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Role of cultural sensitivity on creativity of academic expatriates: The moderating effect of culture

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Call it international assignment; expatriation or working in foreign country, new century is the herald of international movement of work force. Beside the conventional characteristics of an employee such as technical competence, know how, expertise and willingness to contribute to the organizational performance, an expatriate is assumed to be more creative and sensitive to cultural diversification. Accordingly, the proposed study with 62 academic expatriates from Turkey and USA, presents a positive relation between intercultural sensitivity and perceived creativity of academic expatriates and relation gets stronger for USA Academician's who are employed by Turkish universities.

Key words: Academic expatriates, creativity, cultural sensitivity and culture.

INTRODUCTION

Today globalization fastens the transfer of not only the products and services among nations, but also, the intangible factors of production like know-how and expertise (Aycan et al., 2007). This transfer makes it a necessity to have a workforce that is confident in international arena, therefore, today majority of medium and large sized companies send their professionals' abroad and many of them plan to boost their number of expatriates (Selmer, 2004). Expatriates "non citizens of a country in which they are working" started to play an important role in the international business activities of most companies (Gregersen and Black, 1996; Antal, 2000; Daniels, Radebaugh and Sullivan, 2004). Thus, today; an overseas experience has become a significant step in career plans of individuals as well as the competitive advantage of a company and continuous development (Stahl et al., 2008). There are several reasons for this international movement such as increased number of joint ventures, reduction of

resources in local markets, export strategies of some countries, easy transfer of factors of production among nations, growth in direct foreign investment and increased rate of unemployment (Peterson et al., 1996). Regardless of the hidden motive of the international assignment for both organizations and expatriates: - transferring of technology, expanding a business, a volunteer career development tool or all- success of an expatriate has become critical for today's cost cutting and profit seeking multinationals as well as service

organizations like universities (McNulty and Tharenou, 2004; Stahl et al., 2008). While, an international assignment is mostly attributed to "management and employee level expatriation", "volunteer career development" motive refers to a self-governing sought of an international experience (Richardson and McKenna, 2002; Hudson and Inkson, 2006).

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

A thorough review of expatriate and international assignment literature concluded that the studies are

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focused on fundamental issues such as; management, selection and training of expatriates,(Gregersen and Black, 1996; Selmer and Luk 1995; Beck, 1988; Peterson et al., 1996; Castillo, 2006; Stone, 1991; Naumann,1992; Ones and Viswervaran, 1999; Bennet and Colquhaun, 2000; Hutchings, 2002; Selmer, 2004; Graf and Harland, 2005; Tye and Chen, 2005; Inkson et al., 1997), cultural adaptation during an overseas experience (Vance and Paderson, 1993; Aycan et al., 2000; Aycan et al., 2007; Stahl, 2000; Jun et al, 2001; Hutchings 2002; Oudenhoven et al , 2003;Ang et al., 2007), the impact of family and spouse for the continuity and success of an international experience (Caligiuri, 2000; Johnson et al., 2003; Huang et al, 2005; Swagler and Jome, 2005), personality of an expatriate (Harvey, 1997; Shaffer and Joplin, 2001) and various integrated models regarding the antecedent and consequences of an international assignment (Black et al., 1991; Aycan, 1997; Tung,1998). Whatever the core subject of an expatriate research - such as selection, training, performance, job satisfaction, degree of adaptation- "culture" is traced as a sub theme in most of the papers (Black et al., 1991; Vance and Paderson, 1993; Gregersen and Black, 1996; Aycan, 1997; Peterson et al., 1996; Tung,1998; Aycan et al., 2000, 2007; Stahl, 2000; Jun et al., 2001; Hutchings 2002; Oudenhoven et al., 2003; Ang et al., 2007). One of the major problems of an international assignment is adaptation to a new culture where isolation can trigger decreased efficiency, job satisfaction, motivation and performance (Aycan et al., 2000, 2007). So, movement of workforce across border conceives the necessity of intercultural effectiveness and cross-cultural adaptation where "intercultural sensitivity" referred as the key competence for living and working together effectively with people from different cultures (Zhao, 2002). Drawbacks of alienation from host country can be so appealing that either the expatriate or host company, may request an early termination of the expatriation before the official due date of assignment (Beck, 1988). Beside various determinants of an effective international assignment such as cultural adaptation, technical competence, training, selection and planning process, there is a growing tendency toward the importance of "creativity" for global success in international work environment (Harvey and Novicevic, 2002). In his study, Tung (1998a, p.30) has emphasized the significance of creativity as "In the light of the multiple environments indicated above, it is very important that the expatriate be flexible, resourceful, creativity. Creativity is needed because in a rapidly changing environment, the expatriate often has to venture into uncharted territories." In spite of the incremental importance of creativity in multinational domains creativity has taken very little attention in expatriate literature (Agor, 1990; Tung, 1998a; Eisenberg, 1999; Harvey and Novicevic, 2002). Other than theme polarization of expatriate literature around- management,

