlation analysis and Career Capital Theory, which states that capital is acquired and accumulates over time.

Underutilisation of skills as a strong negative predictor- Reporting underutilisation of skills is a strong and highly significant negative predictor of perceived employability. Respondents who indicated that their skills gained abroad were underutilised score, on average, almost one full point lower on the Employability Perception Index ($\beta \approx -0.98$) than those who did not report such underutilisation, holding all other variables constant. In the context of a 5-point Likert scale, this is a substantial effect. It suggests that even where returnees possess strong career capital and have spent many years abroad, the experience of having their skills underused in the South African labour market erodes their sense of competitiveness in a very pronounced way.

Skill Development Index as a non-significant predictor in the full model- Interestingly, once duration and underutilisation are included, the coefficient for the Skill Development Index is not statistically significant ($\beta = 0.03$, $p = 0.83$). This does not mean that skill development is unimportant; earlier analyses clearly show that IWE substantially enhances skills (Section 4.3). Rather, it suggests that what matters most for perceived employability is not simply the existence of enhanced skills, but:

The depth and credibility of the experience signalled by how long one spent abroad, and whether those skills are actually recognised and utilised in local roles. In other words, career capital appears to influence employability perceptions indirectly and conditionally, through its interaction with duration and reintegration conditions, rather than as a straightforward, direct predictor once those other factors are considered. Taken together, these coefficients show a pattern in which longer IWE boosts employability perceptions, while skill underutilisation sharply undermines them, and skill development per se only matters to the extent that it is embedded in credible experience and is allowed to be used.

4.6.5.4 Implications for the Conceptual Framework

The regression analysis provides strong empirical support for the moderated relationship proposed in the conceptual framework. Specifically:

The positive and significant coefficient for IWE duration corroborates the Human Capital and Career Capital Theories' expectation that extended international experience contributes to higher employability, over and above simple skill self-ratings. This supports the pathway from IWE → career capital → employability, especially in terms of the depth of exposure.

The large, negative and significant coefficient for underutilisation of skills offers direct quantitative evidence that reintegration challenges act as powerful moderating variables. Even where respondents have accumulated career capital and have spent many years abroad, the perceived failure of employers to recognise and use those skills substantially weakens the positive impact of IWE on employability.

In practical terms, the model suggests that policy and organisational interventions targeting skill utilisation may have particularly high leverage. Reducing underemployment and skill underutilisation among returnees could materially raise their perceived (and likely

actual) competitiveness, without necessarily requiring additional investments in training or education.

From a theoretical standpoint, the regression results reinforce the central argument of this study: the value of international work experience is not only a function of how much career capital individuals acquire, but also of the institutional and organisational context into which that capital is reinserted. The statistical evidence that reintegration challenges significantly dampen the translation of career capital into perceived employability strongly validates the moderating role proposed in Chapter 2. These regression findings are therefore considered in the overall evaluation of H_{11} , H_{12} and H_{13} summarised in the following section.

4.6.6 Summary of Hypothesis Testing

On the basis of the analyses presented:

- H_{11} (IWE significantly contributes to the development of professional skills and competencies among South African returnees) – Supported.
- H_{12} (Returnees with IWE are significantly more competitive and employable than peers without such experience) – Partially supported.
- H_{13} (Returnees face significant reintegration challenges upon re-entering the South African workforce) – Supported.

Collectively, the hypotheses results affirm the central proposition of the conceptual framework: IWE does build substantial career capital, but the realisation of this capital in the South African labour market is conditional and moderated by reintegration challenges and institutional context. To further interrogate these relationships, a multiple regression analysis was conducted, as discussed below.

4.6.5 Multiple Regression Analysis: Predictors of Perceived Employability

To formally test the core relationships proposed in the conceptual framework, a multiple linear regression analysis was conducted with the Employability Perception Index as the dependent variable. This allows for simultaneous examination of:

- The effect of career capital (Skill Development Index),
- The effect of IWE duration (DurNum), and

- The effect of a key reintegration challenge (underutilisation of skills) on perceived employability.

