ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Global human mobility and knowledge transfer: Highly skilled return migrants as agents of transnational learning

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Global human mobility constitutes a key mechanism for knowledge transfer. This study examines the micro-dynamics of knowledge transfer in the developed-developing country migratory context. It highlights the agentic role of return migrants in transforming overseas learning into relevant knowledge in their home contexts. Drawing on situated and relational theories of knowledge and learning, the study views knowledge transfer as a relevance discovery process. It looks at a group of highly skilled migrants who had returned from developed countries to Ethiopia. Despite their high skill, the focus of knowledge transfer was mostly in non-technical fields that include a broad range of organizational knowledge and work practices. These were made relevant to the local context through the returnees' 'work of reconciliation', involving 'engagement', 'alignment' and 'imagination'. The study challenges the standard assumption of a one-way linear flow of knowledge from developed to developing countries. It sheds new light on the migration-development link by highlighting the 'aspirational' aspect of migrant transnational learning.

KEYWORDS
highly skilled migrants, knowledge transfer, mobility, transnational migrants

INTRODUCTION

Global human mobility constitutes a key mechanism for knowledge transfer across national borders. In recent years, scholars have paid increased attention to the role of highly skilled return migrants in bringing the knowledge and experience that they have acquired overseas to their countries of origin (Sturge et al., 2016; Wang, 2015). Return migration has come to be seen as part and parcel of a circular system of social and economic relationships that facilitates the flow of people and knowledge between developed and less developed countries (Cassarino, 2004; Chand, 2019; Saxenian, 2005). A growing body of work adopts a transnational lens to capture the cross-border linkages and fluid social spaces that have emerged through migrants' simultaneous embeddedness in their host and home countries (Levitt, 1998; Levitt & Schiller, 2004; Wang, 2015). Levitt (1998) argues that such transnational linkages facilitate 'social remittances'—a broad range of knowledge, skills, ideas and practices brought by returnees—that aid social development in migrants' countries of origin. Other studies examine the capacity-building endeavours of return migrants and highlight their role as transnational development agents (Faist, 2008; Hofreiter & Koštialová, 2019; Levitt & Lamba-Nieves, 2011).

However, much of the literature has tended to focus on migrants' engagement in transnational networks and communities instead of the process of transnational learning and knowledge transfer. It assumes that new knowledge, ideas and practices travel easily from the host to home countries alongside the mobility of return migrants or flow through the migrants' social and professional networks. Return migrants are often referred to as knowledge carriers who facilitate the unilateral diffusion of knowledge and practices from the sending (developed) countries to the receiving (developing) countries (Faist, 2008; Levitt, 1998; Wang, 2015). The 'network flow' or 'culture diffusion' view of knowledge transfer overlooks actor agency. It fails to recognize that adopting new ideas or practices requires reflection, situated interaction and negotiation between social actors. Although several studies highlight the constraints that professional return migrants face in sharing tacit knowledge with their colleagues in the home workplace (Williams, 2007; Williams & Baláž, 2008), the complexity of knowledge transfer across societal contexts and issues of knowledge relevance have not been closely examined.

Knowledge relevance refers to 'the degree to which external knowledge has the potential to connect to local knowledge' (Schulz, 2003, p. 442). It is not a characteristic of knowledge but an outcome of learning and knowledge transformation. Making external knowledge relevant to a new context requires reconfiguration and recontextualization (Fernie et al., 2003). The newness of knowledge increases the uncertainty over its utilization in a different context and places significant demands on the efforts necessary for successful utilization. The challenges of recontextualization are especially great when there are significant knowledge gaps or institutional differences across countries (Lam, 1997). Research on developing countries such as Africa suggests that knowledge transfer can be blocked when the provider's knowledge cannot be easily absorbed or used by the recipient (Händschke et al., 2018; Rui et al., 2016). The accumulated knowledge and transnational learning experience of return migrants do not automatically translate into relevant knowledge for their home contexts. The opportunity for utilization and the ability of returnees to recontextualize and connect the knowledge to the local base are critical.

