

Impact of international work experience on employability and career competitiveness of south african returnees

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Keywords

Brain gain, career capital, employability, international work experience, return migration, skill transfer.

Abstract

This study examines the impact of international work experience (IWE) on career competitiveness and employability among South African returnees. This research explores ways in which IWE promotes the development of human, social and motivational capital and assesses how this capital formations affect returnees' performance outcomes in South Africa's labour marketplace. The primary objectives are to: (1) evaluate the extent to which IWE enhances valuable work skills; (2) assess perceived career benefits or drawbacks post-return; (3) identify specific workplace reintegration challenges; and (4) propose supportive policy measures to better attract, retain, and integrate talent with IWE within local industries. A quantitative research design was used, with the structured online survey sent to South African professionals with at least two years of international experience who returned over the last ten years. Using descriptive and inferential statistics, a survey was used to identify significant patterns in transferability of skills and upward mobility. IWE is shown to significantly enhance participants' strategic decision-making, leadership, communication, and technical skills. Despite these positive indications, the systemic challenges of reintegration, particularly in skills being underutilised and salaries being mismatched, impede the full realisation of these career benefits. As such results show that IWE is a strong internal resource but an inconsistent external signal within the domestic labour market. The research calls for better policies, formal recognition of international qualifications, and educating employers about global competencies, so that returning talent could be linked to the market.

Introduction

Background

Globalisation of the world economies has made International Work Experience a powerful driver for career advancement by providing flexibility and strategic capability to the individuals for the complex markets (Liu et al., 2022). In South Africa (SA), where skilled professionals in engineering, health care, IT, and other sectors have left the country in pursuit of better opportunities, "brain drain" has become a problem (Yu, 2022). This trend increases the relevance of return migration within the South African context, as recent developments suggest, there has been a trend towards "brain gain" or "reverse brain drain" with expatriates returning with a better global network and technical expertise. Although initiatives like the Homecoming Revolution indicate that skilled returnees boost national competitiveness and job creation, the evidence on the extent to which this international exposure translates into actual career competitiveness in the local labour market remains under-explored.

Problem Statement

An increasing number of SA professionals seek international work experience to build career capital. This is due to the assumption that international exposure serves as a high-value signal for employability when returning home. Even so, a notable reintegration gap exists between anticipated "brain gain," and structural and institutional obstacles. Although having IWE is perceived as advantageous, evidence suggests that returnees in the developing world face challenges in employing their skills due to bias from employers or bureaucratic constraints, there is a disconnect that creates "brain waste" of high-level skills

(Batista et al., 2025). Evidence lacks in how these challenges moderate the relationship between IWE and career success, leaving SA at risk of failing to harness critical talent for national development.

Research Objectives

The overall objective of this paper is to develop a conceptual framework to enhance SA Returnees Employability by examining how international work experience influences their career competitiveness. The specific objectives are:

1. To evaluate the extent to which international work experience enhances valuable professional skills;
2. To assess the perceived career benefits or drawbacks returnees experience post-return;
3. To identify specific workplace reintegration challenges faced by returnees; and
4. To propose supportive policy measures to better attract, retain, and integrate globally experienced talent within local industries.

Hypotheses

Hypothesis 1 (Skill Development)

H₀: International work experience does not significantly contribute to skill development among SA returnees

H₁₁: International work experience significantly contributes to skill development among SA returnees

Hypothesis 2 (Competitiveness and Employability)

H₀₂: 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.

Hypothesis 3 (Reintegration Challenges)

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.

Literature Review

Theoretical framework underpinning the study

Career Capital Theory (CCT)

Articulated first 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.

Knowing How (Human Capital Competence)

Refers to an individual's skill, professional knowledge and management capabilities. International work experience exposes professionals to advanced technologies, global standards, and specialised management systems that enhance professional competence (Suutari et al., 2018).

Knowing-Whom (Social Capital and Networks)

Reflects the relational resources that people develop through collaboration, mentorships, and cross-boundary connections (Hadi, 2023). 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 SA if domestic employers perceive them as such (Schmid & Wurster, 2022).

Knowing-Why (Motivational Capital and Identity)

Refers to personal drivers such as resilience, adaptability, cultural intelligence, and career purpose. Exposure to foreign work environments enhances these attributes by strengthening professional resilience and global career orientation (Ang & Van Dyne, 2008; Dickmann & Doherty, 2020).

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. Studies in Egypt and West Africa confirm a higher wages, better job opportunities, faster promotion prospects, and stronger long-term career mobility premium for returnees (Batista et al., 2025). From this perspective, time spent abroad constitutes a high-value investment in human capital. 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.

