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**In Search of Global Skillsets: Manager Perceptions of the Value of Returned Migrants and the Relational Nature of Knowledge**

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## **Abstract**

This article builds on the seminal work of Williams and Baláž (2008a) on international migration and knowledge, by arguing that the economic value of the knowledge is relational, being dependent on how it is recognised by potential employers. By analysing in-depth interviews with sixteen managers which are contrasted with insights from thirty interviews with skilled returnees to Slovakia, this study aims to identify the extent to which return migration is considered to facilitate knowledge transfer, and the diversification of the knowledge available, to organizations. The findings reveal that skilled migration is understood by managers to facilitate accelerated learning that contributes to professional and personal development in several ways. Firstly, formal qualifications gained abroad are valued, particularly in context of perceived limitations to the national educational system. Secondly, the managers consider that returnees have acquired not only technical skills, such as market know-how and business intelligence, but also soft skills. Finally, the study indicates that far from facing barriers to the recognition of their knowledge by employers, this was acknowledged and welcomed. Managers with personal exposure to international migration were predisposed to recognising the experiences of returned migrants, and this was most evident in the recruitment practices of the multinationals.

**Keywords:** highly-skilled return migrants, Slovakia, knowledge transfer, transformative learning

## **Introduction**

This article builds on the seminal work of Williams and Baláž (2008a) on international migration and knowledge, which argues that international exposure is an important vehicle for the acquisition, and circulation, of tacit knowledge – that is, personal knowledge that cannot be easily transferred (Polanyi 1958). While knowledge transfer and learning have been studied from the perspective of migrants (i.e. Baláž and Williams 2004; Klagge and Klein-Hitpab 2010; Grabowska and Garapich 2016), this paper emphasises that the value of that knowledge is relational, dependant on whether this is recognised by others, especially employers. The questions this poses are what types of returned migrant knowledge are valued by employers, and what are the reasons for these positive evaluations. It will be argued that the reasons lie as much in the experiences of the employers or managers, as of the migrants.

The circular nature of much human mobility means that migration has long played an increasingly important role in transferring knowledge between Eastern and Western Europe since 1989 (Williams and Baláž 2008a; Klagge and Klein-Hitpab 2010). However, the capacity for knowledge transfers had been intensified by the European Union (EU) accessions which commenced in 2004, and by technological, organizational and infrastructural innovations, including low-cost airlines (Williams and Baláž 2009). These facilitated changes in the frequency and duration of mobility, creating opportunities for more intensive and immediate knowledge transfers. The paper makes three main contributions to understanding the returned skilled migrants' experiences, in terms of utilising both their professional and personal development, in a post-communist, post-transition, newly acceded EU member country.

First, it investigates the relational nature of the knowledge acquired as a result of international migration experiences, that is, how it is perceived and received in a rapidly changing economic context. While there has been increasing interest in studying return migration

in the Central and Eastern European (CEE) context (i.e. Vlase 2013; Grabowska and Garapich 2016), existing research mostly tells the story from the perspective of the migrants, whereas the relational nature of knowledge – and how it is perceived and received – also depends on the employers. This paper seeks to make an original contribution to addressing this gap, by focussing primarily on the firm level, specifically the perspectives of managers. It is one of the first significant attempts to link studies of managers and migrants, contributing to the small body of literature examining return from the perspective of businesses (i.e. Barcevičius 2016).

The second contribution lies in the paper's theoretical framework. We link the theoretical understanding of international migration as a vehicle for the acquisition and dissemination of tacit knowledge (Williams and Baláž 2008a), with the notion of personal development through transformative learning (Mezirow 1990, 1991). The migration experience can be an occasion of transformative learning for individual migrants, associated with the development of more open, discerning and inclusive perspectives.

Thirdly, by focussing on Slovakia, we contribute to broadening the literature on international return migration to CEE which hitherto has been heavily focussed on Poland (i.e. Klagge and Klein-Hitpab 2010; Grabowska and Garapich 2016; White et al. 2018). Following the collapse of state socialism in 1989, the 1990s was a turbulent decade characterised by very high unemployment and chronic crony capitalism. However, the 2000s saw a macro-economic transformation driven by inward investment flows which has created new opportunities for highly skilled workers, especially in the Bratislava region, the principal magnet for multinational investors. This was the background against which Slovakia experienced one of the highest outmigration rates in Europe, including a significant number of student migrants (OECD 2016) as well as substantial return (Baláž and Williams 2004; Kahanec and Kureková 2016). Therefore

the marked intensification of circulation in Slovakia, following its 2004 EU accession occurred in context of major economic shifts, and changing opportunity structures.

This article first provides a brief overview of human capital theories and skills and competences in the context of return migration, followed by the conceptualisations of transformative learning. We then outline the qualitative approach of the study. Next we discuss our findings in relation to three main themes; formal skills, soft skills (competences) and transformative experiences. We end the paper with discussion and conclusions.