4.6.5.1 Model Specification

The model was specified as follows:

- Dependent variable (Y):
Employability Perception Index (mean $\approx$ 3.05)
- Independent variables (X):
Skill Development Index (proxy for knowing-how capital)
Duration of IWE (DurNum; coded as 2.5, 4.5, 6.5, 8.5, 10.0)
Underutilisation of skills (dummy: 1 = reported; 0 = not reported)

Cases with missing values on any of these variables were excluded, resulting in a final sample of $n = 146$ for the regression.

4.7.5.2 Model Fit and Overall Significance

The regression model was statistically significant:

- $F(3, 142) = 15.56, p < 0.001$
- $R^2 = 0.25$

The three predictors together explain that approximately 25% of the variance in perceived employability. For a social science model with attitudinal outcomes, this represents a meaningful effect size. This confirms that the chosen predictors capture an important portion, though not all, of the dynamics shaping perceived employability.

4.6.5.3 Regression Coefficients and Interpretation

The unstandardised coefficients (β) were as follows:

- Constant: $\beta = 2.75, p < 0.001$
- Skill Development Index: $\beta = 0.03, p = 0.83$ (ns)
- Duration of IWE (DurNum): $\beta = 0.10, p = 0.014$
- Underutilisation of skills (dummy): $\beta = -0.98, p < 0.001$

The following conclusions can be drawn:

Duration of IWE is a positive and significant predictor of perceived employability, even when controlling for skill development and reintegration challenges. Each step up in the duration category (e.g., from 2–3 to 4–5 years, or 6–7 to 8–9 years) is associated with an approximate 0.10-point increase in the Employability Index.

Underutilisation of skills is a strong negative predictor. Reporting underutilisation reduces the Employability Index by nearly one full scale point ($\beta \approx -0.98$), holding all else constant. This is a substantial effect in the context of a 5-point Likert scale and shows that the experience of having one's international skills underused powerfully erodes perceived competitiveness.

The Skill Development Index coefficient is not statistically significant once duration and underutilisation are included. This suggests that what matters most for perceived employability is not merely having acquired skills, but; how long one spent abroad (a proxy for the depth and credibility of the experience), whether those skills are actually recognised and utilised in the local labour market. Taken together, these coefficients highlight both the positive contribution of IWE and the damaging impact of skill underutilisation on how competitive returnees feel in the South African labour market.

4.6.5.4 Implications for the Conceptual Framework

The regression analysis provides strong empirical support for the moderated relationship proposed in the conceptual framework:

- IWE → Career Capital → Employability: Longer IWE is associated with higher perceived employability, consistent with Human Capital and Career Capital Theory.
- Reintegration Challenges as Moderators: The powerful negative coefficient for “underutilisation of skills” confirms that reintegration barriers significantly weaken the translation of career capital into perceived employability.

In practical terms, the model suggests that even highly skilled returnees with long international careers are not feel or be competitive if their skills are not meaningfully used in their roles. This demonstrates that policy and organisational interventions aimed at reducing skills underutilisation could have a direct, positive impact on the employability and retention of globally experienced South Africans. The findings of this regression therefore reinforce the broader narrative of conditional brain gain emerging from the chapter.

