

INTERNATIONAL CAREER EXPERIENCES OF EXPATRIATE ACADEMICS IN SOUTH AFRICA

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—Abstract—

South Africa is facing a major staffing shortage in scarce skills disciplines. Expatriate academics have been sourced by universities to run programmes in these disciplines to create ‘home grown’ talent to solve this problem. This study is based on Lazarova, Westman and Shaffer’s (2010) model relating to expatriate work and family performance. It seeks to examine the experiences of academics at UKZN, as well as provide recommendations on how to improve their experience. The key question of the paper, deals with the how expatriate academics have adjusted to their new environment based on job and work environment challenges, family and lifestyle challenges, organisational support and contextual challenges in the host country. The results showed that the majority of respondents are well adjusted in terms of their relationships with their host country colleagues and their relationships with family and friends in their home country, as well as in terms of the fulfilment of their workplace expectations. Their experience of organisational support could however be improved. It was found that they did not share close ties with other expatriates or local South Africans at the university or in their communities. The study is exploratory and involves a single professional group, as such the findings are not generalisable to other contexts or respondents. A descriptive quantitative analysis of the career experiences of 83 expatriate academics was done. The study was unique in that it examined all levels of academia in conjunction with management and takes place in a South African context. To improve organisational support, the institution should establish support systems for international faculty. Furthermore, it was suggested in the study, that there should be the creation of a mentorship or buddy programme by the university to support the adjustment of new international staff. University management should set up an international staff office similar to the International Student Office manned by dedicated staff who deal only with matters concerning expatriate academics.

Key Words: international career experiences, self-initiated expatriates, motivation, social support, organisational support.

JEL Classification: J61

1. INTRODUCTION

International careers have been framed from an organisational perspective in international human resource management literature. However, there has been a growing body of research that has focused on the individual and his/her experience of his/her international career assignment (Howe-Walsh and Schyns, 2010; Tharenou and Caulfield, 2011).

Due to the lack of skills in certain fields such as science and technology, an increasing number of expatriate academics are taking up positions at South African universities (Maharaj, 2016). This situation is similar to countries such as Canada, New Zealand, Australia and countries in Asia (Altbach, Reisburg and Pacheo, 2012).

Richardson (2013) identifies expatriate academics as highly educated people who possess special qualities and expertise in a particular field. Academic expatriates belong to the group, self-initiated expatriates (SIE's) defined by Howe-Walsh and Schyns (2010:260) as "employees who decide to migrate to another country for work through their own volition and are not sent to take up an overseas assignment by their company". Previous studies of SIEs tend to focus on executive management, however, this study aims to add to the existing body of knowledge, by examining academics across all levels.

2. THE EXPATRIATION EXPERIENCE

International human resource management (IHRM) has concentrated on expatriate failure, which has been defined as "the premature return of an expatriate manager to his or her home country" (Lee, 2007:403). Brookfield (2012:1) reports that "between 4-6% of all international assignments fail in any given year". This study is based on a theoretical model developed by Lazarova, Westman and Shaffer (2010) relating to expatriate work and family performance. This model combines two existing theories, namely the Job Demands-Resources (JD-R)

theory, which suggests that job performance is influenced by the balance between the demands that employees are exposed to and the resources available to them (Demerouti, Bakker, Nachreiner and Schaufeli, 2001). The second part of the model combines theories concerning the dynamic interaction between work and family through spill-over effects between the employee's work and family roles (Crouter, 1984) and crossover effects between the employee and their partner (Westman, 2001).

The reasons for negative expatriation experiences are made up of four distinct categories: job and work environment factors, family factors, organisational support, and contextual factors in the host-country (Cole and Nesbeth, 2014). Job and work environment factors refers to resources provided to the expatriate in terms of the work environment (JD-R theory). The second category is focused mainly on the characteristics of the expatriate's partner (spill-over effects). Organisational support refers to a variety of resources provided by the organisation to the expatriate and family. Finally, the fourth category involves increased demands (JD-R theory). This model was suggested Cole and Nesbeth (2014) for the expatriation context because its characteristics include expatriates facing the challenges of a new work context, changing family dynamics, as partners face new tasks and expectations (often simultaneously with career change or job loss) and organisations assuming more responsibility for the expatriate's family compared to domestic employees.