This study examines the micro-dynamics of knowledge transfer in the developed-developing country migratory context. In contrast to the network flow perspective of knowledge transfer, this study stresses the active role of return migrants in transforming their overseas learning into relevant knowledge in their home countries. Drawing on situated and relational theories of knowledge and learning (Dyke, 2015; Lave & Wenger, 1991; Wenger-Trayner & Wenger-Trayner, 2015; Wenger, 1998), the study views knowledge transfer as a 'relevance discovery process' that involves knowledge recontextualization and transformation. It postulates that highly skilled returnees can be key players in this because they are 'knowledgeable actors' (Giddens, 1984) who operate across the host and home country professional and social contexts. The study examines a group of highly skilled migrants who returned from developed countries to Ethiopia. The developed-developing country migratory context reveals the relational forces and interactive dynamics of transnational learning and knowledge transfer. This is not only because of the challenges to knowledge transfer

posed by the wide socio-economic distance between the home and host country contexts but, more crucially, the disjuncture experienced by migrants provides a catalyst for learning (Grabowska, 2018). The analysis focuses on how these people mobilize their distinct transnational capabilities to enact knowledge transfer in their country of origin. The evidence is based on individual interviews with 22 highly educated Ethiopian return migrants across a range of professional fields.

Despite their high skill, the study finds that the focus of returnees' knowledge transfer was mostly in the non-technical fields that include a broad range of organizational knowledge and work practices. These were made relevant to the local context through the returnees' 'work of reconciliation', involving 'engagement', 'alignment' and 'imagination' (Wenger, 1998). Engagement and alignment occur in purposely created organizational spaces wherein new knowledge is routed to those local actors who are most likely to be receptive and made relevant through situated interaction. Imagination is revealed in the returnees' engagement in explorative, future-making activities that transform overseas learning into relevant, 'yet-to-be realized' knowledge in the home context. Previous studies highlight the 'reflexive' and 'relational' capabilities of transnational migrants (Grabowska, 2018; Williams, 2007); this study also draws attention to the 'aspirational' capability—a future-oriented and imaginative psychological resource—that energizes their knowledge transfer activities. The study advances our understanding of international return migration as a mechanism for knowledge transfer by highlighting the agentic role of return migrants in transforming overseas learning into relevant knowledge. It shows that the relevant knowledge developed is a 'transformed mixture' of overseas knowledge deemed to be useful and local knowledge about its applicability. It challenges the assumption underlying much of the migrant transnationalism literature of a one-way linear flow of knowledge from the developed (host) country to the developing (home) country.

CONCEPTS AND FRAMEWORK

The analytical framework directs attention to the circular transnational learning trajectories of return migrants and how their 'knowledgeability' in a nexus of relations across host and home societies facilitates the development and transfer of relevant knowledge. It was developed iteratively between concepts and data but is presented upfront for clarity.

Transnational learning and the 'knowledgeability' of return migrants: A situated and relational perspective

International migration provides a significant and distinct opportunity for learning because it represents a major biographical turning point in individuals' life experience and exposes them to diverse socio-cultural environments and unfamiliar practices (Alenius, 2015; Williams, 2007). The concept of transnational learning is used in this study to refer to the learning and exposure, both formal and informal, experienced by individuals in a transnational setting. For highly skilled migrants, transnational learning is not only instrumental for professional development in terms of the acquisition of new knowledge but can also be potentially transformative in terms of personal development (Palovic et al., 2021). Williams (2007) views transnational learning as an explorative process through which migrants translate and reinterpret knowledge and ideas to fit them into a new social context.