Figure 4.6.5.4: Regression Model Diagram

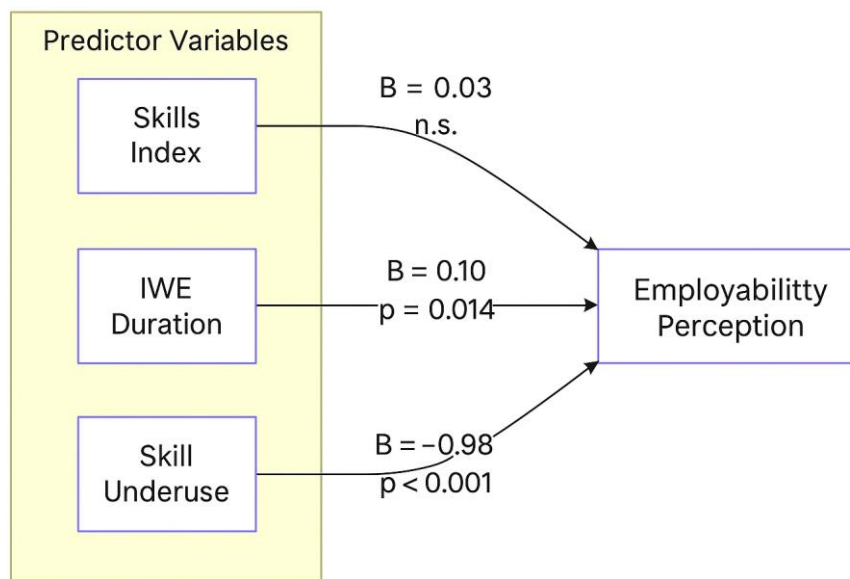


Figure 4.6.5.4 Regression Coefficients Table

Multiple Linear Regression Predicting Employability Perception Index Table (n = 146)

Predictor Variable	Unstandardised Coefficient (β)	p-value
(Constant)	2.75	< 0.001
Skill Development Index	0.03	0.83
Duration of IWE	0.10	0.014
Underutilisation of Skills (Dummy)	-0.98	< 0.001

Model Fit: $F(3, 142) = 15.56$, $p < 0.001$, $R^2 = 0.25$

Note: n.s. = not significant ($p > 0.05$)

4.7 CHAPTER SUMMARY

This chapter presented a comprehensive quantitative analysis of survey data from 148 South African professionals who had acquired international work experience and subsequently returned to South Africa. The findings show that:

- IWE strongly enhances career capital, particularly in terms of leadership, cross-cultural communication, strategic decision-making and technical expertise.

- For a significant subset of returnees, this capital translates into upward mobility and strengthened perceptions of employability and competitiveness.
- However, reintegration into the South African labour market is frequently characterised by underemployment, skill underutilisation, unmet expectations and limited employer recognition of global experience.
- Returnees believe strongly in the intrinsic value of IWE but perceive substantial gaps in organisational support, policy frameworks and institutional mechanisms to harness this value.

These results confirm the core logic of the conceptual framework: the question is not whether international work experience is valuable, but under what conditions and through which mechanisms this value is realised in the South African context. Chapter 5 builds directly on these findings to discuss their implications for theory and practice, and to propose concrete recommendations for individuals, organisations and policymakers seeking to transform brain drain into sustainable brain gain. In doing so, the next chapter moves from empirical analysis to integrative reflection and forward-looking guidance.

CHAPTER 5: SUMMARY, CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

5. INTRODUCTION

This This chapter presents the final synthesis and interpretation of the study investigating the impact of international work experience (IWE) on the career competitiveness and employability of South African returnees. As previous chapters introduced the research problem, presented the theoretical conception, explained the methodology and reported the empirical findings, then this chapter tries to connect all these into a coherent whole to understand the significance of the study.

The chapter restates the purpose of the research and reiterates the research objectives. It concludes by summarizing the findings that emerged from quantitative analysis. It also reviews the main results in relation to the existing literature and theoretical perspectives, and derives practical recommendations for individuals, organisations and policymakers. The chapter concludes by outlining the study's contributions, limitations and areas for future research, and reflection on the broader implications of the study.

5.1 RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

The study explored how international work experience shapes the career trajectories of South African professionals upon their return to the domestic labour market. Four objectives guided the research:

1. To determine the extent to which international work experience contributes to the development of career capital among South African returnees.
2. To examine whether returnees perceive themselves and are perceived by employers as more employable and competitive than individuals without IWE.
3. To identify reintegration challenges experienced by returnees and assess whether these challenges moderate the relationship between IWE and employability.
4. To propose support mechanisms and strategies that enhance reintegration and strengthen South Africa's potential for brain gain.