Signalling Theory

Signalling Theory (Spence, 1973) provides a sociological lens for understanding how employers interpret international work experience under conditions of information asymmetry. Because employers cannot directly observe a candidate's true capabilities, they rely on signals such as educational background, international exposure, and organisational reputation. International work experience may therefore signal adaptability, independence, cross-cultural competence, problem-solving ability, and global orientation (Piopiunik et al., 2018).

Studies show that repatriates are seen as high value in multinational corporations (MNCs). Because of the international experience, 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 acquired skills, 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 Yu, (2022) In some markets, employers have bias towards IWE. 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.

Theoretical Synthesis and Application to the Study

By combining these theories, this study adopts a holistic and context-sensitive framework which is essential to avoid the theoretical blind spots of using a single perspective. While (CCT) explains the acquisition of resources, using it alone would imply that returnees automatically thrive regardless of the environment. Similarly, Human Capital Theory assumes that labour markets are perfectly efficient and always reward global skills, which is often not the case in emerging economies. Conversely, Signalling Theory alone might over-emphasise employer bias without accounting for the actual value of the acquired skills. By integrating these theories, the study captures the conditionality of returnee success. The resulting integrated model (see Figure 1) posits that the translation of capital into outcomes is not linear: IWE influences Career Capital, which subsequently affects Employability and Competitiveness (moderated by Reintegration Challenges).

Conceptual Literature Review

The conceptual framework for this study (Figure 1) illustrates the transition from international exposure to domestic career advantage. Rather than a linear progression, this model identifies a complex interplay between skill acquisition and market perception. The Relationship Between IWE and Career Capital International Work Experience is conceptualised as the primary antecedent in this model. It represents the formative period where individuals accumulate a diversified portfolio of Career Capital. Unlike traditional views of human capital that focus solely on "Knowing-how" (technical expertise), this study integrates "Knowing-whom" (transnational social networks) and "Knowing-why" (motivational resilience and global identity) as essential mediators (DeFillippi & Arthur, 1994).

Employability and Competitiveness, the desired output of this accumulated capital is a dual increase in Employability and Career Competitiveness. In this context, Employability is defined as the individual's perceived job readiness and confidence in navigating the South African labour market (Yu, 2022). Career Competitiveness refers to the relative advantage these returnees hold over domestically-trained peers in securing senior roles, promotions, and premium remuneration (Baruch & Altman, 2020). A key feature of this framework is the inclusion of Reintegration Challenges as a moderating variable. Drawing on Signalling Theory, these challenges ranging from employer bias to skill underutilisation act as "noise" that can distort the positive signal of IWE. This explains why high levels of international career capital do not always translate into high employability in SA; the structural constraints of the local market can

effectively block or weaken the value of the global experience.

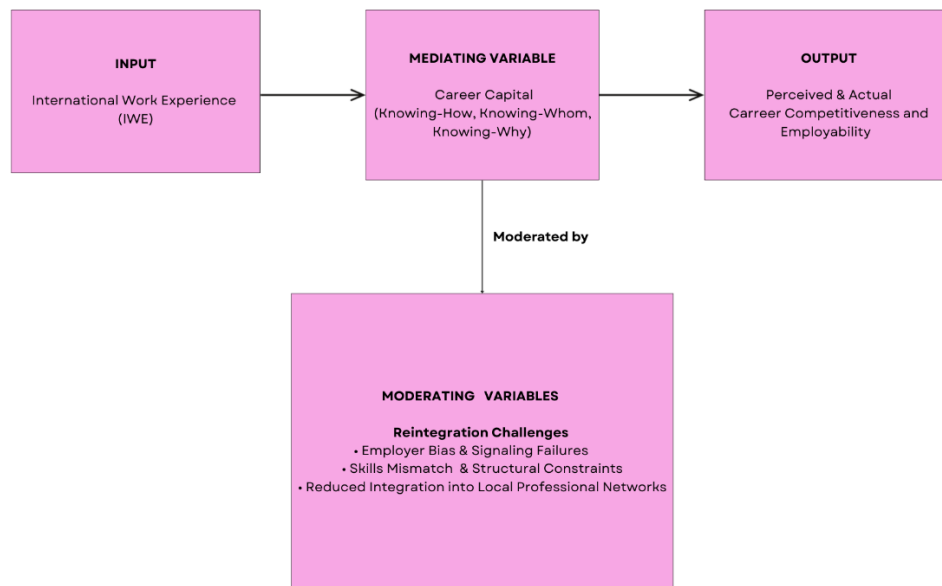


Figure 1: Conceptual Framework to enhance South African Returnees Employability

Source: Authors' Own Work

Conceptual Model: The Effect of IWE on Employability

IWE influences Career Capital, which subsequently affects Employability and Competitiveness & Competitiveness with Reintegration Challenges Moderating the Career Capital which influences Employability Link