This study posits that transnational learning may endow returned migrants with distinct capabilities for transforming their overseas experiences into relevant knowledge in their home contexts. It adopts a situated and relational perspective of knowledge and learning to shed light on this. The idea that knowledge is situated has its roots in pragmatists' view that knowledge is not absolute but rather can only be understood in relation to the specific situation and context (Dewey, 1938). Likewise, Polanyi (1966) stresses the tacit and context-dependent nature of human knowledge and highlights the importance of shared understanding and common rules between one person and another for

knowledge transfer. Blackler (2002, p. 63) elaborates on this by arguing that 'knowledge should be studied as practice, and practice should be studied as activity that is rooted in time and culture'. Building on this pragmatic tradition, the theory of situated knowledge and learning argues that knowledge cannot be acquired in a mechanistic way but must be learned by individuals' participation in communities of practice (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 1998; Wenger-Trayner & Wenger-Trayner, 2015). Thus, knowing and learning are constructed by relations among people engaged in an activity. The social context affects how and what actors learn, their interpretation of the knowledge acquired and how they put it into practice. The practice-based, localized and socially embedded nature of knowledge means that it cannot be transferred unchanged from one context to another. Giddens (1990) addresses this point in terms of the difficulties in 'disembedding' knowledge from one context and 're-embedding' it in another when the embedding circumstances of each context differ. In other words, knowledge cannot be easily transferred across contexts without recontextualization, which is a complex socio-cognitive and socio-relational process. A situated view of knowledge suggests that knowledge transfer across contexts requires 'knowledgeable agents' who have proper understanding of the context and are capable of reconciling knowledge differences and modifying the knowledge or ideas that they seek to transfer.

Returned migrants can be key agents in these processes because of their 'knowledgeability' across the boundaries of multiple locations and social contexts. The term knowledgeability refers to individuals' knowledge or awareness of the circumstances of their actions and the rules they follow (Berends et al., 2003). It originates from Giddens' (1984) structuration theory which posits that the interaction between knowledgeable actors and existing structures provides a source of change because awareness of the rules or contexts gives people the capacity to 'act otherwise'. It is the basis of human agency enabling the reconstitution of resources and renegotiation of practices (Sewell, 1992). Coe and Bunnell (2003, p. 438) argue that transnational migrants are 'knowledgeable' individuals because they embody new knowledge that is of value to others and can enact knowledge transfer by moving across space through transnational networks. Similarly, Basch et al. (1994, p. 6) refer to them as 'mobile knowledgeable subjects' who forge and sustain multi-stranded social relations in both their home and host countries. Relatedly, others draw attention to the social skills and relational competences that they have acquired from their work experiences in migratory settings and engagement in transnational networks (Grabowska, 2018; Levitt, 1998).

Migrants may also develop 'critical reflective' capacities arising from their transnational mobility and distinct learning experience. Williams (2007) argues that these people may develop a particular capacity for reflexivity because they can draw on their previous knowledge and experience to gain a deeper understanding of the particularities of knowledge embedded in different locations. Furthermore, the disjuncture between host and home country experiences can also stimulate reflexivity and generate unexpected insights. As social learning theorists point out, an enabling learning environment is one where there is disjuncture and disturbance between existing knowledge and new experience (Dyke, 2015). Grabowska (2018) speaks of 'migratory aha moments' when people experience surprises and realize differences. The encounter with 'problematic situations' challenges actors' established assumptions and demands renegotiation of meanings and practices. As such, the knowledgeability of transnational migrants is manifested in their ability for reflexivity and critical distancing resulting from their exposure to alternative or new experience. Reflexivity is a source of human agency that allows for greater imagination, choice and conscious purpose.

The knowledgeability of return migrants may also have an 'aspirational' dimension in that the realization of novelty or different ways of doing things induces them to search for and create alternative future possibilities in their home contexts. The notion of 'aspirational capability' refers to a projective, future-oriented mindset that drives motivation and achievement. It is an ability to envision future states and fashion one's behaviour accordingly (Aspinwall, 2005). It is similar to Bandura's (2001) notion of 'forethought' that motivates people's actions in anticipation of future possibilities. Learning, by nature, has an aspirational component because the new knowledge acquired can serve as the basis for developing future possibilities or alternative courses of action (Marquardt, 1996). The propensity of individuals to envision alterative future possibilities can be enhanced by transnational learning that exposes them to diverse cultural perspectives, images and ideas coming from elsewhere (Koehn & Rosenau, 2002). The desire to achieve imagined desired futures can be a powerful motivator for return migrants' engagement in knowledge transfer activities. For example, research on highly skilled diaspora returnees in Africa shows that these people forged their diasporic

identity in a projective manner and were motivated by their desire to contribute to the future of their home countries through their knowledge activities (Meyer & Wattiaux, 2006).