### **Human capital theory and return migration**

Human capital theories conceptualise knowledge as capital that is embodied in the individual. In a migration context, individuals are assumed to utilise a cost-benefit analysis, relocating to new labour markets based on increased returns for their human capital, variously operationalised as education, work experience and skills (Sjaastad 1962). Abroad, the return to their human capital depends on both their generic skills, and their acquisition of nationally specific skills, including language. This poses a dilemma for human capital theory when explaining returned migration. If the returns to individuals increase over time as they acquire nationally specific human capital, why should they return before retirement age? Dustmann and Weiss (2007) provide an answer to this dilemma. They identify three main rationales for return migration: 1) preference for consumption in home country; 2) greater purchasing power afforded to the migrants through exchange rate convergence; and 3) the prospect to utilise their new knowledge and skills more effectively upon return. It is the third point that most keenly relates to the human capital model. It allows the possibility that migrants may go abroad to acquire new human capital, which they

can effectively valorise upon return. A more negative interpretation stresses that return flows are due to the migrant glass ceiling, whereby migrants return because they have reached the limits of being able to increase the returns to their human capital abroad (Cerese 1974). Of course, other, non-economic motives, including culture shock, homesickness or loneliness drive migrants to go back to the country of origin (Gmelch 1980), and the decision to return is rarely based solely on one motivation; rather it is a combination of factors, including those related to increased human capital (Barcevičius 2016).

In practice, the valorisation of human capital varies in both time and space; it is dependent on the relative expansion and contraction of opportunities in the relevant job markets. In the European context, following the collapse of state socialism, the former Eastern Bloc observed both emigration and an influx of return migration (i.e. Klagge and Klein-Hitpab 2010). This was attributed to the human capital gap, between the former planned and the market-based western economies. Consequently, the human capital of Western trained individuals became highly sought after and rewarded. Therefore, human mobility, and circular and return migration play a key-role in transferring human capital between Eastern and Western Europe (Klagge and Klein-Hitpab 2010). Specifically, migrants carry embodied, embrained, embedded and encultured forms of tacit knowledge across socio-economic contexts (Blackler 2002; Williams and Baláž 2008a). While human capital theories provide a strong economic rationale for understanding the employment and income experiences of migrants and returned migrants, they also have limitations, which to some extent have been addressed by drawing on the concept of competences.

### ***Skills, competences and their valorisation***

Skills play an integral role in human capital theories, and they signal workforce abilities. They are usually measured in technical, quantifiable terms that consist of formal education and labour market experience. Nonetheless, the notion of skill is very difficult to define (Noon and Blyton 1997). In what is probably the narrowest of conceptualisations, it is argued that “those who have completed tertiary education are considered to be ‘highly skilled’” (Csedo 2008, 804). Others conceptualise them as general labour market information, which include an individual’s “destination language proficiency, occupational licenses, certification or credentials, as well as more narrowly defined task-specific skills” (Chiswick, Lee and Miller 2005, 488). Furthermore, a broader approach also recognises ‘soft skills’ such as communication and emotional capacities, in contrast to technical or ‘hard-skills’ (Reich 1991).

The recognition of social skills has led to a more nuanced focus on competences. Evans (2002) formalises these in terms of five main types of competences: content-related and practical, attitudinal and values, learning, methodological (i.e. networking), and social and interpersonal (see Williams and Baláž 2008a, 34-37). In the context of migration, considerable emphasis is placed on communication as a key interpersonal competence. This can include the value attached to English language as a ‘ground-floor’ world language (van Parijs 2000). English-language fluency is an internationally recognised competence that has high economic value. Focusing on Slovakia, Williams and Baláž (2005) observed that language learning plays a critical role in migrants’ choice of destination country, as well as in their post return employment experiences. Other competences gained abroad include improved self-confidence, learning new approaches to work, a greater ability to deal with new challenges, and acquiring new ideas amongst returnees to Slovakia as well as greater self-awareness and an ability to manage crises

and difficult situations. Returnees to Poland (Klagge and Klein-Hitpab 2010) were particularly valued for their business English skills, an ability to work and communicate effectively in an international business environment as well as their flexibility and open-mindedness to change. More recently, Grabowska (2017) pointed to other unique skills, notably the capability of dealing with emotional labour (i.e. controlling one's emotions or resilience), an outcome of working experiences in the lesser skilled jobs. These transferable skills and competences are of potential value to employers. Klagge and Klein-Hitpab (2010) argue that "migrants can provide linkages or 'pipelines' to firms" (4), in terms of human capital and skill transfers, and can further initiate a social change in their country or origin (White et al. 2018).