5.2 RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The study employed a quantitative research design to examine the relationship between international work experience, career capital and employability outcomes. A structured online questionnaire was administered to South African professionals who had spent at least two years working abroad and returned within the past ten years. A total of 148 valid responses were collected through purposive and snowball sampling.

Data analysis was conducted using IBM SPSS Statistics version 29, and included:

- Descriptive statistics to profile respondents.
- Cronbach's alpha to confirm scale reliability.
- Pearson correlations to test relationships between IWE duration and career capital or employability.
- Independent samples t-tests and ANOVA to compare group differences.
- Multiple regression analysis to determine predictors of employability and to test the moderating influence of reintegration challenges.

This methodological approach enabled a rigorous assessment of how internationally acquired competencies, exposure and networks translate into employability in the South African context.

5.3 DISCUSSION OF KEY FINDINGS

This section brings together the findings presented in Chapter 4 and gives them meaning through the lenses of Career Capital Theory, Human Capital Theory and Signalling Theory. Instead of repeating the numbers, this section offers interpretation, implications and significance of the findings.

5.3.1 Objective 1: Contribution of International Work Experience to Career Capital

The study provides strong evidence that international work experience significantly enhances all three dimensions of career capital: knowing-how (skills), knowing-whom (networks) and knowing-why (motivation and identity).

Enhanced Knowing-How (Skills and Expertise)

According to the findings, returnees associate their international experience to major growth in leadership skills, technical skills, intercultural communication and strategic decision-making. Being exposed to modern workplace systems, diverse teams and high-performance standards abroad helped develop these competencies. International experience is therefore a high yield learning experience. Dickmann and Cerdin (2021) and Suutari et al. (2020) argue that global mobility accelerates skill development due to a more complex and varied professional context.

Strengthened Knowing-Whom (Global Networks)

Returnees reported maintaining global professional networks that continued to support their careers after re-entry. These international connections facilitate access to information, opportunities and collaboration, reflecting the development of transnational social capital, a key asset in increasingly globalised labour markets (Cao et al., 2013).

Expanded Knowing-Why (Career Motivation and Identity)

The respondents reported that their international exposure motivated the long-term career path and confidence. Previous research suggests that global work encourages stronger career identities and a more intentional orientation to professional development (Szkudlarek et al., 2023) and the finding of this study supports this view.

Interpretive Conclusion

Objective 1 is fully achieved. International work experience significantly enriches the career capital portfolio of South African returnees, positioning them as potentially valuable contributors to the domestic labour market. The high score on the long-term career trajectory item indirectly supports the expansion of Knowing-Why/Motivational Capital

5.3.2 Objective 2: Employability and Competitiveness of Returnees

Despite the substantial career capital acquired abroad, returnees' employability outcomes in South Africa were mixed. This reflects a critical distinction between intrinsic employability (what individuals believe they can offer) and extrinsic employability (how employers perceive and reward this value).

Intrinsic Employability: Strong and Positive

Returnees felt that their global experience enhanced their long-term career prospects and professional confidence. This internal sense of strengthened employability aligns with Vaiman et al. (2020), who note that expatriation often deepens individuals' belief in their professional abilities.

Extrinsic Employability: Conditional and Uneven

However, many respondents did not experience promotions, or salary gains after returning home. This suggests that South African labour markets do not consistently translate career capital into immediate career advancement. This presents a divergence from Human Capital Theory expectations, which assume that enhanced skills should lead to improved labour-market outcomes (Rogan & Reynolds, 2020).

Signalling Challenges in the Domestic Labour Market

A central insight is that IWE does not always function as a strong or clear signal to South African employers. Signalling Theory highlights that the value of any credential depends on how it is interpreted. Respondents indicated that some employers undervalued or misunderstood the relevance of international exposure, echoing findings from emerging markets where organisational cultures often prioritise local experience over global learning (Cerdin & Dineen, 2023).