The 'work of reconciliation' in knowledge transfer: 'Engagement', 'alignment' and 'imagination'

How might the knowledgeability of returned migrants facilitate their engagement in knowledge transfer activities? What are the key processes for transforming overseas learning into relevant and useful knowledge in their home contexts? Knowledge transfer is a complex and multi-dimensional process due to the inherently tacit and socially situated nature of human knowledge (Lam, 2000). It requires effort, negotiation, translation and recontextualization. This is particularly so when transferring knowledge across wide cultural and institutional contexts (Lam, 1997; Williams & Balaz, 2008). The theory of situated learning in communities of practice provides some useful insights into how knowledge acquired in one context can be translated and transformed into relevant knowledge and new insights for another (Wenger-Trayner & Wenger-Trayner, 2015; Wenger, 1998). It elaborates on how individuals who operate across multiple communities negotiate their knowledge and practices by undertaking the 'work of reconciliation' to reconcile differences and resolve tensions. It distinguishes three modes of reconciliation: 'engagement', 'alignment' and 'imagination' (Wenger, 1998, p. 173–174). 'Engagement' refers to individuals' active involvement in mutual processes of negotiation of meaning and the development of common understanding and shared practices. 'Alignment' refers to coordinating one's efforts and activities so that they fit within broader structures and connect with the wider social systems. 'Imagination' is about seeing oneself in a broader context, making connections across space and time, and envisioning alternative future possibilities. Knowledgeability, according to Wenger-Trayner and Wenger-Trayner (2015), is manifested in individuals' productive combination of these different modes of reconciliation in their effort to reconcile differences in knowledge and practices and resolve tensions from their multiple community memberships. For example, the combination of engagement and alignment brings divergent perspectives together and in the process creates some coordination between them. The combination of imagination and alignment enables the anchoring of individuals' broad visions within the context of what they are doing and making it effective in concert with others.

For transnational migrants who move from one societal context to another, the work of reconciliation can be particularly challenging. This is especially so for highly skilled people who have returned from developed host countries to developing home countries where their newly acquired knowledge, work practices and values encounter realities built on 'old' knowledge, modes of behaviour and assumptions. The empirical study examines the disjuncture and problematic encounters experienced by returnees and how they mobilize their distinctive capabilities in their work of reconciliation.

THE EMPIRICAL STUDY

African context: Ethiopia

The study examines a group of highly skilled migrants who had returned from developed countries to Ethiopia—one of the world's least developed countries. Ethiopia serves as an extreme case for this study because it reveals the challenges of knowledge transfer between the developed and developing worlds characterized by wide knowledge and development gaps and significant cultural/institutional distance. The disjuncture between the host and home migratory contexts provides a relational setting for examining the transnational learning experience of migrants in response to surprises, conflicts and contradictions (Grabowska, 2018). It also creates a demanding situation for knowledge transfer whereby the renegotiation of meanings and practices is necessary. Ethiopia, like many other countries in Africa, is characterized by weak formal institutions and heavy reliance on informal institutions and indigenous

knowledge in various aspects of its socio-economic and socio-political activities (Zoogah et al., 2015). This creates an ambiguous environment that poses additional challenges for highly skilled return migrants who seek to harness the knowledge and perspectives that they have acquired overseas in their professional pursuits in their home environments. The chosen migratory context thus offers an ideal setting for exploring the relational forces that drive migrant learning and the effort required to overcome the barriers to knowledge transfer.

Ethiopia is one of the major migrant sending countries in Africa and has suffered from severe brain drain, especially in the medical and healthcare sector and institutions of higher learning (Adugna, 2019; Getahun, 2002). Emigration from Ethiopia started in the mid-1970s with the Marxist revolution and the installation of the military regime. The social and political turmoil that ensued set in motion large-scale emigration, which continues today with skilled migrants seeking opportunities in other parts of the world. This domestic push factor, coupled with the global pull factor, has resulted in a huge loss of skilled personnel. Studies between 1968/1969 and 1995/1996 showed that Ethiopia had lost more than one third of its highly educated personnel sent abroad (Reinert, 2007). Recent Ethiopian government data put the estimate of the Ethiopian diaspora at over three million, mainly residing in the United States, Middle East, and Europe (Adugna, 2019).