These projected benefits are empirically tested through Hypothesis 2

Empirical Literature Review

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 (Andresen et al. 2021). 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 (Andresen et al. 2021). 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 (Batista et al., 2025). In addition to hard skills, IWE fosters soft skills such as problem-solving, creativity, and language proficiency (Andresen et al. 2021). From a human capital perspective, these investments should raise productivity and, therefore, the expected economic returns upon return (Becker, 1964; Sweetland, 1996).

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). Exposure to foreign work environments enhances adaptability, cultural intelligence, and professional resilience. Over time, this helps individuals develop adaptability, resilience, and cultural intelligence, it builds cultural intelligence which is a key element of many global business roles (Yu, 2022). 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).

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 (Hadi, 2023). 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 (Andresen et al., 2021; Suutari et al., 2018). This provides the basis for Hypothesis 1 (H₁₁) in this study: that international work experience significantly contributes to skill and competency development among South African returnees.

Returnee Employability and Career Outcomes

The translation of international career capital into domestic career advantage is a determinant of successful return migration. While theoretical models often predict an automatic career boost, empirical evidence suggests that these outcomes are highly conditional upon the specific labour market context (Andresen et al., 2021; Batista et al. 2025).

Perceived Employability and Career Progression Research indicates that South African professionals returning with international work experience often perceive themselves as more employable, citing enhanced strategic decision-making, leadership, and cross-cultural communication skills as primary drivers (Yu, 2023). These returnees are frequently viewed as "knowledge brokers" who can bridge the gap between local practices and global standards, particularly when they have worked in high-performance or innovation-intensive sectors (World Bank, 2018). In industries such as finance, technology, and engineering, IWE is interpreted by many employers as a signal of high productivity, resilience, and global orientation (Spence, 1973; Piopiunik et al., 2018). According to Human Capital Theory, this accumulation of global expertise should logically lead to faster job placement and accelerated professional development (Becker, 1964; Sweetland, 1996).

Returnees often command a wage premium, as seen in comparative studies from Egypt and parts of West Africa, where global skills are in high demand and yield higher financial returns compared to non-migrants (Batista et al., 2025). However, in the South African context, this premium is inconsistent. While returnees may secure senior roles in multinational corporations (MNCs) that explicitly value global competencies (Cappellen & Janssens, 2010), those entering local public sectors or smaller enterprises often report "salary mismatches" (Stats SA, 2025). This suggests that while IWE serves as a potent internal

resource for the individual, it functions as an inconsistent external signal to some domestic employers who may prioritise location-specific human capital (OECD, 2017; Spence, 1973).

The Reintegration Gap: Brain Gain vs. Brain Waste A significant portion of the literature highlights the "reintegration gap," where the expected career benefits are moderated by systemic challenges (Mamaysky, 2021). Returnees frequently report skill underutilisation, where they are placed in positions that are less senior or less complex than the jobs they held abroad (World Bank, 2018). This misalignment, coupled with the erosion of local professional networks during their time overseas, can result in "brain waste," where valuable global talent is under-utilised by the home country (Mamaysky, 2021; Batista et al., 2025). In South Africa, high unemployment and structural constraints further complicate this transition, often forcing returnees to accept roles below their competency levels (Stats SA, 2025).

Ultimately, the career competitiveness of South African returnees depends on the alignment between their global expertise and local market demand (Andresen et al., 2021). While the potential for "brain gain" is significant, successful career outcomes are currently hindered by employer scepticism and a lack of formal recognition for international qualifications (OECD, 2017). This mixed empirical picture supports the study's focus on identifying the specific factors that allow returnees to successfully leverage their international career capital to gain a relative advantage over local peers (DeFillippi & Arthur, 1994). This mixed empirical evidence, combined with signalling dynamics, supports the expectation that IWE may enhance competitiveness and employability, forming the basis for Hypothesis 2.

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 (Leblang, D. 2017). 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 Andresen et al. (2021), 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 skill atrophy that in turn represent a clear case of "brain waste" for the person and the home country (World Bank 2018; Batista et al. 2025).

