

Impact of Work-based Support Sources on Repatriation Adjustment of Academics of State Universities in Sri Lanka

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates the impact of work-related support sources (Perceived Organisational Support (POS), Perceived Supervisor Support (PSS), and Perceived Co-worker Support (PCS)) on the Repatriation Adjustment (RA) of academics in Sri Lankan state universities. The sample includes academic staff from state universities who returned to their home universities in Sri Lanka upon completing postgraduate studies overseas. Cross-sectional data were collected using a questionnaire developed using well-accepted, standard measures for each variable. Results indicate that PSS significantly impacts the RA of these academics. However, POS and PCS do not significantly affect RA. The findings of the study provide implications for state-funded universities in managing RA by signifying the facilitating role of respective Heads of Departments in supporting RA. The study further expands the current discussion on RA of academics in a developing country context at a time when many such nations are struggling due to the brain drain of academics.

Keywords: Academics, Perceived Organisational Support (POS), Perceived Supervisor Support (PSS), Perceived Co-worker Support (PCS), Repatriation Adjustment (RA), State universities

Word count:

Title: 16 words

Abstract: 149 words

Keywords: 06 words

Body: 2654 (excluding tables and end text references)

Professionals, including academics, travel abroad for work-related developmental requirements such as training, higher education, and learning. Universities around the world extensively encourage and motivate their academics to pursue educational and development opportunities abroad; thus, a majority of academics from the global south countries go to the global north for education and training. Out of the professional groups who travel abroad for their self-development, only very limited research has been undertaken on academics who go overseas for postgraduate studies, expecting to gain international exposure and develop their career prospects (Robison, 2016; Gunawardena & Nawaratne, 2017). In this study, in line with prior similar studies (e.g., James & Azungah, 2019; James, 2018; Przytula, 2024), we refer to that category of academics as academic expatriates. The most common form of travel for development by academics includes going abroad to high-ranked, reputable universities to pursue a Doctor of Philosophy (PhD) degree, which often requires temporarily residing in that country for nearly three to five years. During that stay, the academics get acclimatised to those countries, and as a result, there is a tendency for these academics to get lucrative opportunities in those countries (Khan, 2021). Opportunities they get often include absorbing them into tenure-track positions at foreign universities. Despite these kinds of greener pastures available abroad, a considerable percentage of academics return home, but then again, resign and go back to those foreign countries due to the inability to adjust back to their home country and work setting. This is caused by different conditions at the personal, work, and national levels (Gunawardena & Nawaratne, 2017). Hence, this inability to adjust back to their home country setting by the academics has been a major cause related to their intentions to resign and leave for foreign countries. International Human Resource Management (IHRM) literature identifies this as a failure in repatriation adjustment.

Repatriation adjustment is the process of readjusting into the home country context, having stayed overseas for a significant period (Adler, 1981). Prior researchers have found that repatriation adjustment is influenced by several personal and organizational factors, such as cultural discrepancies between the foreign work setting and the home country work setting (Black, 1992; Mehreen et al., 2025), time passed upon repatriation (Robinson, 2016), social status (Suutari & Välimaa, 2002), re-entry guidance, appreciation of international experience, perceived discrimination (Černigoj et al., 2024) and organizational support (James & Azungah, 2020). Among these factors, work-related support sources are believed to significantly impact repatriation adjustment (Breitenmoser & Bader, 2021; Suutari & Brewster, 2003).

During the repatriation adjustment process, work-related support sources, also referred to as internal social support in certain literature (e.g., Li et al., 2022), are essential to

maximizing individuals' contributions to the organization and guaranteeing successful reintegration (James, 2021; Suutari & Brewster, 2003). Lazarova and Caligiuri (2001) explored the role of organizational support practices in retaining repatriated employees and emphasized the importance of supportive human resource practices to facilitate successful repatriation and reduce turnover intentions. Prominent researchers have stated that relocating even to one's home country creates a considerable level of uncertainty and that people generally need to reduce uncertainty to a comfortable level to adjust to the setting after a considerable period of being away (Black & Mendenhall, 1990; Lofquist & Dawis, 1984; Nicholson, 1984; Torbiorn, 1982). Further, these researchers have highlighted that the lack of support from supervisors and organizations during their stay abroad (Kudo et al., 2024) as well as upon return is a major reason for repatriating employees to leave their home country and the organization (Oddou et al., 2009). Oddou et al. (2009) have further emphasized the importance of handling repatriating employees carefully for the benefit of the organization by assisting with their adjustment, inspiring them to participate in their jobs, and by giving them opportunities to contribute their experience.