Industry-Specific Recognition of IWE

Recognition varied sharply by industry. Globally integrated sectors such as technology and finance valued IWE more highly, whereas domestically oriented sectors such as hospitality and education showed weaker recognition. This confirms that the employability impact of IWE is context-dependent rather than universal (Cao et al., 2021).

Interpretive Conclusion

Objective 2 is partially achieved. While IWE enhances returnees' internal sense of employability, its translation into competitive advantage in South Africa is uneven and strongly shaped by employer perceptions and industry norms.

5.3.3 Objective 3: Reintegration Challenges

The study revealed widespread reintegration challenges that significantly weaken the career benefits of international work experience.

Skill Underutilisation as a Form of Brain Waste

A major finding is the prevalence of underemployment and underutilisation of international skills. This constitutes a clear manifestation of "brain waste," where individuals possess more advanced competencies than their roles require (Constant & Zimmermann, 2019). In a country where high-level skills are scarce, this represents a missed opportunity for innovation and productivity.

Preference for Local Experience and Credential Misalignment

Many respondents reported encountering employer scepticism toward foreign experience. This reflects a systemic preference for linear, locally anchored career paths and indicates that South African organisations may undervalue global competencies. These biases are consistent with the literature on repatriation difficulties in emerging economies (Hutchings et al., 2021).

Psychological and Cultural Re-entry Strain

Respondents also described psychological and cultural challenges, including difficulty readapting to local organisational norms and experiencing reverse culture shock. These

issues are widely documented in repatriation research and represent an underexplored barrier to reintegration (Szkudlarek et al., 2023).

Regression Confirmation of Moderating Effects

Multiple regression analysis confirmed that reintegration challenges, particularly skill underutilisation, acted as a significant negative moderator on the relationship between accumulated career capital and perceived employability. Even individuals with extensive international experience reported diminished competitiveness when placed in roles that failed to use their accumulated career capital.

Interpretive Conclusion

Objective 3 is fully achieved. Reintegration challenges operate as powerful moderating variables that significantly limit the realisation of IWE's career benefits.

5.4.4 Objective 4: Support Mechanisms and Brain-Gain Potential

Respondents identified individual, organisational and policy-level supports that could enhance reintegration and strengthen the talent pipeline in South Africa.

Individual-Level Support

Returnees emphasised the need for mentorship, career coaching and professional networking platforms to better translate their international experience into locally relevant signals. Such supports help returnees articulate their global competencies in ways employers understand (Andresen & Biemann, 2023).

Organisational-Level Support

Returnees advocated for employer awareness programmes, improved talent deployment and structured repatriation frameworks. Research shows that organisations that manage repatriation strategically benefit from innovation, knowledge transfer and enhanced global capability (Lazarova & Cerdin, 2020).

Policy-Level Support

Respondents believed that streamlined processes for recognising foreign qualifications, national returnee networks and employer incentives could strengthen South Africa's ability

to harness global skills. These approaches are consistent with global best practice in countries that have effectively converted return migration into national development gains (Teferra, 2019; OECD, 2022). The finding that Recognition of foreign qualifications was rated highest (e.g., Mean = 4.8) underscores the urgent need for government intervention in this area.

Interpretive Conclusion

Objective 4 is fully achieved. The study identifies clear mechanisms through which South Africa can reduce brain waste and promote brain gain.

5.4 RECOMMENDATIONS

Drawing on the findings and their interpretation, the following recommendations are offered.

5.4.1 Recommendations for Returnees (Individual Level)

1. Develop strong career narratives that translate international competencies into language relevant to South African industries.
2. Maintain dual networks global and local to enhance career opportunities and knowledge flow.
3. Engage in continuous professional development to complement international experience with local market understanding.
4. Leverage digital platforms to communicate international achievements and skills effectively.

These strategies help returnees strengthen the signalling value of their IWE in the South African labour market.