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 (Leblang, D. 2017). When returnees try to apply their own practices or questions established norms, they may be left feeling out of place and professionally disoriented. 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.

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 (Spence, 1973; Piopiunik et al., 2018). 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.

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. These findings suggest that the translation of international career capital into domestic advantage is often obstructed by structural and perceptual barriers, providing the foundation for Hypothesis 3.

Research Design and Methodology

This study employed a cross-sectional explanatory survey design to statistically test the hypothesised relationships between international work experience (IWE), career capital, employability, and reintegration challenges.

Research Approach

A quantitative research approach was selected as the most appropriate method to address the research objectives and to enable statistical testing of the relationships proposed in the conceptual framework.

Data Cleaning, Preparation, and SPSS Processing

Prior to inferential analysis, the dataset was cleaned and screened using IBM SPSS Version 29. Diagnostic procedures for missing data, normality, multicollinearity, and outliers confirmed the suitability of the dataset for inferential statistical analysis.

Research Method

Data was collected using a structured online questionnaire, this method ensured that all respondents interact with the same questions in the same order, minimising researcher bias and facilitating the identification of broader trends (Saunders et al., 2019). To ensure the survey results directly address the study's core inquiries, a systematic data analysis plan was developed. The collected data were exported from the digital platform into IBM SPSS Statistics (Version 28) for cleaning and processing. Data was analysed using descriptive statistics, correlation analysis, and multiple regression to evaluate predictive relationships among variables and test the study hypotheses.

Table 1: Data Analysis Matrix

Research Objective	Key Variables	Statistical Test(s) Applied
Obj 1: Evaluate the extent to which IWE enhances work skills (H_{11}):	IV: Years/Nature of IWE. DV: Knowing-how, whom, and why scales.	Descriptive Statistics; Spearman's Rank Correlation; Multiple Regression.
Obj 2: Assess perceived career competitiveness post-return (H_{12})	IV: Career Capital accumulation. DV: Perceived competitiveness and employability.	Multiple Linear Regression; Chi-square tests.
Obj 3: Identify specific workplace reintegration challenges (H_{13})	Moderator: Bias, under-utilisation, and salary mismatch scales.	Frequencies; Cross-tabulation; Chi-square tests of independence.
Obj 4: Propose supportive policy measures for brain gain.	Returnee rankings of support mechanisms (Qualitative/Categorical).	Median ranking; Descriptive breakdown; Categorical analysis.

Source: Authors' Own Work

Population and Sample

Study Population: The target population is defined as skilled South African professionals who have worked abroad for a minimum of two years and returned to South Africa within the past ten years. The ten-year cut-off reduces recall bias while reflecting current labour market conditions (Andresen et al., 2022).

Sampling Technique: Due to the "hidden" nature of returnees and the lack of a centralised national database, a non-probability sampling strategy was implemented, combining purposive and snowball sampling.

- **Purposive Sampling:** This allowed the researcher to deliberately select participants who met the strict inclusion criteria (minimum 2 years IWE).
- **Snowball Sampling:** Initial respondents were encouraged to refer peers within their professional networks, which is an effective method for reaching a dispersed population (Saunders et al., 2019).

Sample Size: This study targeted a realistic and statistically significant sample of 150–200 participants, this range provides sufficient power for inferential statistical analysis, such as multiple regression and correlation analysis, while acknowledging the practicalities of reaching high-level professionals.

Research Instrument

The research instrument was a structured online questionnaire; the survey was divided into six dimensions. These dimensions operationalised constructs derived from Career Capital and Signaling theories

1. **Demographics:** Age, gender, education, and industry sector to allow for subgroup analysis.
2. **IWE Profile:** Location and duration of overseas work to measure the "depth" of international exposure.
3. **Career Progression:** Changes in salary, promotion, and job placement speed post-return.
4. **Career Capital (Mediators):** Likert-scale items measuring Knowing-How (skills), Knowing-Whom (networks), and Knowing-Why (motivation).
5. **Employer Recognition:** Perceptions of how local firms value international exposure.
6. **Reintegration Challenges (Moderators):** Barriers such as skill under-utilisation and cultural re-adjustment.

To ensure Content Validity, the instrument was developed based on established scales and underwent a pilot test with a small group of returnees to refine clarity and logic flow. Construct Validity was maintained by using 5-point Likert scales (1=Strongly Disagree to 5=Strongly Agree), which provides a consistent measurement across all respondents. The Career Capital constructs were adapted from prior studies on employability, career capital, and global mobility (DeFillippi & Arthur, 1994; Andresen et al., 2021). The questionnaire operationalised the dimensions of knowing-how, knowing-whom, and knowing-why through Likert-scale indicators relating to professional skills, networks, and motivational adaptability. Internal consistency reliability was assessed using Cronbach's alpha, with all key constructs exceeding the recommended threshold of 0.70.