The limitations of the study include, the sample size, making these findings ungeneralisable to other universities or even other SIE groups. Furthermore, most of the respondents were African males from SADC countries, hence this could have influenced the results of the study. However, ethnicity and gender were not fully explored in the study.

3. METHODOLOGY

The aim of the study is to examine the experiences of these academics at UKZN, as well as provide recommendations on how to improve their experience. The key question of paper, focuses on the how expatriate academics have adjusted to their new environment. This is an exploratory study and involves a single professional group, namely expatriate academics at UKZN as such, the findings are not

generalisable to other contexts or respondents. Using judgement sampling, a self-designed questionnaire was administered to 83 respondents. Items in the Expatriation Experience Scale have a Cronbach's alpha value of 0.799 indicating an acceptable to good inter-item reliability for the overall scale items. Furthermore, the KMO score for the Experience scale is 0.660 and Bartlett's Test is significant, indicating that the data set complies with the requirements of sampling adequacy and sphericity for Factor Analysis to be performed.

4. PRESENTATION AND DISCUSSION OF RESULTS

In the section below, the results of the study are presented and discussed.

4.1 Demographic Profile

In the section below, the demographic profile of the sample is provided.

Age

The majority of the sample (33.7%) were from the age group 41-50, followed closely by the 36-40 group (30.1%), the 50+ group (18.1%) and the 31-35 group (15.7%). Only two respondents were from the 26-30 age group. It is interesting to note that the majority of respondents in the sample are between the ages of 36-50 years old. This would imply that these respondents are mature adults, are established in their occupations and their career trajectories.

Gender

The majority of the sample (80.5%) was male, while the sample comprised of 16 females (19.5%). It was important to note that because the majority of the sample was male, this made it difficult to generalise the findings to both sexes. This skewing of the sample was typical of the demographics of migration, where males dominate.

Marital status

The majority of the sample (54.2%) were single, while only 45.8% were married. As the majority of respondents were single, questions seeking answers involving spouses/partners and children were largely ignored.

Qualification

The majority of the sample, had Doctoral degrees (75.9%); followed by Masters (22.9%). Only one respondent had an Honours degree in the sample. These results indicated that the subjects of the sample were from the group classified as 'highly skilled workers'. Thus, the findings fit the profile of SIE's who are classified as being highly qualified and skilled in their chosen professions.

Duration of stay in South Africa

The majority of the sample (50.6%) has been residing in the country for between seven and ten years, followed by those who have been here for between four and six years (28.9%). Only 20.5% have been here in South Africa for between one and three years. Despite the challenges they have faced during their experiences, many academics have chosen to settle in South Africa (Maharaj, 2016).

Nationality

The majority of the sample (27.7%) came from Zimbabwe, followed by India (12.0%), Nigeria (10.8%): Ethiopia (6%), Ghana and Cameroon (4%). Zambia with 3 respondents, America, Mauritius, Romania and Tanzania with 2 respondents respectively. Argentina, Australia, Bangladesh, Belgium, Britain, China, Denmark, Germany, Italy, Lesotho, Malawi and Swaziland had one respondent respectively. In terms of regional distribution, Africa is by far the largest supplier of expatriate academics to the university (71.7% of the sample), followed by Asia with 12.4%, Europe with 8.4%, and the Americans 3.6%. South Africa as an ideal destination for other Africans due to its relative socio-economic stability, thereby attracting the highly skilled as part of the global skills migration pattern (Al Ariss and Ozbilgin, 2010).