However, the acquisition of skills and competences is only the first stage because skill recognition is negotiated (Csedo 2008). Chapman and Iredale (1993, 360) conceptualised the determination of wage outcomes as a two-step process of recognition involving: "1) formal acceptance by a body (registration/licensing body, etc.), or 2) informal acceptance by an employer or employing body of a person's qualifications and/or skills". Migrants do exercise agency in this process: Csedo (2008) found that "the recognition of foreign credentials depends considerably on the individual migrant's ability to signal the value of their qualifications, experience and skills, in specific social contexts" (807). However, the recognition of skills also depends on broader social process of ascription, suitability and acceptability (Jenkins 2004), and how an individual's socio-biographic characteristics influence the social reception of their knowledge and skills. Surprisingly, there is relatively little detailed research on this process of informal recognition of skills by employers. While the transfer of newly acquired skills, practices and ideas may be welcome in some contexts, for example, in low-paid sectors in Poland (i.e. Grabowska and Garapich 2016), the few existing studies emphasise that migrants may encounter



significant barriers in terms of skills recognition. Barcevičius (2016) found that returnees' skills are not always welcome by the local employers in Lithuania who prefer home-educated youth, while Tzanakou and Behle (2017) in their study on the transferability of the UK degree found limited awareness of the British degree in some European countries and non-ratification of international agreements as reasons for barriers in finding employment in the country of origin after return. Similarly, Williams and Baláž (2008b) report on the considerable challenges faced by doctors returning to Slovakia to work, especially initially. These studies are of course context specific, and they are also told mainly through the voices of the returned migrants.

In short, migrants are considered to have an impact upon the development of their home countries, both in terms of the economy (Klagge and Klein-Hitpab 2010) and society (White et al. 2018). They have the potential to shape the knowledge capacity of organizations, via the influx of their non-local human capital (Trippel and Maier 2010). They are possibly more than just labour substitutes; rather they are constructive sources of knowledge, resources and networks (Williams 2006). However, as we have noted, “knowledge does not simply translate into action” (Williams, Baláž and Wallace 2004, 43) because the recognition of human capital is ultimately socially constructed. Whether their skills and competences are recognised and their potential is valorised is likely to be highly contingent and to vary across sectors, places and time periods.

### ***Transformative learning***

Although the notion of competences broadens out the understanding of skills, it does not embrace the idea that learning is a fundamental aspect of the human experience. According to

Mezirow (1990, 11), “no need is more fundamentally human than our need to understand the meaning of our experience”. Whether it occurs formally through institutions (school, workplace, firm), or informally through life experiences (society, family, relationships), learning transforms us. It changes our “behaviour, knowledge, attitudes, and beliefs” (Merriam, Mott, and Lee 1996, 1). Consequently, learning challenges self-concepts, identities and perspectives, ultimately contributing to growth, change and an enhanced state of self-awareness. Intrinsically, particular life-events can heighten the necessity for learning, or intensify the desire to make meaning or sense out of these experiences (Mezirow 1990). They represent a divergence from normative expectations, and are interpreted as *disorienting dilemmas*. Consequently, they provide rich grounds for introspection, and often necessitate some form of change as a result whether in terms of thinking, approach, or perspective.

International migration represents a significant life experience which marks an important biographical turning-point in an individual’s life. Through corporeal mobility, individuals are transplanted across geographical, cultural and social space (Musella, Nagel, Perone and Spanò 2011), which provides rich grounds for learning. Although aspects of the significance of learning in the migration context has been explored in several studies (i.e. Sjaastad 1962; Chiswick 1978), these have mostly focus on learning in terms of human capital, language and employment skills. International migration is also a catalyst for accelerated learning, including transformational experiences. However, migration contributes to learning, which is not only instrumental, in terms of professional development, but, also transformative, in terms of personal development. In the latter, learning is an experience related to identity, and a process of becoming (Wenger 1998). Transformative learning theory has been widely discussed in adult education in recent decades (Cranton 2006). It represents the seminal work of Jack Mezirow, who sought to produce a new

learning theory which explored the effects of what he termed ‘deep’ learning. His theoretical approach originated in his empirical research of women returning to work and higher education in the 1970s. He considered that transformative learning marks the transition from passive acceptance of knowledge to individual agency. More specifically, it marks the transition from perceiving the self, according to other people's expectations, towards seeking validation from within. Meaning-perspectives are transformed through a disorienting dilemma and resolved “through exposure to alternative perspectives” (Mezirow 1990, 364). Transformative learning is prompted by a state of crisis, which brings to light “how and why our assumptions constrain the way we perceive, understand, and feel about our world” (Mezirow 1991, 167). Nevertheless, transformative learning is not an automated process and should not be taken for granted in any setting, including migration. Rather, it is a learning domain that is complex, multifaceted, and “uniquely adult” (Mezirow 1981). Moreover, it is constantly shifting, and context dependent. Just as certain life events can trigger reflections, towards an expanded state of consciousness, others can have the opposite effect, resulting in growth-inhibiting outcomes and development backsliding (Merriam et al. 1996).

Reflection is an important facet of transformative learning, primarily as a tool for understanding. By applying reflection, individuals learn to compare their experiences. Consequently, it is through the process of self-reflection that individuals can deconstruct their previous meaning-perspectives, or networks of arguments (Mezirow 1990), and build more inclusive and enhanced understanding. It marks the transition from being an object of knowledge (or other’s people’s knowledge), towards becoming an agent of one’s own thinking (Mezirow 1991). Furthermore, by learning how to identify how our taken-for-granted norms “have come to constrain the way we perceive, understand, and feel about our world”, we learn how to

“reformulate these assumptions to permit a more inclusive, discriminating, permeable, and integrative perspective” (Mezirow 1990, 14). In short, Mezirow’s (1990; 1991) theory of transformative learning provides a means for understanding the international migration experience as a significant life event, triggering a state of disorientation which subsequently results in the process of learning and knowledge acquisition.