selection, training, orientation to new culture and personality of expatriates- majority of the studies consider corporate managers or employees as principles of international assignment. However, progressing to teach, learn and doing business can be traced back to movement of "Athens Sophist" of second half of 5th century BC -all over the Greek speaking world- for spreading around the ideas across "political" and "geographical boundaries" (Welch, 1997:325). Not surprisingly, in the present century, university education also receives its bit from the globalization breeze, thus, today majority of the universities turn out to be international service organizations as a result of strategic partnerships where both students and academicians are circulating between universities of various countries (Richardson and McKenna, 2002). These connections and developed network among universities generate oversees opportunities for both students and academicians all around the world in different universities (Welch, 1997; Richardson and McKenna, 2002; 2006). Regardless of these developments among education institutions academic expatriates, who are classified as "self directed expatriates" by Richardson and McKenna (2006) with their own special expertise have taken very little attention of the expatriate literature. So the rapid shift of world toward a global village-trough economic integration, evaluation of technology, ease of constituting a network and release of domestic markets from obstructions against international trade (Harvey and Novicevic, 2002) - affiliates new concept to the business vocabulary as expatriates and cultural sensitivity arouse the importance of others such as creativity, which is as old as the history of humanity. We compose the underlying structure of our study, depending on the extensive literature about both the importance of "international assignment" in individuals' career developments and growing moment of employee creativity and cultural adaptation in today's global work environment (Tung, 1998a; 1998b; Aycan, 1997; Aycan et al., 2000, 2007; Zhao, 2002; Selmer, 2004).

THE MODEL

International assignment became the essential part of career development by 1990s where "global integration" beside "local representativeness" is the key point (Tung, 1998b). Adjustment to host country during international assignment has been divided into two major undergrowths as; "Anticipatory Adjustment" (the individual factors such as experience and organizational factors such as selection) and "in-country adjustment" (the individual factors such as personality, organizational factors such as socialization, job related factors such as organizational culture and non work factors such as cultural novelty) (Black et al., 1991:303). At this point the

efficiency and continuity of international assignment turn out to be a conditional consequence of fit between expatriate's home country culture and host country culture in both work and non work areas (Aycan, 1997).

While some companies highly rely on the expertise, technical and managerial competence of the selected expatriate others believe in the importance of adaptive characteristics of the selected staff when entering a new culture such as; self confidence, flexibility, tolerance, cognitive skills and acceptance of the expatriate by host country colleagues and friends which help him to expand good relations with the host society (Daniels et al., 2004).

CULTURAL SENSITIVITY AND CREATIVITY

"Intercultural sensitivity" is the consequent contribution of the globalization which started to change the phase of organizations by the late 1900s to the academic literature after "expatriates" (Bennet, 1993; Chen and Starosta, 2000). By adapting the early definition of the concept Chen and Starosta (2000:5) redefined the term intercultural sensitivity as: "intercultural sensitive people are able to reach the level of dual identity and enjoy the differences and attempting to defend their own world views, and moving to emphatic ability to accept and adapt cultural difference". So the optimistic self-concept, being confidence, open-mindness, nonjudgmental, social relaxation and openness to experience are the major personal attributes of intercultural sensitivity (Chen and Starosta, 1998; Zhao, 2002). Adaptation to the culture of host country is only a step in this game beside, an expatriate should avoid judging culturally different people negatively, be aware of their own culture, overcome the idea that his/her beliefs are universal and learn to control ethnocentrism (Varner and Palmer, 2005). Creativity refers to the ability of contrary thinking by which individual produces novel ideas that have been projected for the sake of the employer (Tierney and Farmer, 2002). Agor (1990) stated that creative superiority of expatriates increases their penetration and interpretation of similarities and dissimilarities between local and international units. Among the very few studies about creativity of expatriates, Eisenberg (1999) indicated that all other variables being equal, the creative performance of expatriates boost when there is a similarity between motivation factors like rewards and cultural values. Expatriates, who perceived themselves as creative, are tend to pay more attention to details of competitive global environment letting them to recognize and integrate the similarities between two systems such as host and home country culture (Harvey and Novicevic, 2002). A recent study indicated that working abroad increases the degree of creativity such that effort of adapting to a new culture creates a "psychological transformation" (Galinsky and Maddux, 2009). Furthermore, Bennet (1993) argued that