Level of academic post

48.2% of the sample, held the position of lecturer, followed by senior lecturer position (22.9%); associate professor position (19.3%), professorship (7.2%) and,

lastly, two respondents holding a tutor's post. In any event, though the majority of expatriate academics in this sample hold doctoral degrees, many do not hold posts higher than lecturer, the minimum requirement for which is a Master's degree. These results illustrate that there is an under-utilisation of skills, referred to as 'underemployment', a common problem among highly skilled immigrants at UKZN. (Al-Ariss and Ozbilgin, 2010) This could be attributed to the underlying xenophobic attitudes surfacing not only in South Africa, but across the globe.

4.2. Experiences of Expatriation

In this section, the results of the expatriate academics experiences of expatriation at UKZN are presented.

Table 1. Measure of Central Tendency for the Expatriation Experience scale

	n	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
Family and Friends Support	83	1.00	6.75	5.01	1.13
School Support	83	1.80	7.00	4.80	1.24
Pre-departure Phase	83	1.00	7.00	4.25	1.62
University Community Support	83	1.00	7.00	4.15	1.36
Fulfillment of Workplace Expectations	83	1.00	7.00	3.81	1.50
Experience (Overall)	83	2.71	6.29	4.40	.90

4.2.1 Family and Friends Support

A mean score of 5.01, shows that respondents agreed slightly on the role family and friends have played in their experience of expatriation. The standard deviation (sd.= 1.13) showed a wide variation from the mean. Some respondents indicated that they disagreed strongly (min=1.00), while others agreed (max=6.75). A seven-point rating scale was used with (1) being disagree strongly and (7) being agree strongly. The highest mean score of 6.83 showed that respondents agreed to having the support of family and friends in their home country (32.5% agree, 44.6% agree strongly) during expatriation. When asked if family and friends were supportive of their decisions to expatriate to UKZN and South Africa, the majority of respondents agreed (32.5%), while some (18.1%)

strongly agreed. The majority of respondents (33.7%) agreed that their spouses and children played an important role in their overall experience of expatriation, while others remained neutral (28.9%). This can be attributed to the fact that the majority of the sample were single. The majority of respondents (26.5%) had no opinion, while 24.1% agreed that their colleagues were supportive of their decisions to expatriate to UKZN and South Africa. Results indicated that respondents in the study had a positive perception of the role that family and friends support played in their overall experience of expatriation.

These results support the findings of Al Ariss and Ozbilgin (2010) and Rodriguez and Scurry (2014), which indicate that age played an important role in the international career experience of highly skilled individuals. It would appear that respondents in the 31-40 age group were more inclined to value the support of family and friends during expatriation.

4.2.2 School Support

The university houses different disciplines in 'schools'. Therefore, this component seeks to measure the level of support perceived by expatriate academics by their respective disciplines. 'Schools' fit into the organisational structure of the university as part of the respective 'Colleges' that were previously faculties. The mean score of ($m=4.80$) shows that respondent's agreed slightly regarding their perception of school support. The standard deviation ($sd=1.24$) shows a wide variation. Some respondents disagree strongly ($min=1.00$) while others agree strongly ($max=7.00$).

This component examined the respondents' perception of the levels of support offered to them by the school and thus looked closely at the challenges and opportunities respondents faced in their working environment. The degree of collegiality in the school environment alluded to the type of working environment the respondent perceived, whether it was mutually respectful or hostile, and what level of collegial support they received from other colleagues. These items helped to describe the type of relationships expatriate academics shared with fellow staff members.