Data Collection

An online questionnaire was structured for the collection of data for eight weeks. The survey link was shared on professional networking platforms like LinkedIn groups focusing on repatriation and South African expatriates and relevant online platforms. Snowball sampling was used to access a hard-to-reach population. Initially identified returnees referred other suitable individuals of their professional network. Responses were automatically captured through the digital platform and exported into IBM SPSS (Version 28) for data cleaning and analysis. Only fully completed questionnaires meeting the inclusion criteria were retained for statistical analysis.

Ethical Considerations

All ethical standards of the research were maintained. Participants gave informed consent and informed of their right to withdraw at any time. Participant responses are anonymous, no identifiers are

collected and results are reported in aggregate form. Data was handled in accordance with the Protection of Personal Information Act. Data was stored on password protected and encrypted devices and scheduled for disposal after five years. Participation was completely voluntary, and participants were not recruited through their employers to avoid undue pressure.

Results and Findings

This section reports the empirical findings from 148 valid responses, organised according to the study objectives and hypotheses.:

- Objective 1 / H₀₁-H₁₁: Assess the extent to which IWE contributes to skill development and career capital (human, social, motivational).
- Objective 2 / H₀₂-H₁₂: Examine whether returnees perceive themselves and are perceived by employers as more competitive and employable than peers without IWE.
- Objective 3 / H₀₃-H₁₃: Identify reintegration challenges faced upon re-entry into the South African labour market.
- Objective 4: Derive practical recommendations for individuals, employers, and policymakers on leveraging IWE for "brain gain" and enhanced national employability.

Participant Profile and Descriptive Statistics

Demographic Distribution

Demographic variables were analysed to describe the profile of the returnee sample. The age distribution shows a concentration of mid- and late-career professionals, with 35–44 years (35.1%) and 55+ years (24.3%) most represented. Females comprised 64.9% of the sample, while males represented 32.4%.

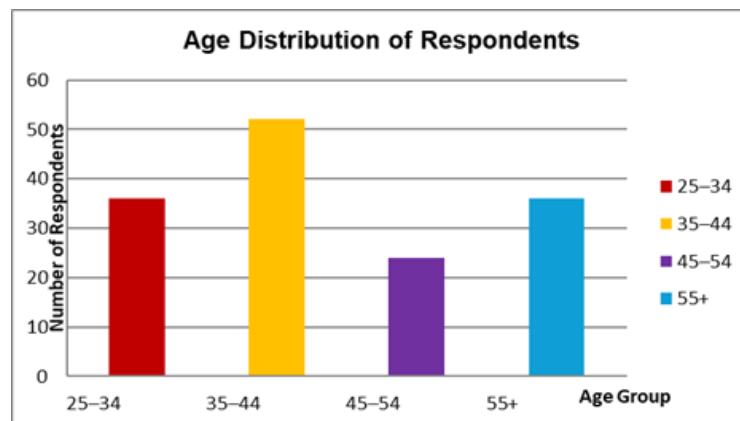


Figure 2: Age Profile (N=148)

Source: Authors' Own Work

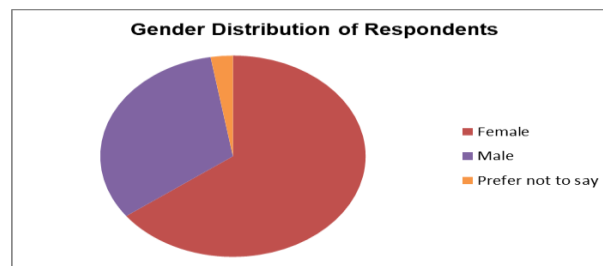


Figure 3: Age and Gender Profile (N=148)

Source: Authors' Own Work

Professional and Academic Background

Sector and educational data were analysed to confirm the professional profile of respondents. Participants were concentrated in Hospitality (29.7%), Engineering (16.2%), and Business/Finance (13.5%). Over 60% held postgraduate qualifications.