cultural fit is an integral part of intercultural sensitivity and emphasized that individuals with high intercultural sensitivity are ready to recognize different cultural aspects which yield to an increase in efficiency of international assignment. Depending on the relevant literature about international assignment, the effects of cultural sensitivity during international assignments and the raising importance of creativity among expatriates, we proposed the following hypothesis:

Hypothesis 1: The degree of intercultural sensitivity is positively related with the perceived creativity of expatriates.

MODERATING ROLE OF COUNTRY COMPARISON OF CULTURES

Before the increased demand for globalization and liberalization of business environment, majority of the studies were done in Western cultural context. However today interference of various cultures on both business and social domains encourages willingness to better understand different cultural variables and increases the need for culture-fit studies (Aycan et al., 2000). Challenges of an international assignment -apart from poor career and reentry planning- can be revealed by differences such as governance of work related issues, intra and/or inter organizational communication patterns and life styles between home and host country cultures (Stahl, 2000).

Culture is defined as the "collective programming of the mind which distinguishes the members of one human group from another", where it includes the systems of values and these values are among the building blocks of culture (Hofstede, 1980:21). Thus, the word culture is rather related to the human made face of the world which is constructed by the collective mind of individuals due to long years of living, communicating and perceiving together (Hofstede, 1980). According to Hofstede's (1980,1997), most cited categorization of national cultures, an academic expatriate can be a citizen of a country where long term orientation is preferred, power distance is high(low), uncertainty avoidance is strong(weak),individualism is preferred or masculinity is the dominant value. Among these dimensions the effects of "individualism and collectivism" on various aspects of international assignees has became subject for various cross - cultural studies such as creativity (Eisenberg, 1999), acculturation (Gomez, 2003), organizational commitment (Wasti, 2003) and perception (Hofstede, 1997). Such that in individualistic cultures individual success is valued more than the efficiency of group (Triandis, 1989), self is the core in group relations (Markus and Kitayama, 1991) however in collectivist cultures main concern is given to the collective interest of

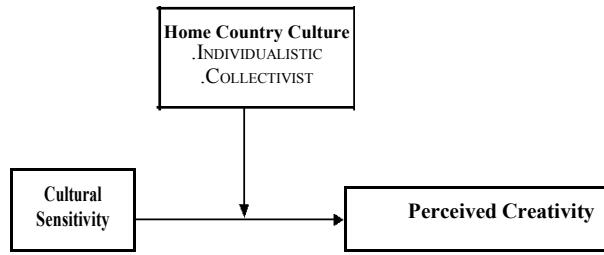


Figure 1. Hypothesized relationships.

minds (Hofstede, 1997). For employees of individualistic cultures accomplishment of a job related task is more important than "social relations" where as for collectivists socialization between individuals may sometimes exceed the motivation toward work related patterns (Kim et al., 1994).

Richardson and McKenna (2002;2006) has studied the overseas experience of academic expatriates and their basic motivation for an international assignment by conducting in-depth interviews with 30 academic expatriates studying in different universities in New Zealand, Singapore, Turkey and United States. The study indicates that discovering new cultures (majority of interviews consider this as an "amazing venture"), personal accomplishment and growth and positive contribution of "international experience" to their careers were among the major motives to go for an overseas experience. The systematic analysis of in depth interviews of the lateral study of scholars interpreted that, when there is a cultural-fit as a result of accepting the differences between home and host country cultures, the expatriates' life become more satisfactory and qualified (Richardson and McKenna, 2006). Based on these studies about the effect of culture during international assignment we proposed the following hypothesis:

Hypothesis 2: Home country culture moderates the relationship between the intercultural sensitivity and perceived creativity of expatriates such that the relationship is stronger when the individual is coming from an individualistic culture.