## **Methods**

Interviews were undertaken over the course of a one-year fieldwork period. Participants were approached using multiple entry points, including social media sources, such as LinkedIn, Meetups and even Facebook, non-governmental organizations, Start-up Awards, as well as governmental institutions such as the Ministry of Finance, Ministry of Economy and Ministry of Foreign Affairs. In terms of business respondents, the initial objective was to achieve a balance between domestic and international companies operating in Slovakia. However, domestically-owned Slovak businesses were generally reluctant to participate in the study, mainly because they did not have believed it was relevant to them, as they not employ any returned migrants. In contrast, many of the international multinationals were keen to discuss the importance of international migration experience.

<b>N</b>	<b>Type of company</b>	<b>Sector</b>	<b>Interviewee Job Position</b>
<b>0</b>			
<b>1</b>	MNC SK	IT	CEO
<b>2</b>	MNC USA	ICT	Manager
<b>3</b>	MNC USA	ICT	Manager
<b>4</b>	MNC USA	ICT	Manager
<b>5</b>	MNC USA	ICT	Manager
<b>6</b>	MNC USA	ICT	Manager
<b>7</b>	MNC USA	Finance	Partner
<b>8</b>	MNC USA	ICT	Manager
<b>9</b>	MNC France	Finance	Manager
<b>10</b>	MNC Germany	Retail	Manager
<b>11</b>	MNC China	ICT	Manager
<b>12</b>	SME SK	IT	CEO
<b>13</b>	SME SK	Retail	CEO
<b>14</b>	SME SK	IT	Founder
<b>15</b>	SME SK	ICT	CEO
<b>16</b>	Bank SK	Retail	Manager

**Table 1.** The list of participants: Businesses

A total of sixteen managers were interviewed, only two of whom were women. Amongst these, 11 worked for multinational corporations (MNC), one of which was Slovak owned (see Table 1). An additional five Slovak businesses were interviewed, four of which were small to medium sized enterprises, while one was a Slovak bank. Five of the 16 managers interviewed were foreign expats currently working and living in Bratislava. An additional five Slovak managers had worked, studied or lived abroad. The remaining six were categorised as Slovak stayers; individuals with no migration history. Therefore, the majority of managers interviewed (10 out of 16) had foreign experience, which is likely to be important in regards to their general enthusiasm in taking part in the study as well as their perceptions of the contribution of returned migrants. However, having international experiences, in the forms of education and or professional experience, is characteristic of senior management in such companies in Slovakia.

Although the main data we draw on in this paper are the interviews with managers, we also refer in some places to the interviews conducted with Slovakian returnees, in order to complement or illuminate the managers' views. Thirty interviews were conducted with university educated migrants (15 with women and 15 with men) who had returned to Slovakia from various European destinations. All returnees were aged under 35 at time of migration with three quarters were aged less than 25. They were also selected via multiple entry point purposive sampling, using social media sources such as Facebook, Meetups and personal contacts. The interviews with both groups took place in various locations, such as cafes, restaurants, offices and occasionally the personal homes of the respondents. All interviews followed a semi-structured interview format that employed an interview schedule. They were conducted in Slovak or English, and all were audio-recorded, transcribed and translated from Slovak into English. All interviews were anonymised and pseudonyms were used. Ethical issues were

addressed throughout the data collection process and all respondents were informed that they could withdraw from the study without giving a reason.

### **Managers' perceptions of skilled migration**

#### ***Formal skills: "The local education is simply not sufficient"***

Williams and Baláž (2008a) note that most human capital studies use education credentials as indicators of migrant skill. The same can be said for immigration and visa allocation schemes (Salt 1988). This recognises that university degrees are an important sign-post in career development. Moreover, studying abroad to obtain formal qualifications is known to be a major driver in global population movements (i.e. Findlay, King, Smith, Geddes and Skeldon 2012). Slovaks are no exception to the rule; about 14% of Slovak students study abroad (OECD 2016), being one of the highest proportions among European countries. The acquisition of formal education credentials, in the form of additional university degrees has been reported in the interviews with return migrants, several of whom had obtained Master's, MBA's, PhD's or Post-Doc experience abroad. Sofia, who returned from the UK, and is now employed as an investment trader, reflects that for her the opening up of international travel had made it possible to gain a foreign diploma. Making significant financial investments, she chose to study in the UK, citing the prestige of British universities. In fact, all the returnee respondents that attended part of their university education abroad, share a similar appreciation of international educational systems. The returnees, Rasislav and Martina, both educated in the UK, compare the educational systems

of the UK and Slovakia, and agree that their international education experience was integral to developing their critical thinking abilities:

The Slovak education system is mostly about memorising, so when you learn something, you believe it, but abroad I learned to think through everything. It was like that in school, but also in real life. When somebody tells you something, you do not accept it immediately. You think about it, you question it, you question yourself. You learn that not everything presented as a fact is necessarily true. (Rastislav, Services at IBM; Country Abroad: UK; Job Abroad: Sandwich Maker)