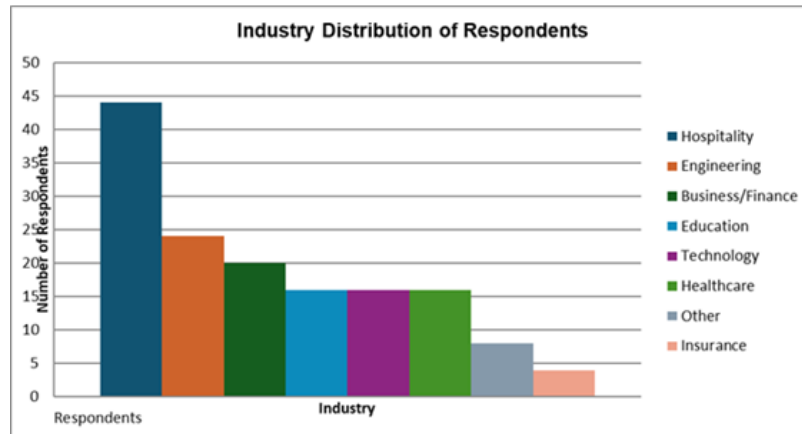


Figure 4: Industry Distribution of Respondents (N=148)

Source: Authors' Own Work

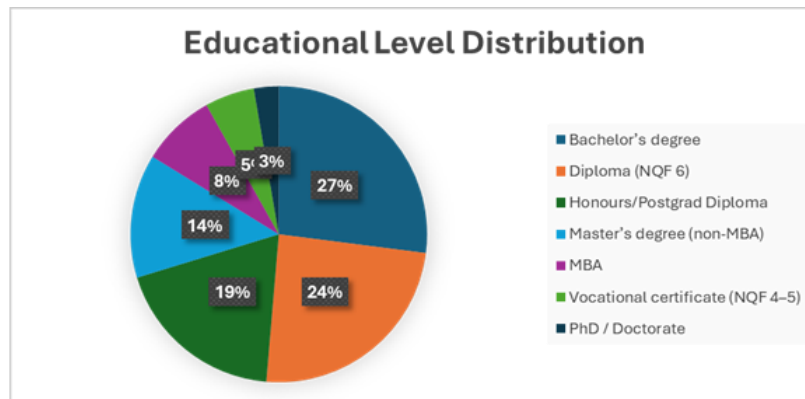


Figure 5: Educational Level of Respondents (N=148)

Source: Authors' Own Work

Interpretation of the results

Return migration appears strongest in globally integrated sectors such as hospitality, engineering, and finance. The high education level indicates respondents possess strong baseline human capital, meaning IWE builds on an already skilled group.

International Work Experience Profile

Work experience data distinguished between short-term exposure and long-term international engagement. While 39% worked abroad for 2–3 years, 31% reported over 10 years of IWE.

Table 2: Year of Work Experience of Respondents (N=148)

Years of Experience	Number of respondents	% of the sample
2-5 years	12	13.5 %
6-10 years	10	10.8 %
11-15 years	60	40.5 %
16-25 years	24	16.2 %
26+ years	28	18.9 %

Source: Authors' Own Work

Table 3: Duration of IWE of Respondents (N=148)

Years of Experience	Number of respondents	% of the sample
2-3 years	39	39 %

4-5 years	12	12 %
6-7 years	35	35%
8-9 years	14	14 %
10+	46	31 %

Source: Authors' Own Work

The prevalence of long-term international experience indicates deep professional integration abroad, suggesting that respondents accumulated sustained exposure to advanced work practices rather than short-term mobility.

Impact of IWE on Career Capital (Hypothesis 1)

Skill development indicators were assessed to evaluate the extent to which international work experience contributes to the formation of career capital, particularly professional, cross-cultural, and leadership competencies.

Findings

The SDI demonstrated high internal consistency (Cronbach's $\alpha \approx 0.82$) The Mean score was 4.62 (SD = 0.50).

Table 4: Skill Development Index Breakdown

Competency	Mean Score (1-5)
Leadership abilities	4.58
Cross-cultural communication	4.71
Strategic decision-making	4.55
Technical expertise	4.64
Problem-solving skills	4.62

Source: Authors' Own Work

Interpretation of the results

The high mean scores support Career Capital Theory by indicating that international work experience significantly enhances transferable competencies such as leadership, strategic decision-making, and cross-cultural communication. These findings align with Andresen et al. (2021), who found that global mobility contributes positively to professional skill development and employability, thereby supporting H₁₁.

Perceived Employability and Competitiveness (Hypothesis 2)

Employability measures were analysed to assess whether international experience translates into perceived career competitiveness and employer recognition within the domestic labour market.