Based on the reviewed literature and hypotheses developed above, research model of the current study is developed as in Figure 1.

METHODOLOGY

Data and sample

In order to test our hypothesis, we targeted to collect data from academicians who took a position in a university other than their

home country. Although, both the definition and duration of an international assignment is altering, the term "expatriate" mostly corresponds to the employee of a multinational who took a position other than his/her home country (Gregersen and Black, 1996; Antal, 2000; Daniels et al., 2004). Therefore, we state a condition in the explanation part of our questionnaire as "Please answer the questions according to your last international experience which lasts for more than 6 months" and include a question asking the tenure of their international assignment in host country in the "demographic part" of the questionnaires.

All the questions in the survey except the demographic ones are evaluated on a five point Likert type scale, where "5" demonstrated strongly agreement and "1" strongly disagreement. The original - "English" -version of the scales are used in the questionnaire assuming that working as an academician in a foreign country (USA in our sample) requires being a bilingual speaker of English and Turkish for Turkish academicians in our sample. The snowball sampling is used to reach academician both in Turkey and USA. The respondents were required to fill the questionnaires via internet (<http://spreadsheets.google.com>) and hand. The data were collected between May - August 2009. In order to evaluate the moderating effect of country cultures (individualistic versus collectivist) we implicate the responds of academic expatriates who define their home and host country as either USA or Turkey. Thus, we end up with a "sample of 62 academic expatriates" who's either a USA or Turkish citizen of origin and study in either Turkey (for USA citizen) or USA (for Turkish citizens) during their international experience. Table 1 demonstrates the basic descriptive and frequency distribution of the sample.

Measures

Perceived creativity is measured with "Creative Self Efficacy" scale developed by Tierney and Farmer (2002) which is composed of six questions such as "we feel that we are good at generating novel items". A 24-itemed full version of "Intercultural Sensitivity Scale" developed by Chen and Starosta (2000) is used to measure the "cultural sensitivity" of responds; scale includes questions such as "we enjoy interacting with people from different cultures". To evaluate the moderating effect of country culture on the relation between intercultural sensitivity and creativity, a dummy variable is defined for nationality of respondents where "1" corresponds to Turkish Citizens (Collectivist Culture) and "0" to USA citizen (Individualistic Culture).

Analysis

Descriptive statistics and correlations among all study variables are

reported in Table 2. We conducted hierarchical regression analysis to test our hypothesis, in which the "intercultural sensitivity" was entered into the equation predicting perceived creativity of academic expatriates in the first step, and dummy coded "home country" variables in the second step, and the interaction terms "Intercultural Sensitivity X Home Country" in the last step.

In Model 1 the results indicated that intercultural sensitivity of academic expatriates significantly and positively predicted perceived creativity of academic expatriates ($b = .36$, $R^2 = .13$, $p < .01$). Following this in Model 2, no main effect for home country culture is predicted; ($b = .105$, $R^2 = .13$, $p = .39$) thus, creativity is not higher among Turkish academic expatriates than American colleagues. Finally, in Model 3, we entered the interaction of intercultural sensitivity and home-country to the equation in order to determine the moderating effect of home country culture. The results presented that interaction of the two variables significantly increase the variance explained ($R^2 = .09$, $p < .01$). The statistical interpretations of the results are presented in Table 3.

The interpretation of beta coefficient for a dummy variable is different. When using a dummy variable such as "home country comparison" in our sample, the beta coefficient is demonstrating how much more the relation between dependent variable (creativity) and independent variable (intercultural sensitivity) strengthens (or declines if beta is negative) when the dummy variable increases one unit (thus, shifting from 0 = USA Citizen to 1

= Turkish Citizen). Thus, the result presented in Table 3 supports our hypothesis by saying that the relation between intercultural sensitivity and creativity is improved when the subjects are USA academicians (0 = USA) in Turkey. In other words, one unit increase in cultural sensitivity of USA academic in Turkey creates a similar or accelerating effect in their perceived creativity, but the same increase in cultural sensitivity of Turkish academician (when dummy variable increases one unit 1 = Turkish) in USA yields to a decreasing increase in their perceived creativity (representing the negative beta coefficient).