In Slovakia, the education system is very old fashioned. In the exam, you are expected to reproduce knowledge verbatim. There is one book per course, and you are expected to just memorise it. In England, there is a completely different approach to education. For one assignment, you are expected to read through a diversity of material, from books, to articles and newspapers and, in the end, produce a reflective essay. (Martina, Marketing Manager; Country Abroad: UK; Job Abroad: Marketing Manager)

Studying at foreign universities for the returnees was considered to have been ‘eye-opening’ and triggered critical reflection on their prior way of knowings (Mezirow 1990). While living and studying in a foreign country, they re-evaluated their learning processes and schooling systems. In contrast to simply accepting the knowledge transferred in the lecture theatre by their teachers in their home countries, while abroad – in the UK, irrespective of their discipline, students are encouraged to challenge concepts and ideas (Tzanakoua and Behleb 2017). A critique of the Slovak education, in the context of the acquisition of formal educational experiences abroad, is a recurrent theme in the interviews. All the managers perceive the Slovak educational system as



being laggard and in need of reform. Delivery of very abstract knowledge, and lack of courses on transferable skills and personal and professional development, are common topics during the interviews. As bluntly summarised by a manager, Slovakian “*are taught to sit down, shut up, and listen*”. This points to the limited development of certain skills among students, typically critical thinking and analytical skills:

Making mistakes is actually part of learning. This is the opposite of what Slovak youth are taught in school. They are not allowed to speak up, let alone asked for their feedback, impressions or concerns. The teachers continue to feed the illusion that things are either black or white. But, the reality is – that there are many shades in-between.

(10, Manager, Retail)

The tradition of monologue-based teaching has resulted in a system that is not conducive to engaging with the dynamism of the “digital” age. In addition, personal and professional development are not part of the Slovakian curriculum – an issue that is particularly surprising for the expatriate managers and those with international experience, as the following quote demonstrates:

Before I joined (company name removed), I was in Žilina, working for Kia Motors. We were trying to find qualified individuals to come and join our company, so we had a lot of interaction with the local Technical University. However, I was quiet shocked to discover that the education system did not teach the students how to write a CV, how to present themselves, how to do an interview. However, things are improving, over the course of the 12 years that I have been in the country – things have developed and changed a lot.

(5, Manager, ICT)

The findings stress a common view among the interviewees that Slovak schools do not promote the development of soft-skills, including communication abilities and critical thinking:

In Slovakia, we don't learn how to present ourselves. It was never part of the curriculum; this is a huge gap in our education system. (14, Founder/Manager, IT)

Employability skills, such as writing a CV and preparing a job application as well as transferable skills, are still uncommon at universities. However, the interviewee does note that Slovakian universities are slowly adopting to higher global standards. For decades, state socialist values were binary to the more capitalist ideals of independence, critical thought and action (Kurekova 2011). Subsequently, the individual and individualism were also suppressed. Concepts such as individual agency and civic ownership were therefore foreign until the fall of the regime and the dissolution of the Iron Curtain. International migration experiences, according to the business respondents, offers their employees a different perspective. In turn, managers acknowledge that returnees came back with a greater sense of individualism and thereby of self-agency and ownership.

Lack of university-industry engagement in Slovakia was also frequently mentioned. Our data from returnees emphasise that Slovak students appreciate being exposed to more points of view, especially in industry, and being encouraged to formulate their opinions as a result. They also celebrate the practical approach to learning, whereby individuals are not only encouraged to memorise theories, but rather to also learn from real-life case studies:

My education in Germany showed me how things can work. I was better able to compare and see the difference, to observe how certain processes don't work in Slovakia. What really frustrates me is the lack of cooperation between universities and the private sector. This was hugely unfamiliar. In Germany, we had companies on campus - like Nokia and BlackBerry - in addition to many other private sector firms. They all closely cooperated with the university.

(Miso, Tech Start-up Entrepreneur; Country Abroad: Germany; Job Abroad: Internship)

The comparison of the two educational systems in Slovakia and Germany led to a critique of the prior. This gap between practical and theoretical experience in the Slovakian education system is partially attributed to the legacy of state socialism, and the persistent social and economic disparities between East and West. These influence the types of education programs that are available in Slovakia. Poor academia-university collaboration in Slovakia points to challenges in filling particular labour shortages, as explained by one of the industry participants:

For the positions we have to hire for, we have hardly any ready to use candidates. This is one of the biggest challenges in Slovakia, but also Eastern Europe in general. For example, we are looking to hire a controller, but there are no ready to hire candidates in the local market. Not to the standard or profile of those in the UK or United States. We end up hiring bookkeepers, auditors, accountants – people with finance experience, but who do not necessary understand the control aspect of the role. There is no tradition of controlling in this country. There is no tradition for marketing in this country. Honestly speaking, I personally do not feel that much progress has been made in this respect over the past 25 years.