Other items included the perceived levels of research and teaching support from the school. These are two major challenges that any academic faces in the current

academic context. Firstly, access to research funding has been a major issue that affects all academics as many of the research grants are available on a competitive basis. This has proved to be a major obstacle to expatriate academics as many research grants are exclusively for South Africans. Secondly, the South African higher education system presents unique challenges in terms of large class sizes and students from diverse socio-economic backgrounds, where English is spoken as a second or third language. Other items dealt with how much value respondents placed on being part of the school, the level of intellectual stimulation they felt by being part of the school, and how they felt about the time they spent at the school and whether or not it had a positive or negative impact on their career. The mean score of 5.02 was obtained for the item dealing with the respondent's experience of collegial support (31.3% agree, 19.3% agree strongly). A mean score of 4.8 was obtained for the respondent's experience of their school being a collegial place to work (38.6% agree, 19.3% agree slightly). A mean score of 4.73 was obtained for the respondents' experience of school support when it came to their research activities (27.7% agree slightly, 24.1% agree). A mean score of 4.55 was obtained for the respondents who found their experience of working at their school intellectually stimulating (24.1% agree, 18% agree slightly). The lowest mean score of 4.37 was obtained for the item examining the respondent's experiences with the school helping with the challenges associated with teaching (22.9% agree, 19.3% agree slightly). This implies overall, the interpersonal relationships respondents shared with their work colleagues was positive and supportive. This showed that collegial support played an important role in these academics ability to adjust positively to their new work environments.

The respondents' perception of the support their school has shown them during their expatriation experience showed that they had a positive perception of the support their schools had offered them, with responses ranging from agree strongly to agree slightly. Results illustrated that the overall perception regarding the support their school had shown them during their career experience was positive (62%). Findings indicated the majority of respondents (62%) were positive in their perception of school support during their career experience and this supported Tharenou and Caufield's (2010) findings that organisational support during expatriation is critical for the success of expatriation.

Lee (2007) argued that organisational support, supervisor support and spousal and family support, was critical and such social support would enhance the chances of successful adjustment. The results of the current study indicated that, because

expatriate academics perceive strong support from their counterparts in their schools, they are likely to have adjusted more quickly to their new work environment.

4.2.3. Pre-departure Phase Experience

The mean score of ($m=4.25$) shows that respondents have no opinion regarding their pre-departure phase experience. The standard deviation ($sd= 1.62$) shows a wide variation from the mean. Some respondents disagreed strongly ($min=1.00$) while others agreed strongly ($max=7.00$). One of the items here dealt with the expatriate academics, expectations of their living conditions being based on realistic previews. Most respondents agreed with this item. In terms of the support offered by the university during the pre-departure phase also known as the 'on-boarding' phase of expatriation, the majority of respondents tended to disagree strongly with this item. This was because the university did not have any specific department that dealt specifically with matters unique to expatriate academics. This was significant, as this led to more time and effort being wasted on the part of the expatriate academic, who had to figure things out on their own.

In terms of realistic previews of the living conditions in South Africa, the majority of respondents (28.9%) indicated that they had a good idea of what to expect when settling down in South Africa. Other respondents (25.3%) agreed slightly that they had a fairly good idea of what to expect in South Africa. Respondents indicated that they strongly disagreed (20.5%) with the proposition that there was a high level of support from the university. Some respondents had no opinion (19.3%) regarding the level of support offered by the university during pre-departure phase. From the results, it was clear that the majority of respondents felt that their pre-departure experience was a positive one (72%). In response to the item 'on taking up the new position the university offered support to my family, for example, accomodation, employment, schools, and so on .', a mean score of 3.83 (26.5% having no opinion and only 16.5% agreed slightly) showed that the expatriate academics are not totally satisfied with the level of support that they have received from UKZN during this time. The findings of the study overall indicate respondents felt positively about their pre-departure experience (72%), thus supporting studies by Froese (2012) that suggest during the pre-departure phase of an international career experience, expatriates should have proper support.

4.2.4 University Community Support

The mean score of ($m=4.25$) shows that respondents are neutral regarding the social support component. The standard deviation ($sd.=1.36$) shows a wide variation in responses. Some respondents disagreed strongly ($min=1.00$) while others strongly agreed ($max=7.00$). It seemed as if this was not an important aspect of adjustment to respondents. A mean score of 4.39 and 4.24 respectively was obtained when examining the establishment of ties to other expatriates at the university and whether expatriates in the community where the respondent lived had expressed an interest in establishing contact with them. When asked about the support the university had provided, results yielded a mean score of 3.83, with 26.5% of the respondents were neutral in their responses and 16.5% who agreed slightly.