Mentioned effect of the moderator is presented in Figure 2 which is drawn by plotting the low, medium and high points from the regression equation (where ICS= Intercultural Sensitivity, and HCC= Home Country Comparison).

FINDINGS

The aim of the study was to explore whether perceived creativity is positively affected by the level of intercultural sensitivity of academic expatriates and whether or not country culture comparison has a moderating effect on this relation. The results of SPSS analysis presented that academic expatriates with high intercultural sensitivity perceived themselves more creative than the ones with low intercultural sensitivity.

Following this we enter home country culture to regression equation and result support our H2 interpreting that academic expatriates with high intercultural sensitivity and coming from an individualistic culture (USA citizens) and studying in a collectivist culture (Turkey) perceive themselves more creative than their collectivist colleagues (Turkish citizens) in USA(Individualistic culture). Our results are collinear with Chatman's research (Chatman et al., 1998) where the results interpret that perceived creativity is increasing in collectivist cultures, but decreasing in individualistic

cultures. Academic with high intercultural sensitivity can develop better communication channels with culturally diverse workforce. Furthermore these well developed communication channels can supply the holder with assorted information for creative thinking in collectivist culture where flow of information through participation is encouraged. As a result, an individualistic in a collectivist culture, where ideas are worth for collective performance and not turnout to competition tools, can easily and not surprisingly perceive self creative. However, the positive relation between intercultural sensitivity and perceived creativity is not improved for a collectivist in an individualistic culture.

This is most probably because a collectivist, who used to work and think with a sharer perspective, feels uncomfortable and reluctant in an organizational environment where personal achievements are encouraged. Consequently, regardless of the excitement of interacting with new cultures; an academic expatriate in an individualistic culture does not feel that this experience contribute additional perspectives to his/her creative capacity.

DISCUSSION

There is a continuous interplay between organizational and national culture about the way work is conducted at organizational levels (Hofstede, 1980; Aycan et al., 2000). So the expatriates, who understand the social-cultural environment of the host country, will move one step forward in understanding the culture of the host company. For example in individualistic cultures; organizations focus on rewarding individual contributions, where in collectivists cultures; shared objectives, common interests, interdependence and communication is valued (Chatman et al; 1998). Such demographic compositions may affect employee performance, creativity, motivation turnover intentions and any other job related outcomes. Among these "creativity" is more tangible and employee specific resource of organizations, lack of which, may retain multinationals from keeping in touch with technological changes and development in related industries.

In individualistic cultures people may feel more reluctant to share their novel ideas due to lack of trust, fear of deceiving the reward of its results or/and even apprehension of missing the promotion opportunity tied to that creative outcome (Chatman et al., 1998). Contradicting with this, in collectivist culture, where common fate and interdependence, hence, the "organizational membership" is the core value, people may feel free to share their novel ideas just with the motive to contribute to the success of the organization (Hofstede, 1997; Chatman et al., 1998).

In their research Chatman and his colleagues argued

Table 1. Demographic distribution of sample.

Variable	Mean (N = 62)	Frequency distribution (N = 62)
Age	41	
Tenure	12	
Period international experience	10	
Gender	-	
Female		25
Male		36
Missing		1
Home country	-	
Turkey		33
USA		29
Missing		0

Table 2. Means, standard deviations and correlation among study variables.

Key variables	N	M	SD	1	2	3
Intercultural sensitivity	62	4.04	.34	-		
Creativity	61	4.30	.44	.363**	-	
Home country	62	-	-	-.056	.085	-

** p < .01.

Table 3. Hierachal regression analysis with creativity as the dependent variable (n = 61).