(10, Manager, Retail)

This comment gives insight into specific human resource gaps in Slovakia, in respect of quality management and quality control. It also reflects the fact that there is little dialogue between industry and university in Slovakia. One of the interviewees concludes that “The local education is simply not sufficient enough.” This was also a reason why many management positions in Slovakia are filled by expatriates. Interestingly, a study conducted almost two decades earlier had also pointed to similar shortages and problems with the education system: in particular, Williams and Baláž’s (2005) respondents refer to marketing skills as those gained abroad and missing from the Slovakian curricula. Continued negative perceptions of the Slovak education system led youth to search for educational opportunities elsewhere. About 14% of Slovak students study abroad, particularly for masters and doctoral degrees, with 77% those enrolled in the neighbouring Czech Republic (OECD 2016). Returnees who acquired formal or informal skills abroad, according to employers, were far better prepared for the contemporary labour market in Slovakia. Only belatedly is there some evidence of attempted changes in education policy, including a reform education policy entitled ‘Generation 3.0’, in collaboration with the US Embassy in Slovakia, which seeks to enhance lifelong learning in Slovakian schools.

***Soft skills – bringing back a positive mindset***

The transformative effects of the international experience are evident not only in the range but the depth of skills acquired by migrants abroad. Technical skills, such as market know-how and specific skills related to marketing or controlling are among the skills emphasised by the

management respondents during the interviews. However, it is not just the acquisition of hard-skills that are welcomed by management respondents. Soft-skills, such as communication-abilities, networking skills, critical thinking and independence are also recognised. Notably, self-confidence is a reoccurring key word used to describe the changed attitude of the returnees. It is related to an ability to rely on oneself, including the capacity to make decisions, as well as to believe, justify and standby those decision. Exposure to new, embedded environments, allows migrants to acquire best practices, which increases their confidence in knowledge transfer upon return. Being proactive and taking the initiative is notable among those who returned:

They are more open, flexible and willing to learn – analyzing problems for themselves without asking me all the time ‘what should I do, what should I do, what should I do?’

(5, Manager, ICT)

This new attitude materialises in the ability to be independent and take action in the workplace. Self-confidence is one of the key competences gained through an international exposure, an outcome of a successful migration, even of a short duration (Janta, Jephcote, Williams and Li, this issue). Self-confidence, emerging from international experience, is also reinforced by social recognition – friends and colleagues recognising the change. But self-confidence and learning to adapt represent more than just additional competences. Mezirow (1990, 14) stresses that transformation occurs in response to an externally imposed disorienting dilemma, and a sojourn in a different culture where new ways of doing things need to be learnt, can be a catalyst to such transformation.

The management respondents identify the value of returnees 'seeing' how things work out abroad, if only to build confidence in their ability to realise a similar vision back home. There are parallels here with innovation, and the international development literature contends that return migrants "come closest to the ideal of the 'innovator', their skills and investment behaviour are most likely to have a positive influence on their community" (Papademetriou 1991, 215). Managers echo these sentiments, believing that Slovaks coming back from abroad have the potential to become leaders, especially in an emerging market economy. In light of the desire to transition from a local to a global market, returned migrants are considered to be armed with strategic and practical human capital that can help accelerate the process. The bringers of the 'new' not only have the potential to be knowledge brokers (Johri 2008), but also to step into leadership roles as generators of new thought and possibilities. This idea is aligned with the concept of transmitting *social remittances* between countries. Specifically, new ideas, practices and objects acquired through international migration can later spill over to new workplaces, contributing to social change (Grabowska and Garapich 2016).

Regarded as a 'ground-floor' language (van Parijs 2000) in terms of its status and world language dominance, English language competence is frequently mentioned by both migrants and businesses. In Slovakia, prior to 1989, the education model reflected Soviet ideals with Russian, rather than English, being taught in schools, particularly after the 1968 Soviet-led Warsaw-Pact invasion of Czechoslovakia (Applebaum 2012). Nowadays, knowledge of international languages is directly tied to employability, at least for MNCs who export their services internationally:

Language ability is an important skill we look for, as we operate our business in English.

But, there is a big difference between people who learned English in school, versus people who have actually applied it in the field. We need people who think in English, it needs to come as second nature to them. So, if they have lived and worked abroad – they are definitely more interesting. (...) The difference is really apparent in comparison to those that learned the language from the television. You can instantly hear it in their sentence structure and vocal ticks. (15, Founder/Manager, ICT)

While migrants returned with various language skills gained abroad, the value of English was especially emphasised. Other languages such as German, Spanish, French and even Dutch are welcomed by employers, although English is considered a ground-floor language (van Parijs 2000) and a must for the MNCs operating in Slovakia. Hiring Slovaks with international experience, connections and the right English accent is a strategy that Slovak based companies, looking to pitch to global consumers, are starting to implement. Individuals with international experience and English language fluency are positioned as spokespersons to better present the product. This supports previous studies, in the CEE countries, which highlight the importance of English language skills, including business English (Williams and Baláž 2005; Klagge and Klein-Hitpab 2010). English skills are also discussed in relation to broader communication skills and intercultural skills. Exposure to a diversity of new systems, persons, and cultures is considered to facilitate the acquisition of specific communication skills that are of particular value in the Slovakian business environment:

The difference becomes especially visible in communication - Slovaks who have not lived abroad start getting very nervous when communicating with foreigners. But if you

already lived abroad – you were already forced to interact with people of different cultures in your non-native language.