To redress the problem of brain drain, the Ethiopian government, in common with other African countries, has been actively developing diaspora engagement policies since the early 2000s (Chacko & Gebre, 2013). Measures such as introducing investment incentives for diaspora members, offering dual citizenship and promoting diaspora professional networks have enticed a growing number of professional and high-skilled migrants to return to the country. Recent research suggests that the impact of migration on the home community is increasingly manifested through the transnational engagement of high-skilled migrants and their business and knowledge transfer activities in their origin home communities (Lituchy, 2019). This study examines the experience of a group of highly skilled return migrants to shed light on their transnational learning experience and the micro-processes of knowledge transfer.

Methods and data

The study is based on individual interviews with 22 highly educated Ethiopian returnees across a range of professional fields. The majority were identified through the personal contacts of the second author who had extensive research contacts in Ethiopia. Some additional names were obtained by snowballing. All the interviewees have acquired postgraduate qualifications at the master's or PhD levels in developed countries, including the United States (6), Europe (8), Japan (5) and elsewhere (3). They were all 'education migrants' who went overseas in pursuit of postgraduate education and professional development. However, there are variations in the duration of their stay and work experience in the host countries. Out of the 22 interviewees, seven had worked in their professional fields for an extensive period (3–25 years) in the host countries, following their advanced education/training there. These people are referred to as 'diaspora professional returnees'. The remaining 15 are 'professional training returnees'—people in their early- or mid-careers who went overseas in pursuit of higher education/professional development and returned to their home countries soon afterwards, with some having worked for a short period (<2 years) in the host countries. Table 1 shows the profiles of the interviewees.

The interviews were conducted in Addis Ababa, the capital city of Ethiopia. They were conducted in English at the workplaces of the interviewees. All the interviewees were fluent in English. A semi-structured protocol focusing on the following key areas was used: (a) overseas training/education, work experience, types of knowledge acquired and evaluation of learning experience; (b) reasons for going overseas and returning home; (c) professional and work experience back at home; (d) challenges and opportunities for utilizing the knowledge and skills acquired overseas; and (e) extent of engagement in transnational networks and related activities. The interviews lasted for approximately 60–75 min each and were recorded and transcribed.

In addition, other relevant documentary information obtained via web searches, such as the CVs or LinkedIn pages of individuals and press releases on the Ethiopian government's diaspora engagement policies/activities, also provided

TABLE 1 Interviewee profile

Case code (type)	Age/educational qualification	Current position (at the time of study)	Work experience/position prior to going overseas	Duration of stay in host countries; type of activities	Reasons for returning and time elapsed
01 (DPR)	Early 40s; BA and MA engineering (1986–1992; Soviet Union)	Senior energy analyst (public sector)	None (left for higher education after school)	6 years; education/training; Soviet Union	To work within trained profession; 22 years
02 (DPR)	60+; BSc public health (home); MA/PhD (USA)	Retired; NGO on brain gain	Health professional (Ministry of Health)	5 years; education/training; USA 25 years; health professional, UN	Retirement; 10 years
03 (PTR)	Early 40s; BA and MBA (India)	Diaspora Officer, Ministry of Labour/Social Affairs	Government officer	6 years; education/training; India	Work and family ties; 3 years
04 (PTR)	Age: unknown; BA (home); MA Energy Studies (UK); Professional training (the Netherlands)	Senior Executive, Ethiopian Railway Corporation	Government officer	3 years; education/training; UK and the Netherlands	Continuity of employment/ career; 20 years
05 (PTR)	30s; BA (home); MA/PhD Development Economics (Japan)	Think tank researcher	Think tank researcher	5 years; education/training; Japan	Continuity of employment/career; 3 years
06 (DPR)	60+; BA/MA Urban Planning (USA)	CEO/founder of two engineering consultancy firms	None	42 years; education and professional work in public and private sectors; USA	Always wanted to return; a circular migrant for over a decade followed by permanent return; 10+ years
07 (DPR)	45+; MA/PhD Anthropology; Germany; Postdoc (Germany); Diploma Journalism (UK)	Owner of private schools/colleges + other private business	None	12 years in Germany; education/training and postdoc research	Perceived limited opportunities overseas; 'giving back'; 6 years