Howe-Walsh and Schyns (2010) argued that, in order for expatriates to be better prepared for the international career experience, they need to have realistic expectations of their work environment. They found that accepting an offer of international employment is largely dependent on the individual having a realistic idea of what to expect. This is where HR can be of support in the pre-departure phase by providing realistic living and work previews that will ensure the individual does not experience a huge “culture shock” when taking up a post..

These results indicated that other expatriates in the university and in the community at large do not form a closely-knit group nor do they socialise solely with one another. These results challenged the findings of Richardson (2013), who found expatriate academics tended to socialise almost exclusively with each other, as well as those of Selmer and Luring (2013) who also found that expatriate managers often form closely-knit expatriate communities. These results illustrated that respondents had remained neutral regarding the support received from other expatriates, either in the university community or society at large.

This study supported the findings of Froese’s (2012) that found going to a ‘close culture’ can cause as many difficulties as going to a ‘distant culture’. These findings added a dimension to this argument since even those from similar backgrounds did not socialise in a foreign country, and it was not only host country nationals who are difficult to socialise with. The majority of respondents in the current study are from Africa, this meant that they are from cultures that

could be considered 'close' to South Africa. This finding is consistent with the general xenophobic attitude exhibited in South African society towards foreigners. For example, this attitude was displayed prominently in an article by a senior academic at UKZN in 2013 (Ngcobo, 2013) as well as in recent xenophobic attacks. This finding was also consistent with the feelings of isolation and alienation experienced by an Indian academic at UKZN due to professional jealousy (Soobramoney, 2014).

4.2.5 Fulfilment of Workplace Expectations

The mean score of ($m=3.81$) shows that respondents disagreed slightly, in terms of their workplace expectations being fulfilled. The standard deviation ($sd.=1.49762$) shows a great variation from the mean. Some respondents disagreed strongly ($min=1.00$) while others strongly agreed ($max=7.00$).

The highest mean score of 3.63 was obtained for the expectations of respondents regarding their working conditions and whether these expectations were met or not (25.3% disagree, 15.7% agree). A mean score of 3.24 was obtained for the expectations of respondents regarding their working conditions and whether these expectations were exceeded (25.3% disagreed, 21.7% no opinion). Results indicated that the respondents disagreed that these factors played an important role in their overall expatriation experience. When SIEs decided to expatriate they had certain expectations regarding their work situation. These results showed that respondents bordered on the negative in terms of their responses to these items. This also indicated an unwillingness to be open and honest regarding the fulfilment of their expectations regarding their work situation and living conditions in South Africa.

Three categories of responses (Negative, No Opinion and Positive) were identified to further analyse the findings. The majority of respondents expressed a negative opinion (54%) regarding the fulfilment of their workplace expectations; this suggested that their experience at UKZN had not met their expectations regarding workplace conditions. There were no statistically significant differences in the perceptions of the dimensions of the expatriation experience between gender, marital status, and years of experience as an academic. These results supported the findings of Froese (2012), whose study indicated that age, gender,

period of international assignment, length of previous work experience, organisational position and other factors did not correlate with a successful career experience.

The results of the current study challenged the findings of studies by Al Ariss and Ozbilgin (2010) and Rodriguez and Scurry (2014), whose results indicated that age, gender and ethnicity played an important role in the expatriation experience of highly skilled individuals. These results supported the findings of Okurame and Fabuni (2013), who found no significant differences in the career experiences of Nigerian nurses based on gender.