Robison (2016) has found that academics in Sri Lanka who have earned international experience by studying and working in foreign universities and research institutions have faced similar difficulties in adjustment upon repatriation, similar to corporate expatriates who return home. Thus, this research context of repatriating academics of state universities is an important field of research in HRM (James, 2018). A successful repatriation adjustment process may considerably impact the intention of these academics to stay while contributing to institutional growth in the academic context of Sri Lanka. Moreover, the successful repatriation adjustment process may positively support minimising the migration of academics of state universities with the current economic condition in Sri Lanka and the South Asian region. For instance, Gunawardena and Nawaratne (2017) have found that Sri Lankan university academics who had completed their Ph. D.s, from 1990 to 2012, had resigned and migrated during the mid-repatriation adjustment process, which is an alarming concern regarding the quality of the services provided by the higher education institutes. Such labour market conditions have caused state universities in Sri Lanka to suffer extensively due to the shortage of talented academics, as they find it challenging to maintain the high-quality service they used to provide. This study, therefore, aims to investigate the impact of work-related support sources, namely, Perceived Organisational Support (POS), Perceived Supervisor Support (PSS), and Perceived Co-worker Support (PCS), on the repatriation adjustment process of academics in Sri Lankan universities.

THEORIES AND HYPOTHESES DEVELOPMENT

Perceived Organisational Support (POS) and Repatriation Adjustment

Organisational Support Theory (OST) (Eisenberger et al., 1986), rooted in the Social Exchange Theory (SET) (Zhao et al., 2020), is used in this paper to establish the relationship between POS and the repatriation adjustment of academics. OST suggests that POS, which is the perception developed by employees of how much their organisation values their contributions and cares about their well-being (Eisenberger et al., 1986), influences employees' sense of obligation to give back to the organisation and their emotional commitment to it. POS indicates that an employee values the feeling of assurance that aid will be available from the organisation when needed to carry out one's job effectively and to deal with stressful situations (George et al., 1993). Thus, employees may increase their contributions within their designated roles, go beyond expectations, reduce instances of stress-related turnover, act as the organisation's agents and support to achieve the organisation's goals rather than their personal interests (e.g., quitting, going abroad) when they feel supported by the organisation (Levinson, 1965).

According to a recent review by Eisenberger et al. (2020), the pioneering author who came up with the construct more than three decades ago, employees form POS as a meaningful explanation for favorable working conditions (e.g., opportunities for advancement, job enrichment, and involvement in organizational decisions) or unfavorable treatment from the organization and uses that to predict how the organization would treat them in the future. Thus, organisational support can be a significant source of valuable assistance to any employee repatriating to work upon completing an overseas stay, for better adjustment to their new environment. Kumar et al. (2022) found that perceived organisational support had a significant role in predicting repatriation adjustment. These researchers have chosen employees in India's manufacturing and technology sectors for their study. Arokiasamy (2024) reported that perceived organisational support positively relates to repatriation adjustment in a study done in Vietnam.

Past research has also investigated the impact of perceived organisational support on academic repatriation adjustment (e.g., James, 2021; James & Azungah, 2020). Thus, using the theoretical support from the SET and the OST, as well as the above empirical support, it could be argued that perceived organisational support can significantly impact the adjustment process of academic repatriates. Furthermore, it has been identified that POS appears to have stronger positive outcomes in Eastern cultures than in Western cultures (Eisenberger et al., 2020); as

such, it could be considered worthy of investigating the impact of POS on repatriation adjustment of academics of state universities in an Asian country like Sri Lanka.

Accordingly, it is hypothesised:

H₁: Perceived organisational support positively influences the repatriation adjustment of academics

In addition to investigating the influence of POS, we also investigated the effect of two other primary sources of social support from the organisation, which are namely, PSS and PCS.