(Continues)

TABLE 1 (Continued)

Case code (type)	Age/educational qualification	Current position (at the time of study)	Work experience/position prior to going overseas	Duration of stay in host countries; type of activities	Reasons for returning and time elapsed
08 (PTR)	Early 30s; BA (home); MA Public Finance (Japan)	Government Officer; customs office	Government officer; customs office	1 year; education/training; Japan	Obligatory; 5 years
09 (PTR)	30s; BA (home); MA Engineering (Japan)	Company founder	Government officer	2 years; education/training; Japan (also travelled to USA for professional development)	Partly obligatory but strong desire to make a difference; 3 years
10 (DPR)	50s; MA/PhD Radiology (USA)	University professor	Worked in medical field at home (10+ years)	13 years; education and professional work; USA	Personal and wanted to serve country; 3 years
11 (DPR)	30s; BA (home); MA Engineering (Germany); PhD/Post-doc (USA)	University professor	None	8 years; education/training and postdoc research; Germany and USA	Perceived more opportunities at home; 4 years
12 (PTR)	30s; MA/PhD Economics (Denmark)	Think tank researcher	Think tank researcher	7 years; education/training and postdoc research; Denmark	Continuity of employment/career; 2 years
13 (PTR)	Age: not known; BA/MA (home); PhD (Belgium)	University academic	Government officer	5 years; education/training and postdoc research; Belgium	Professional and family reasons; 5 years
14 (PTR)	30s; BA (home); MA (Denmark)	Think tank researcher	Think tank researcher	3 years; education/training; Denmark	Obligatory; 2 years
15 (PTR)	Age: late 50s; BA/MA Geology (Cuba)	Government officer	Government officer	6 years; education/training; Cuba	Obligatory; 20+ years

(Continues)

TABLE 1 (Continued)

Case code (type)	Age/educational qualification	Current position (at the time of study)	Work experience/position prior to going overseas	Duration of stay in host countries; type of activities	Reasons for returning and time elapsed
16 (DPR)	50s; BA (home); MA (Holland); PhD Geosciences (USA)	Own consultancy firm and consultancy work for government	Government officer	15 years; education and professional work; USA	Career life cycle; time to return home in late-career; 4 years
17 (PTR)	30s; BA/MA (home); PhD Management (USA)	University lecturer	University lecturer	3 years; education/training; USA	Perceived limited opportunities in USA; 5 years
18 (PTR)	30s; MA (home); MA Management (the Netherlands)	University lecturer	University lecturer	2 years; education/training; the Netherlands	Limited opportunities overseas; 10 years
19 (PTR)	30s; BA (home); MA/PhD Economics (Japan)	Think tank researcher	Not known	4 years; education/training; Japan	Employment/career opportunities at home; 4 years
20 (PTR)	30s; BA/MA (home); PhD Economics (the Netherlands); postdoc (Japan)	Think tank researcher	Think tank researcher	5 years; education/training and postdoc research; the Netherlands and Japan	Obligatory; employment/career continuity
21 (PTR)	30s; BA (home); MA (Norway); PhD Economics (Sweden)	Think tank researcher	Think tank researcher	5 years; education/training; Norway and Sweden	Employment/career opportunities at home; 4 years
22 (PTR)	30s; BA (home); MA (Japan)	Government officer, then own start-up company	Government officer	1 year; education/training; Japan	Obligatory; 4 years

Abbreviations: DPR, diaspora professional returnee; PTR, professional training returnee.

valuable data. For example, one of the interviewees mentioned his involvement in diffusing Kaizen work practices at home after his return from Japan. We conducted web searches and found articles and blog posts written by him on the topic and documentary evidence of his involvement in setting up the Ethiopian Kaizen Institute. It is worth noting that the interviews were conducted with a selected sample of highly educated professionals with relatively successful careers, and the documentary evidence available online concerned success stories of returnee engagement. Thus, the data may be skewed towards portraying a highly positive experience of knowledge transfer.