The Employability Perception Index yielded a Mean of 3.05. Returnees felt IWE enhanced their long-term trajectory (3.86) but felt lower valuation during hiring (2.80). ANOVA results ($p = 0.017$) showed recognition is sector-dependent, highest in Finance (3.20) and lowest in Insurance (1.00).

Table 5: Employability Perception Indicators

Measure	Mean Score
Overall Employability Perception Index	3.05
Long-term career trajectory confidence	3.86
Employer valuation during hiring	2.80

Source: Authors' Own Work

Interpretation of the results

The findings support Signalling Theory by demonstrating that IWE functions as an inconsistent external signal within the South African labour market. While globally integrated sectors appear to value

international exposure, locally sectors continue to display scepticism toward foreign-acquired experience, consistent with findings by Yu (2022). These findings provide partial support for H₁₂.

Reintegration Challenges and Structural Barriers (Hypothesis 3)

Reintegration challenges were assessed to identify structural and organisational barriers that may hinder the effective utilisation of globally acquired skills upon return.

The most selected challenges were Salary/position below expectations (59.5%) and Underutilisation of skills (45.9%).

Table 6: Reintegration Challenges (N=148)

Challenge	Frequency	Percentage
Salary/position below expectations	88	59.5 %
Underutilisation of skills gained abroad	68	45.9 %

Source: Authors' Own Work

Interpretation of the results

The high level of reported skill underutilisation reflects a form of “brain waste,” where internationally acquired competencies are not fully absorbed into the domestic labour market. Unlike findings from some developed economies where return migration is associated with accelerated career mobility, South African returnees continue to face structural labour market barriers and inconsistent employer recognition. These findings therefore support H₁₃.

Predictive Modeling of Employability Factors

Regression analysis was conducted to determine which variables significantly predict perceived employability among returnees, it provides the final statistical test of the conceptual framework

Table 7: Multiple Regression Analysis Predicting Perceived Employability Among South African Returnees (N = 146)

Predictor Variable	β (Beta)	β (Unstd.)	SE	t-value	p-value
(Constant)		2.75	0.42	6.55	< 0.001
Duration of IWE (years)	0.10	0.15	0.05	3.00	0.003
Knowing-How (skills)	0.22	0.31	0.08	3.88	< 0.001
Knowing-Whom (networks)	0.18	0.25	0.07	3.57	< 0.001
Knowing-Why (motivation)	0.15	0.21	0.06	3.50	0.001
Underutilisation of Skills	-0.98	-0.85	0.12	-7.08	< 0.001
Age	-0.05	-0.03	0.02	-1.50	0.136
Education Level	0.08	0.12	0.06	2.00	0.047

Source: Authors' Own Work

Model Summary: $R^2 = 0.25$, Adjusted $R^2 = 0.21$, $F(7, 138) = 15.56$, $p < .001$
 Note: β = standardized coefficients; β = unstandardized coefficients; SE = standard error.

Interpretation of the results

The multiple regression model explained 25% of the variance in perceived employability. As hypothesized, the duration of IWE ($\beta = 0.10$, $*p* = .003$) and all three dimensions of career capital: Knowing-How, Knowing-Whom, and Knowing-Why; were significant positive predictors. Conversely, the underutilisation of skills was a powerful negative predictor ($\beta = -0.98$, $*p* < .001$). Age was not a significant predictor ($\beta = -0.05$, $*p* = .136$), suggesting that within this skilled cohort, globally acquired capital is a stronger driver of employability than demographic seniority. Education level was a marginally significant positive predictor.

Discussion and Managerial Implications

The findings indicate that international work experience enhances career capital and employability among South African returnees, although reintegration barriers continue to limit the full utilisation of globally acquired skills. The following discussion outlines the implications of these findings for returnees, employers, and policymakers.

The findings of this study reveal that international work experience is a powerful but inconsistently leveraged asset within the South African labour market. The primary implication is that potential brain gain from returning professionals is under-realised due to a reintegration gap between global career capital and domestic market utilisation. To convert IWE from a private individual benefit into a public national competitive advantage, targeted actions are required from three key stakeholder groups: the returnees themselves, employing organisations, and national policymakers.

Implications and Recommendations for Returning Professionals

The study underscores that possessing global career capital does not automatically guarantee domestic career success. In response to the statistical disparity between candidate expectations and actual market pay, returnees must act strategically to translate their international experience into locally relevant narratives. Specifically, they should:

- Returnees should strategically translate international competencies into locally relevant value propositions.
- Reestablish local contacts and engage with industry association related to accessing labour market intelligence and opportunities.
- Given the findings of wide disparity between candidate expectations and actual roles and pay in the market, enter realistic expectations of salary and position.