Influence of Supervisor and Co-worker Support on Repatriation Adjustment

We used the same Organisational Support Theory (OST) (Eisenberger *et al.*, 1986) to hypothesise the relationships between perceived supervisor support and repatriation adjustment, as well as perceived co-worker support and repatriation adjustment of academics. In line with OST, it could be argued that employees in an organisation may adjust well during repatriation with the support of supervisors and co-workers (Robinson, 2020). Repatriation of academics, which is not fully facilitated by universities as in corporate expatriation assignments, creates a great deal of uncertainty. However, in this situation, the role played by the Heads of the academic Departments in acting as a source of support for adjustment would help individuals extensively to reduce uncertainty in these ambiguous situations (Charoensukmongkol & Phungsoonthorn, 2021; Szkody *et al.*, 2021).

Previous researchers have found that individuals may obtain support within the organisation from various sources, such as co-workers, supervisors, friends, and families (Caplan *et al.*, 1975; Charoensukmongkol & Phungsoonthorn, 2021; Sen & Yildirim, 2023) to adjust to novel and uncertain situations. These support sources might positively impact on work adjustment of employees while reducing turnover intention and stress (Eisenberger *et al.*, 2020; Srivastava & Agrawal, 2020). One of the main reasons that causes difficulties for academics upon repatriation is the psychological distress caused by the change (Suutari & Brewster, 2003). At this point, Heads of the Departments as well as colleagues in the academic department of the home university can play a critical role in supporting returning academics to adjust themselves to their home country (Lauring & Selmer, 2013). Especially considering the rapid changes that have occurred in the state university system in Sri Lanka over the past five years, supportive relationships at work can help alleviate stress and enable not only adjustment but also re-adjustment of academics to their home country and the work setting upon repatriation (Robinson, 2016). Thus, it is proposed:

H₂: Perceived supervisor support positively influences the repatriation adjustment of academics

H₃: Perceived co-worker support positively influences the repatriation adjustment of academics

METHODS AND RESULTS

We used a quantitative research design for this study (Creswell, 2009). Data were collected using a survey from the academic staff of state universities in Sri Lanka who have returned after going abroad for postgraduate studies with their families.

Sample and Data Collection

Out of the questionnaires distributed among the returning academic staff from state universities in Sri Lanka, who qualified according to the sample selection criteria, we received 155 completed surveys. The final usable sample consisted of 144 academic staff, comprising 53.4% male and 46.6% female participants. Out of 144 academics, a large proportion of repatriated academics (84.5%) were married, and everybody had a postgraduate degree. The majority of the academics had been working for their current university for 11-15 years. A significant number of academics fell within the age category of 41 to 50 years.

Measures

Repatriation adjustment: Repatriation adjustment was measured using five (05) items, adapting two items from Cable and Judge (1996) and three items from Cable and DeRue (2002). Modifications done to these items by James and Azungah (2020) were used in the present study as well, to ensure consistency with the other scales and items in the questionnaire. Cronbach's alpha is .88 for repatriation adjustment. A sample item from the scale is 'The things that I value in my life are very similar to the things that my organisation values.'

Work-related support sources

POS: POS was measured using the nine-item (09), unidimensional shorter version of the POS scale originally developed by Eisenberger et al. (1986). Cronbach's alpha is .87 for POS. A sample item from the scale is, 'My university cares about my general satisfaction at work.'

PSS: PSS was measured using the same nine-items (09) employed to assess POS, with the wording modified by replacing 'university/university management' with 'Head of the Department (HoD)/Supervisor.' Cronbach's alpha is .87 for PSS. A sample item is, 'Help is available from my HoD/ supervisor to ease my repatriation transition.'

PCS: PCS was measured using the two-dimensional (02), eight-item (08) scale developed by Ducharme and Martin (2000), with adaptations informed by James (2021). Cronbach's alpha is .81 for PCS. A sample item is –‘My co-workers give useful advice on job problems.’

Results

Table 1 presents descriptive statistics related to study variables.