Data analysis

The data analysis followed an abductive approach (Shepherd & Sutcliffe, 2011), iterating between the data and concepts in an interpretative manner in several stages. It used a combination of NVivo software and manual coding in the first stage of open coding to identify core themes and emerging patterns. The initial analysis explored the interviewees' overseas learning and work experience and their experience of knowledge utilization and transfer back at home. A notable insight that emerged early on was the 'aspirational' component of the returnees' transnational learning alongside technical and socio-cultural learning. Based on this, a loose initial framing was developed that facilitated the progression from open to focused coding for the types of knowledge/competences acquired and how they were deployed in their home contexts. At this stage, a coding summary sheet was used to record the narratives and examples that illustrate their transnational learning experience, the events/stories of knowledge transfer and their evaluation of the relevance/usefulness of the knowledge acquired overseas to their work and professional activities back at home. Through 'progressive focussing' (Sinkovics & Alfoldi, 2012), the analysis identified two distinct processes that revealed the returnees' 'work of reconciliation' in knowledge transfer: (a) the creation of organizational spaces for engagement and alignment and (b) engagement in future-making activities that entail imagination and alignment. Finally, five focal cases were identified that most clearly exemplify these micro-processes of knowledge transfer.

TRANSNATIONAL LEARNING OF HIGHLY SKILLED RETURNEES: TECHNICAL, ENCULTURED AND ASPIRATIONAL

The majority of the returnees interviewed downplayed the relevance of the advanced technical or specialist knowledge that they had acquired overseas. Some saw their advanced overseas education/training as a hindrance to reintegration back into their home environments. However, many emphasized the imprint of encultured learning and elaborated on the broad range of organizational and socio-cultural knowledge that they had acquired overseas. The analysis also highlights an 'aspirational' aspect of their transnational learning that gave them the knowledge of alternative possibilities or what could be achieved in the future. It appears to be a powerful energizing force driving their knowledge transfer activities.

Limited relevance of advanced technical learning

Although all the returnees generally saw the technical expertise and formal qualifications they had acquired overseas useful for their personal professional development, only a small minority said they were able to apply them directly in their jobs back at home. This was limited to a small number of professional training returnees who returned to work for their previous employers. The majority, notably the diaspora professional returnees, reported limited opportunities to do so. The main reasons for this were twofold. The first is the lack of resources or equipment to use specialist expertise. For example, one US-trained medical expert with a doctorate in radiology found himself isolated and unemployed in the beginning because of the lack of medical equipment in his field (Case 10). Another PhD geologist, who had 15

years of professional experience in petroleum exploration in the United States, found himself doing 'bits and pieces' including international voluntary work (Case 16). The second reason is the reluctance of some of the returnees to work in their trained professional fields because of low pay or perceived poor career prospects. This appeared to have prompted some to adopt a 'polyvalent' strategy by working across a range of fields outside their expertise. For example, an academic researcher in anthropology, who had doctoral and postdoctoral training in Germany, decided to pursue an entrepreneurial career by setting up his own business, including a private language training college and a photo-frame business. He described himself as 'a jack of all trades' (Case 7). Even among those who were able to work broadly within their professional fields, they chose to be self-employed to have the flexibility to work across organizational or sectoral boundaries. This 'polyvalent' adaptive strategy appears to be common among many high-skill professional returnees in Africa (Kleist, 2015).

While the direct transfer of their specialist expertise is not immediately apparent, their engagement in multi-stranded activities in their home communities may have created opportunities for sharing their broad professional experience and transnational competences beyond their professional fields. For example, the geologist (Case 16) cited above used his transnational professional contacts to promote diaspora activities both at home and abroad. Another professional engineer (Case 6) set up his own consultancy company to advocate for improvement in engineering standards and good governance (see section below: 'Creating organizational spaces for promoting new practices').