(5, Manager, ICT)

They are more motivated and better prepared. Their experience abroad gives them greater exposure; they learn how to deal with different circumstances, different cultures, and different people. (6, Manager, ICT)

In the context of return to Poland, Klagge and Klein-Hitpab (2010, 1644) note that having an understanding of two or more cultures is key in removing the image of a low-trust business economy with weak institutions. Additionally, the importance of being bicultural, having the ability to understand two cultures may facilitate building one's own business subsequently: consulting companies, accounting offices, translation services and other services directed to foreign clients.

While the vast majority of management views are highly positive about the value of international experience, there are some isolated more negative comments about the benefits of international mobility. Drawing from personal experience, a manager from the retail sector notes that many East-West migrants may be tertiary educated, but are tracked into low-skilled positions as a result ethnic stigmas and the immigrant glass ceilings:

My colleague quit his job at the bank to go to Britain. He worked in a distribution centre. He returned after 6 months, and didn't even improve his English. Most of his colleagues were fellow Slovaks, Czechs and Poles.

(16, Manager, Retail)



This example illustrates that, of course, not all the experiences abroad result in skill acquisition that subsequently leads to enhanced careers after return, and stereotyping as well as discrimination continue shaping migrants' experiences in Europe (Lulle, Janta and Emilsson, this issue). As pointed out by the interviewee, working in ethnic enclaves with other co-ethnic fellows may not bring valuable experiences. In the context of the post-accession return to Poland, Grabowska (2017) noted that, indeed, non-learning and alienation are also part of the mobility experience. Yet, the cited commentary was a rare qualification and the vast majority of managers interviewed hold strong views about the value of international exposure, even for those who had worked abroad in low-skilled sectors.

### *Expanding a comfort-zone through transformative learning*

A consistent thread throughout the interviews was the association of the international experience with individual change; as tackling unfamiliar situations leads to critical reflection and transformation (Mezirow 1990). Slovaks with no international experience are characterised by many management respondents as passive, risk averse and lacking confidence, being abroad is considered to lead to increased creativity, risk-taking and self-confidence:

You start to think more outside of the box. When you experience life outside – it changes your thinking – you begin to approach problems in more innovative ways. When our people return, they bring back these trends, in addition to their new skills and confidence.  
(4, Manager, ICT)

As the Slovak economy becomes more knowledge complex, so does the need for dynamic workers. A HR manager, who has been with an ICT company for over a decade, describes how she perceives the difference between employees with and without international experience:

When we interview them, we are able to just see that they have been abroad. It does not need to be in the western country. It might be an eastern one as well. It does not matter. The point is that as soon as a person crosses the borders of his small town, he changes - and we can see it. It opens his eyes, it broadens his horizons. (...) After interviewing hundreds of people, I can just see it. I am not a psychologist, but I can see that a person who studied or worked abroad just behaves differently. It is a signpost that he knows how to take care of himself – how to organise his life; he travelled and had to depend on himself. How to put it? His speech is different; he just presents himself differently than someone who has never been abroad. (3, Manager, ICT)

Mezirow (1990) links that change to a process of identity shedding, whereby individuals are prompted - through a disorienting dilemma - to question their normative beliefs thereby acquiring greater self-knowledge (Habermas 1984). A process of transformative learning catalysed first and foremost, by a disorienting migration experience, contributes to the expansion of one's comfort-zone, according to the business informants. These trigger a form of acute learning that may otherwise remain dormant – if they are not prompted, as illustrated in the excerpts below:

They have been thrust into different environments and had to sink or swim, as a matter of survival. This experience gives them more confidence; in general they feel more comfortable in their own skin. As a result, they can adapt and work through situations that may have paralysed them before. (15, Founder/Manager, ICT)

When you go abroad and start your life from scratch. You develop your personality – you become stronger. When I see this kind of experience on a CV, it demonstrates to me – that they have an ability and willingness to learn. (9, Manager, Finance)

Living in an unfamiliar environment challenges accumulated normative beliefs, causing a degree of disorientation. Exposure to a new culture, language, and institutional system can trigger the need for adaption, and sense-making. The expansion of an individual's comfort zone occurs when individuals are able to rise to the challenge and overcome their fears (Luckner and Nadler 1997), or in other words, adapt to the new circumstance. When Slovaks go abroad and return, they may bring with them new worldviews, languages, networks, and capital - in addition to competences and skills that are highly competitive in the Slovak labour market. This is the outcome of more than the acquisition of new skills and competences, rather it is also informed by their transformative learning experiences, acquired through questioning own identity and known stereotypes (Mezirow 1990). As a result, they are better able to position themselves in a global - and not only a local paradigm of existence - integrating a world-scope into their outlooks and into the domestic labor market. It is evident that international exposure and experience is an essential ingredient in how Slovakia is being integrated into global structures, and alleviating socio-cultural cleavages resulting from the legacy of 40+ years of state socialism.