Insert Table 1 about here

Table 2 shows the results of the hierarchical multiple regression analysis conducted to test the hypotheses. When testing the three hypotheses, it was controlled for age and gender. Results indicate that the relationship between POS and repatriation adjustment is not significant ($\beta = -.04, p < n.s$). Thus, H₁ was not supported by the data. However, the results indicate that the coefficient for predictor PSS and repatriation adjustment of academics was significant and positive ($\beta = .69, p < 0.00$). Thus, H₂ was supported. Further, results indicate that H₃, which tested whether there is a relationship between PCS and repatriation adjustment of academics, is not significant ($\beta = -.13, p < n.s$). Thus, the data did not support H₃.

Insert Table 2 about here

DISCUSSION

The objective of this research was to investigate the impact of work-related support sources (e.g., POS, PSS, and PCS) on the repatriation adjustment of academics in state universities in Sri Lanka. Results demonstrated that there was no relationship between POS and repatriation adjustment. It can be assumed that this result was due to the fact that the universities are not yet fully concerned about accepting academics back into their home institution. However, we found a positive effect of PSS on repatriation adjustment, which is consistent with previous studies (Arokiasamy *et al.*, 2024). This suggests that PSS plays a crucial role in the repatriation adjustment of academics in the home country after completing their postgraduate studies overseas. On the other hand, there was no effect found for the association between PCS on the repatriation adjustment of academics.

Theoretical Contribution and Practical Implications

The findings of this study support the OST (Eisenberger *et al.*, 1986), which emphasises that supportive supervisor relationships are a key resource that facilitates employees to deal with stressful events and thereby support academics' repatriation adjustment (Bakker &

Demerouti, 2007; Saks & Gruman, 2012). Further, this research addressed important knowledge gaps by examining the simultaneous roles of multiple work-related support sources for academics' repatriation adjustment. Moreover, the study reiterated the role of the supervisor (i.e. PSS)/ Head of the Department in universities in ensuring the repatriation adjustment of academics.

In addition, several practical implications can be drawn from the findings of the study. First, at a time when the Sri Lankan state university system is struggling to get back and retain academics who go abroad for postgraduate studies, the findings of this study would be beneficial for university administrators to understand how to facilitate the repatriation of academics who return. Second, the study provides insights into the crucial role played by the Heads of each academic department to which the staff member belongs in facilitating the repatriation adjustment. Third, university administrators (e.g., Deans and Heads of Departments) can use these findings to develop clear repatriation policies to minimise adjustment difficulties for returning academics. Finally, findings support academic institutions in understanding their role in managing the repatriation transition and identifying and providing the necessary resources to facilitate the repatriation adjustment of academics.

Future researchers can consider several avenues to advance this study. First, the lack of support for the relationships between POS and repatriation adjustment and PCS and repatriation adjustment was surprising. Hence, researchers have an avenue to conduct research on these non-significant relationships using larger samples. Second, future researchers can investigate the moderating effects of personal resources in strengthening or weakening the relationship between PSS and repatriation adjustment, which was supported. The study has some limitations, too. We used the Sri Lankan university system and chose academics from the Sri Lankan context, which may differ from other cultural contexts. Hence, testing this model among academic repatriates in different countries and cultural contexts would ensure the external validity of the findings.

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Table 1. Means, standard deviations and correlations

Variables	Mean	SD	1	2	3	4	5
1 Age	0.63	2.50					
2 Civil Status	0.47	1.19	-0.09				
3 POS	1.20	4.63	0.10	-0.07			
4 PSS	1.40	4.88	0.09	-0.04	.97**		
5 PCS	1.29	4.93	0.06	-0.01	.95**	.98**	
6 Repatriation Adjustment	1.32	4.78	0.11	-0.07	.95**	.97**	.95**

Table 2: Regression analyses

Variable	β
Controls	
Gender	.06
Age_45-55 (dummy)	.00
Age_55-65 (dummy)	.03
Predictors	
Perceive Organisational Support	-.04
Perceive Supervisor Support	.69
Perceive Co-worker Support	-.13
R ²	.96
F	355.807
ΔR^2	.95

n = 144; Standardized coefficients are reported; *p < .05, **p < .01, ***p < .001