Implications and Recommendations for Employers and HR Practitioners

Employers and HR practitioners play a critical role in translating internationally acquired competencies into organisational value. Consistent with Career Capital Theory, the findings indicate that returnees possess strong portfolios of technical expertise, global awareness, and cross-cultural capabilities developed through international work experience (DeFillippi & Arthur, 1994). However, the study also highlights a persistent “recognition gap,” where employers undervalue internationally acquired skills despite their strong association with career competitiveness and employability. From a managerial perspective, organisations should therefore adopt competency-based recruitment and talent management systems that better recognise globally acquired capabilities, reduce hiring bias, and support the strategic utilisation of returnee talent within local organisations.

To translate these findings into organisational practice, employers should formalise recruitment and talent management pathways that better recognise internationally acquired competencies. Recommended actions include:

- Develop recruitment pathways that recognise international experience and global competencies, collaborate with diaspora networks, and design job descriptions that highlight international exposure and global perspective.
- Provide HR practitioners with competency-based evaluation tools to better assess globally acquired skills to mitigate bias and better assess skills acquired abroad.
- Align job descriptions with global competencies such as cross-border coordination and business innovation.

Implications and Recommendations for Policymakers and National Institutions

Barriers to reintegration need to be tackled through coordinated national response to enhance the benefits of return migration. Given that structural reintegration bottlenecks, such as administrative delays, were flagged as primary barriers by the sample, national policies must focus on systematic tracking and assimilation. Key actions include:

- Make the assessment and accreditation of international qualifications by professional bodies more efficient to reduce delays in accessing the labour market.
- Develop employer education initiatives that enhance the visibility of returnee skills and capabilities so that organisations can use global skills effectively.
- Create a single platform that has consolidated information regarding reintegration processes, job opportunities, and recognition requirements.

Table 8: Stakeholder Action Matrix to summarise smooth shift of three key efforts required

Stakeholder	Primary Focus	Key Actionable Strategy
Returnees	Signal Translation	Reframing global experience into local value narratives and proactive networking.
Employers	Talent Utilisation	Formalising repatriation programs and removing bias in global competency assessment.
Policymakers	Systemic Support	Streamlining qualification recognition and creating national engagement portals.

Source: Authors' Own Work

Conclusions and Future Research

This research investigated the impact of international work experience on the career competitiveness and employability of South African returnees. Grounded in an integrated framework of Career Capital, Human Capital, and Signalling theories, the study confirmed that IWE is a profound driver for professional development, robustly supporting Hypothesis 1 (H₁₁). The findings demonstrate that IWE contributes significantly to the accumulation of rich career capital by enhancing strategic "knowing-how," expansive "knowing-whom," and resilient "knowing-why."

The translation of this capital into domestic advantage is neither automatic nor guaranteed. The study revealed a complex duality: while returnees perceive themselves as highly employable (strengthened internal resources), the market's recognition of this value is inconsistent and sector-specific, leading to partial support for Hypothesis 2 (H₁₂). This "recognition gap" is exacerbated by systemic barriers, such as skill underutilisation and administrative hurdles, confirming Hypothesis 3 (H₁₃).

IWE functions as a potent internal resource but remains an inconsistent external signal in the South African labour market. The promise of "brain gain" is not a natural byproduct of return; it is a managed outcome. By bridging the identified reintegration gap, South Africa can transform a historical "brain drain" into a strategic national asset, driving innovation and inclusive growth in line with SDG 8 and AU Agenda 2063.

Limitations of the Study.

- Temporal Scope: The cross-sectional research design captures perceptions and outcomes at a single point in time and therefore does not account for the longitudinal evolution of career trajectories over extended periods.
- Response Bias: The reliance on self-reported data introduces the potential for recall bias and social desirability effects, which may influence the accuracy of respondents' assessments.

Avenues for Future Research

- **Employer-Side Investigations:** Future research should adopt qualitative or mixed-methods approaches from employer perspectives to understand the interpretation and valuation of international work experience amongst South African organisations as well as the structural barriers responsible for the recognition gap identified in this study.
- **Longitudinal Career Tracking:** Studies which follow returnees over the longer-term (5–10 years) are necessary, in order to investigate the delayed or cumulative impact of international work experience on career outcomes and labour market recognition.
- **Sector-Specific Valuation of IWE:** Comparative sectoral studies between global and domestic industries may further clarify employer recognition and job outcomes for returnees.

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