Steps and variables	Model 1		Model 2		Model 3	
	Beta	t-value	Beta	t-value	Beta	t-value
Intercultural sensitivity	0.363**	3.017	0.369	3.055	0.795	3.987
Home country			0.105	.873	3.907	2.682
Intercultural sensitivity *					-3.813**	-2.618
Home country comparison						
R ²	0.13		0.14		0.23	
R ²			0.01		0.09**	

** p < .01.

that self reported creativity in other words “perceived creativity” is increasing in diverse environments where required information and know-how variety is sustained. So, academic expatriates who also contribute to the diversity of universities can maximize their creative capacity where diversification and novel ideas are highly supported and welcomed. However, one should keep in mind that an academic expatriate, who studies in a foreign university should shed oneself from preconceptions about different cultures and allow himself to frame the value schemes of the host society. This

cognitive adaptation, which is defined as high intercultural sensitivity by Bennet (1993), will permit international assignee to judge the behaviour of others according to cultural values of the host country, rather than country of his origin. In conclusion; expatriates in host country with high intercultural sensitivity will feel more in cahoots, relative and compatible with diverse colleagues and established accommodating work environment will foster the sharing of novel ideas and increase self reported creativity.

Although, the globalization breeze is considered as the

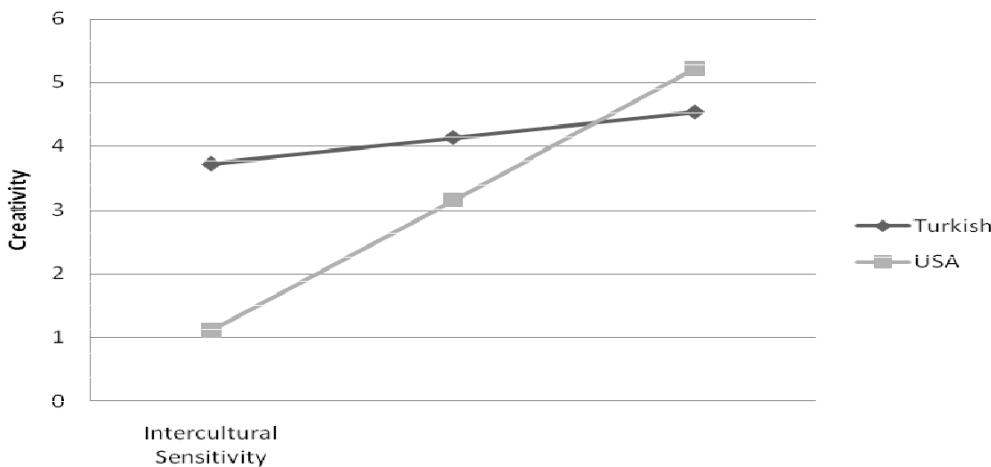


Figure 2. The interpretation of moderating effect of HCC on relation between ICS and creativity.

most cited subject of expatriation, recent economic crisis also triggers the pursuit of career opportunities in international arena. Today, not only employees of multinationals are rotating around different branches of home organization, but also, volunteer individuals are favouring positions in companies located outside the borders of their home country. Increasing rate of unemployment, individual development, limited opportunities among home country institutions and even the motive of venture may be the examples for rising popularity of "self-directed international assignment". Universities consequently the academicians, are among the most valuable assets of countries and they are also the ones who are frequently defined as "volunteer expatriates".

Thus, today, not only the multinationals should advance their skills of managing diverse groups, but also, universities should generate universal codes of management for their future success. Initial step in this construction is decoding the life and work related attitudes of those labeled as "diverse groups". The organizations that appreciate the cultural differences of diverse work force and create a supportive environment for both local and international employees can help the career development of their work force. The importance of understanding the cultural differences among diverse workforce, judging the due results of these differences without prejudice and even encouraging this diversity for creativity will probably be the leading competitive advantage of today's global village.

LIMITATIONS AND FURTHER RESEARCH

Despite our persistent mails, we could not manage to send our survey to the academicians in the mailing list of

"Turkish American Scientists and Scholars Association – TASSA". So, we have to check out the web pages of popular universities in Turkey and USA and send our survey to the related respondents. This method was very time consuming and it prevents us from increasing the size of our sample. However, despite the small sample size of our study, Cronbach alphas indicate that the reliability of our scales are high (78% for Intercultural Sensitivity and 77% for "Creativity").

Supported hypothesis and gaps in the relevant literature show that the relation between creativity, adaptation to country/organization culture and expatriates is a merit subject for further studies. The model of the study can be expanded with variables such as job satisfaction, perceived career development and intention to quit the international assignment suggesting that lack of cultural adaptation may decrease job satisfaction and perceived career development and increase intention to return to home country.

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