## **Conclusions**

This paper makes two main theoretical contributions to the literature on knowledge transfer and sharing through the process of migration and return. It contends that migration is not only an opportunity for acquiring additional competences, but also for transformative learning. In other words, while Williams and Baláž (2005) see the acquisition of self-confidence or ability to adjust to different cultures as widening the range of competences acquired by individual migrants, the notion of transformative learning sees this as a fundamental deepening in capacities and perspectives. An international sojourn becomes an arena for transformational learning, in which prior ways of understanding are transformed, and new perspectives are acquired (Mezirow 1990). Migration can be a disorienting dilemma, leading to reflection and the question of normative beliefs and acquisition of greater self-knowledge (Mezirow 1990; Habermas 1984), but this is neither automatic or universal.

The other major conceptual contribution of the paper is to emphasise the relational nature of transformational learning and knowledge: neither exists in a social vacuum. Transformational learning does require affirmation from significant others such as close friends or, as in this study, from employers. Similarly, knowledge is only effectively shared and valued when it is recognised. While this argument has been previously advanced (Williams 2006), it has tended to be construed in terms of barriers, whereas this paper contends that in particularly circumstances – where those in positions of power are themselves international migrants – it can be facilitator. More specifically, our study points to five main findings.

Firstly, formal qualifications gained abroad are seen as valuable, particularly, in comparison to the local educational system; the Slovak education system and universities are assessed as being in need of reform and curriculum improvement, and as lacking in creativity and student led learning. Many managers recognise the value of transferable skills learnt at prestigious European universities, as significant elements in graduates' portfolios. Secondly, the managers appreciated that returnees do not only have market know-how and business intelligence, but also specific soft skills and enhanced self-knowledge. Contingent effects are important here: although competencies such as communication, critical thinking and creativity may be sought after in most workplace, they are in particularly short supply in the transition economies of Central and Eastern Europe (Teich et al. 2011).

Thirdly, a disorienting migration experience, contributes to the expansion of an individual's comfort-zone, triggers critical reflection and finally, leads to transformative learning (Mezirow 1990). The transformative learning has implications beyond the individual returned migrants. Many managers consider there are positive spillovers from returned migration, as the returnees are helping to raise Slovakia's overall business consciousness, especially by encouraging more global thinking or awareness in the local, non-migrant population. In other words, the acquisition of knowledge and transformative learning experiences have the potential to transition beyond the confines of the firm or the industry, and spill over into the labour market and society more generally (Williams and Baláž 2008a). Returning migrants help to empower other people through their own personal stories, sharing with the locals not only their professional knowledge but also their personal and transformative learning.

Fourthly, it is well documented that "expatriates are often used to set up operations, transfer knowledge and train local managers" (Harzing 2002, 221). Bratislava has a small but

burgeoning foreign ex-pat community (Durianova 2006) and part of their role is to recruit local managers. The research findings suggest that the attraction of Slovak professionals from abroad, or amongst the returned migrants, is viewed as an important strategy, especially by international businesses. In many ways, returnees are well positioned to execute jobs with a strongly international dimension, which is why - given Slovakia's very open economy - returning internationals are seen as being able to help drive economic development. The extent to which this is durable or characteristic of a particular stage of economic transformation is uncertain. This research focused on employers as well as returnees and the value of international experience, knowledge transfer and global skills. Our findings suggest that international mobility is highly valued and accommodated by many firms in Slovakia, yet we acknowledge that smaller and less internationalised firms in Bratislava may have less positive perceptions of employing returnees. This is potentially a reason for lack of interest or willingness to take part in the study, despite the numerous attempts in contacting the firms. Moreover, we have noted, that some local employers in Bratislava did not agree to participate in this research and their attitudes may have been different. Other studies conducted in the context of late transition economies have reported barriers that returnees face when applying for jobs; including a lack of relevant social networks and employers' distrust of foreign qualification (i.e. Barcevičius 2016). In contrast, this study found that many migrants who returned to Slovakia secured relatively privileged positions after their return where their skills are valued, often by returned migrant managers.

The research indicates that, at least in Bratislava in this particular time period and in the multinational sector, the relational nature of their knowledge is highly important. As van der Heijden (2002, 565) comments, "expertise can only exist by virtue of being respected by knowledgeable people in the organization". This is often seen as a barrier for migrants (Williams

2006) because cultural differences are an obstacle to the creation of shared knowledge (Taylor and Osland 2003, 213). However, in this case although many of the managers and migrants have different national identities, which could engender lack of recognition of their knowledge and experience, they share another identity – that of having international experiences. Indeed, they seem to benefit from the desire of many international organizations “to create an affirming work climate for an increasingly multicultural workforce” (Chrobot-Mason and Thomas 2002, 323–24). The managers are predisposed to identifying with and valuing the experiences of returned migrants. Therefore, at least in the case of Bratislava and the recruitment practices of the multinationals, there is evidence of the emergence of a self-perpetuating high-skilled migrant recruitment system, whereby those with international experience and exposure seek out employees with a similar skillset and mindset.

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