4.2.6 Expatriation Experience and Duration of International Career Experience in South Africa

There were no statistically significant differences amongst the components of Fulfilment of Workplace Expectations ($f=.70$, $p>0.05$) and Family and Friends Support ($f=1.31$, $p>0.05$) for the Expatriation Experience scale. The components, Pre-departure Phase Experience ($f=4.56$, $p>0.05$), School Support ($f=2.97$, $p>0.05$), and Support from Other Expatriates ($f=2.89$, $p>0.05$), as well as the overall Expatriation Experience scale score ($f=2.97$, $p>0.05$) are significantly different between the categories of the Periods of International Career Experience at the 95% level ($p>0.05$).

Table 2. ANOVA: Expatriation Experience and Duration of International Career Experience

ANOVA		<i>F</i>	<i>p</i>
Pre-departure Phase Experience	Between Groups	4.56	.005*
Fulfilment of Workplace Expectations	Between Groups	.70	.554
Family and Friends Support	Between Groups	1.31	.278
School Support	Between Groups	2.97	.037*
University Community Support	Between Groups	2.89	.041*
Experience (overall)	Between Groups	2.97	.037*

Those academics that have been residing in South Africa for between 1-3 years have the highest mean score for the Pre-departure Phase Experience (mean=5.09), followed by those between 4-6 years (mean=4.48), between 7-10 years

(mean=4.23), and finally, for longer than 10 years (mean=3.07). These responses ranged from slightly agree to slightly disagree, showed that this dimension played a significant role in academics' expatriation experience. These results showed that those academics that have arrived more recently, appeared to have a more clear recollection of their experiences. They also seemed to have had a more positive experience when compared to those academics who have been here for longer.

Those academics who had been in South Africa for between 1-3 years had the highest mean score for the component School Support (mean=5.44), followed by those who had been in South Africa for between 4-6 years (mean=4.88). Those that had been in South Africa for over ten years have the lowest mean score (mean=4.20). These responses ranged from agreeing slightly to no opinion regarding the level of support academics received from their schools during their expatriation experience. These results showed those that had been in South Africa for a shorter period of time tended to perceive the level of support received from their schools more positively than those here for a long time. Those that had been in South Africa for 7-10 years had the highest mean score (mean=4.40); followed by those that had been in South Africa for 1-3 years (mean=4.33). Academics that were in South Africa for 4-6 years (mean=4.278), followed and finally, those for over ten years (mean=3.21). These responses ranged from having no opinion to slightly disagree regarding the level of support they have received from other expatriates both at work and the community.

5. RECOMMENDATIONS

In order to address the deficiencies regarding organisational support, concerns about the ability of accompanying spouses to find appropriate employment, for example, might be addressed by providing realistic living conditions preview. This includes information about local employment opportunities. Similarly, the institution should establish support systems for international faculty. Furthermore, it is suggested, there should be the creation of a mentorship or buddy programme by the university to support the adjustment of new international staff members. University management should set up an International Staff Office similar to the International Student Office at the university to answer any questions they may have; this centre should be manned by dedicated staff who deal only with matters concerning expatriate academic staff.

The highly efficient and advanced Information Communication System (ICS) at UKZN should be used to create a link on the Staff page on UKZN's website dedicated to expatriate academics, which would cover all the information required to settle at the university and in South Africa.

6. ASPECTS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Future studies can verify the challenges and opportunities presented by the international career experience at UKZN by engaging expatriate academics in in-depth interviews. In future, this style of research could greatly assist policy makers and those who implement policy to make the necessary changes in current practice to improve the overall expatriation experience, thereby allowing both UKZN and the individual to make the best of the employment relationship. Furthermore, by focusing on gender and ethnicity, more can be learnt about the unique challenges each group faces during expatriation.

7. CONCLUSION

In this study, the majority of expatriate academics are well adjusted in terms of their relationships with their host country colleagues and their relationships with family and friends back home as well as in terms of the fulfilment of their workplace expectations. However, their experience of organisational support, could be improved. It was found that they did not share close ties with other expatriates or local South Africans at the university or in their communities.

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