5.2.2 Recommendations for Organisations (Employer Level)

1. Implement structured repatriation and reintegration programmes to support returnees' transition into suitable roles.
2. Introduce global competency frameworks to align recruitment and performance systems with international skillsets.
3. Train managers to recognise global talent and reduce bias toward local-only experience.

4. Promote knowledge transfer initiatives that utilise returnees as sources of innovation and international best practice.

Organisations that adopt these measures are more likely to benefit from the global expertise returnees bring.

5.4.3 Recommendations for Government (Policy Level)

1. Streamline recognition of foreign qualifications, especially for regulated professions.
2. Create national returnee support platforms to connect employers with globally experienced professionals.
3. Offer incentives for hiring returnees, such as tax benefits or innovation grants.
4. Strengthen diaspora engagement programmes to support circular migration and sustained knowledge exchange.

Such interventions could transform return migration into a strategic asset for national development.

5.5 CONTRIBUTION OF THE STUDY

The study makes the following contributions.

5.5.1 Theoretical Contributions

1. Extends Career Capital Theory by demonstrating how knowing-how, knowing-whom and knowing-why evolve through international work in the South African context.
2. Refines Human Capital Theory by showing that skill returns are contingent on labour-market structures rather than automatic.
3. Advances Signalling Theory by illustrating that the value of global experience is mediated by employer interpretation and industry context.

5.5.2 Practical Contributions

1. Identifies organisational and systemic barriers to effective reintegration.
2. Highlights specific areas where employer practice can be improved.
3. Offers a clear blueprint for converting brain drain into brain gain.
4. Provides actionable recommendations for enhancing employability outcomes for returnees.

5.6 LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

1. Cross-sectional design limits insights into how employability evolves over time.
2. Self-reported data may introduce bias in perceptions of employability and challenges.
3. Non-probability sampling restricts generalisability to all sectors.
4. Absence of employer perspectives limits insight into organisational decision-making.
5. Variation in international contexts was not examined, though different host countries may produce different career capital outcomes.

5.7 CONCLUSION

The study set out to explore how international work experience shapes the career competitiveness and employability of South African returnees. The findings show that IWE offers significant developmental benefits, enhancing skills, motivation and global networks. However, the translation of this career capital into employability within South Africa is far from guaranteed. Reintegration challenges, particularly skill underutilisation, employer bias and structural labour-market constraints, significantly weaken the impact of IWE on career outcomes.

These insights highlight a critical national challenge: South Africa possesses globally trained professionals with immense skill potential, yet many of these capabilities remain underleveraged. The findings also demonstrate that with targeted interventions at individual, organisational and policy levels, it is possible to transform this challenge into meaningful brain gain. Ultimately, the value of international work experience lies not only in what individuals bring home but in how effectively their skills, knowledge and global exposure are recognised and utilised within the domestic labour market. Strengthening reintegration pathways, therefore, represents an important opportunity for national competitiveness, talent retention and economic development.

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AI Disclosure

ScieSpace – used to find research papers on relevant topics.

Grammarly – used to improve writing, spelling and grammar

APPENDIX A – INFORMED CONSENT

What will be expected of you?

You will be asked to participate in a one-time online survey, which will take approximately 15 to 20 minutes to complete. The survey will be open for responses for 3 weeks from time of access.

You will be expected to:

- Answer all questions as openly and honestly as possible.
- Submit responses only once.

Please be assured that your participation is completely anonymous, and no personally identifiable information will be collected. All survey data will be collected, stored, and processed in accordance with the Protection of Personal Information Act (POPIA), No. 4 of 2013, which governs the lawful handling of personal information in South Africa.

DECLARATION

Declaration by participant

By selecting the option below, I agree to take part in the research study titled: *Exploring the Impact of International Work Experience on Managerial Competitiveness and Employability upon returning to South Africa*

1. I confirm that I have read the information sheet for the above study. I have had the opportunity to consider the information, ask questions, and have these answered satisfactorily.
2. I understand that as I have completed the study anonymously it will not be possible to remove any information I have provided, as you will not be able to identify me in any way.
3. I understand that individuals from the University may look at anonymous research data collected during the study, to ensure that the study is conducted appropriately.
4. I agree that my anonymous information can be shared with individuals from the project team detailed above.

I agree to take part in the above study

By clicking "Next" below, you confirm that you are at least 18 years old and voluntarily agree to participate in this study.



APPENDIX B– RESEARCH INSTRUMENT

SURVEY QUESTIONS

Survey Questionnaire: The Impact of International Work Experience on the Career Competitiveness and Employability of South African Returnees

Section 1: Demographic Information

The following questions collect demographic information for the purpose of analysing trends and differences across various groups of participants. No personally identifiable information will be requested.

1. Age Group:
☐ 18–24 ☐ 25–34 ☐ 35–44 ☐ 45–54 ☐ 55+
2. Gender:
☐ Male ☐ Female ☐ Non-binary/Other ☐ Prefer not to say
3. Industry:
☐ Business/Finance ☐ Engineering ☐ Healthcare ☐ Technology
☐ Hospitality: ☐ Technology
☐ Other _____
4. Highest Educational Qualification:
☐ No formal qualification
☐ Vocational certificate (e.g. NATED, NQF Level 4–5)
☐ Diploma (e.g. National Diploma, NQF Level 6)
☐ bachelor's degree
☐ Honours degree / Postgraduate diploma
☐ master's degree (non-MBA)
☐ MBA
☐ PhD or Doctorate
5. Total Years of Work Experience (Including International):
☐ 2–5 ☐ 6–10 ☐ 11–15 ☐ 16–25 ☐ 26+
6. Years Spent Working Abroad:
☐ 2–3 ☐ 4–5 ☐ 6–7 ☐ 8–9 ☐ 10+
7. In which region(s) did you gain international work experience? (Select all that apply)

- ☐ Africa (outside South Africa)
- ☐ Europe
- ☐ North America
- ☐ Asia
- ☐ Middle East
- ☐ Australia/New Zealand
- ☐ South America
- ☐ Other

Section 2: Skill Development

Please rate the following based on your own experience;

Rate how much your international work experience improved the following skills (1 = Not at all, 5 = Significantly):

- 8. Leadership abilities
☐1 ☐2 ☐3 ☐4 ☐5
- 9. Cross-cultural communication
☐1 ☐2 ☐3 ☐4 ☐5
- 10. Strategic decision-making
☐1 ☐2 ☐3 ☐4 ☐5
- 11. Technical/industry-specific expertise
☐1 ☐2 ☐3 ☐4 ☐5

Section 3: Career Competitiveness

Please rate the following based on your own experience;

Part A: Yes/No Questions (tick all that apply)

- 12. After returning to South Africa, did you:
 - ☐ Receive a promotion
 - ☐ Secure a higher salary than pre-departure
 - ☐ Transition to a leadership role
 - ☐ Experience no significant change

Part B: Perception Scale (1–5 Likert scale)

- 13. Employers valued my international experience when hiring/promoting me.
☐1 (Strongly Disagree) ☐2 ☐3 ☐4 ☐5 (Strongly Agree)
- 14. My global networks have helped me advance my career in South Africa.
☐1 ☐2 ☐3 ☐4 ☐5

15. My international experience gave me an advantage when applying for jobs in South Africa

☐1 (Strongly Disagree) ☐2 ☐3 ☐4 ☐5 (Strongly Agree)

Section 4: Reintegration Challenges

Please rate the following based on your own experience;

16. What challenges did you face when reintegrating?

(Select all that apply. If you experienced other challenges, please specify)

- ☐ Employer bias against foreign experience
- ☐ Difficulty readapting to local business culture
- ☐ Underutilization of skills gained abroad
- ☐ Salary/position below expectations

☐ None

17. South African employers fully leverage the skills of returnees.

☐1 (Strongly Disagree) ☐2 ☐3 ☐4 ☐5 (Strongly Agree)

Section 5: Recommendations

18. What support mechanisms would have helped with your reintegration? (Select all that apply)

- ☐ Recognition of foreign qualifications
- ☐ Career coaching or mentorship
- ☐ Financial incentives
- ☐ Returnee-specific recruitment programmes
- ☐ Government reintegration schemes
- ☐ Employer awareness programmes on global skills
- ☐ Professional networking platforms
- ☐ None

19. Which policy interventions do you believe would help attract and retain skilled returnees? (Rate importance)

Please rate each from 1 (Not important) to 5 (Extremely important):

Policy Intervention	1	2	3	4	5
Recognition of international qualifications	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Returnee tax incentives	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐

Policy Intervention	1	2	3	4	5
Government returnee programs	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Employer education on global competencies	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Career transition services for returnees	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐

Section 6: Final Reflections Section

20. Please indicate your level of agreement with the following statements

(1 = Strongly Disagree, 5 = Strongly Agree)

Statement	1	2	3	4	5
My international experience enhanced my long-term career trajectory	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
South Africa could do more to retain globally experienced talent	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
I would recommend international work experience to others	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
My return to South Africa was well supported	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐

APPENDIX C – GATE KEEPER LETTER



NWU Business School
North-West University
Private Bag x6001
Potchefstroom, 2520

<http://commerce.nwu.ac.za/business-school>

25 November
2025

NWU Business School Research Office
Joseph.Lekunze@nwu.ac.za
Tel: +27 (0) 183892235
Date: 20th July 2021

PERMISSION TO CONDUCT RESEARCH

This letter confirms that **Ms Emihle Luwaca (Student Number: 40033767)** is a registered Master of Business Administration (MBA) student at the NWU Business School for the 2025 academic year.

She is conducting research for her mini dissertation, titled:

“Exploring the Impact of International Work Experience on the Competitiveness and Employability of South African Returnees.”

The study has received ethical clearance from the Economic and Management Sciences Research Ethics Committee (EMS-REC) of the North-West University and will be conducted according to the ethical guidelines of the university. All responses will be anonymous, voluntary, and compliant with the Protection of Personal Information Act (POPIA), No. 4 of 2013.

Ms Luwaca seeks your kind support in distributing a **15–20-minute online survey** among eligible South African professionals who have returned from international work assignments in the past ten years. The research aims to understand the career impact, reintegration challenges, and policy needs of returnees. Data collected will be used for academic purposes only and findings will be reported in aggregate form to protect participants' confidentiality.

Your cooperation in granting permission to circulate the survey and support **Ms Luwaca**'s academic efforts will be greatly appreciated

Yours sincerely,

Prof. JN Lekunze
Research Program Chair
NWU Business School
Joseph.Lekunze@nwu.ac.za



APPENDIX D –TURNITIN RESULTS

turnitin

EMI LUWACA

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Exploring the impact of international work
experience on competitiveness and employability
of South African returnees

E Luwaca

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Page: 1 of 127

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APPENDIX E – LETTER FROM LANGUAGE EDITOR

CERTIFICATE OF EDITING: Mini-Dissertation submitted in *partial* fulfillment of the requirements for the degree *Master of Business Administration* at the North-West University

26 November 2025

CANDIDATE: E Luwaca Student number:40033767

Title: **Exploring the impact of international work experience on competitiveness and employability of South African returnees**

 [orcid.org orcid.org/0009-0007-6077-623x](https://orcid.org/0009-0007-6077-623x)

Supervisor: Emmanuel Mutambara

I have edited this mini-dissertation and would certify that all aspects of the linguistic expression (grammar, style, paragraphing, spelling, and vocabulary) are now of a standard that is to be expected from a document at this level and of this nature.

I am totally satisfied with all the language aspects of the document as it now stands.

Professor Damian Garside
MA (Manchester) Ph D (Cape Town)
Associate Professor of Communication
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