Strong imprint of encultured learning

Previous research suggests that international mobility provides significant learning opportunities for migrants beyond the acquisition of formal qualifications and technical knowledge to include a broad range of knowledge about socio-cultural norms, organizational and work practices and modes of behaviour (Levitt & Lamba-Nieves, 2011; Williams & Baláž, 2008). Evidence from this study echoes this observation. The term 'encultured learning' is used here to denote the imprint of informal, experiential learning overseas on the personal and professional outlooks of the returnees. In the interviews, many spoke at length about the socio-cultural and organizational knowledge that they had acquired through 'visiting', 'experiencing' and 'seeing', to put it in their own words (Case 11, academic, civil engineering). The novelty and surprises of being exposed to very different work environments and work practices provided a catalyst for learning and appeared to have imprinting effects on returnees' attitudes and behaviours. For example, several academic returnees explained how learning about work discipline and time management culture in the developed economies had altered their work behaviours at home. The following quote is illustrative:

> The working discipline overseas and here is so different. You know, one achievement or one good habit I learn from Europe is to sit, you know, work for longer and also to avoid many unnecessary things … Well, one thing I can mention is just *before going abroad*, some of my working time I spent it on differ-ent purpose which was not meant for research. Absolutely, yeah. [Laughs] *But after getting exposed to the overseas environment*, now, you know, during my working time I work just perfectly on my research. (Case 22; researcher; emphasis added)

The realization of contextual differences and exposure to new practices overseas also stimulated critical reflective thinking and prompted them to re-evaluate the work practices back at home. What was once accepted as normal and taken for granted is now seen as problematic. One academic researcher, for example, came to the realization that poor time management in his former workplace had led to 'a lot of institutional inefficiency' and 'hindered' his work (Case 13; academic researcher).

The imprint of encultured learning is especially notable among those returnees who had studied and worked in Japan. They talked about their initial 'cultural shock' when confronted with Japanese ways of doing things that were

'totally different from African…' (Case 9). Some described their learning experience as 'transformative' and expressed their deep admiration for Japanese work ethics and quality management practices (e.g., 'Kaizen'):

> Well I would say it was *very transformative* because, you know, you are doing your education in a very different environment. So before I went to Japan I heard about this East Asian development experience from the media and different literatures, but I have never studied that in depth. So that was a good opportunity for me to go to Japan and then see the East Asian experience … Yes, another thing is that there is this thing, they called Kaizen' (Case 5; researcher; emphasis added)

> What excites me is, like Japan is a very nice country, you know, and then they are very serious, especially about quality, infrastructure and services. And they are very polite and very punctual … *I'm just jealous* … Like if you are reading, you can't acquire a lot of knowledge, but once you have seen something *you never forget*' (Case 9; engineer; emphasis added)

Expressions such as 'very transformative', 'I am jealous' and 'you never forget' all indicate the strong imprint of transnational learning on the returnees as they transform their 'seeing' and 'experiencing' in a very different social context into their own personal biography and perspectives. Being jealous, for example, is a mental state associated with the desire to emulate or to raise oneself to a state of equality with others with whom one compares with oneself (Gesell, 1906).

Energizing effect of aspirational learning

The interview narratives also reveal an 'aspirational' aspect of the returnees' transnational learning arising from their exposure to diverse socio-cultural and work environments and knowing alternative ways of doing things. It gives them the confidence and optimism to develop ambitious personal and professional goals and to confront the future. This is particularly notable among the professional training returnees in their early or mid-career stages. In the interviews, many expressed their newfound confidence in doing new things and confronting challenges at home. Several used the expression 'to think big' to articulate their desire to develop new professional goals and capture emerging opportunities. One believed that there were more opportunities at home than abroad and indicated his plan to develop his own business:

> 'In developed countries it's difficult to see the gap, but here if you go around you can see many gaps … The best opportunity is here actually. Yeah, I'm thinking about big projects. To think big I have to get more knowledge, also I have to have good linkage … Individually I can do many big things and I just have this perspective now' (Case 22; government officer).

This positive, forward-looking orientation was shared by another academic researcher who took pride in his success in building a big house following the completion of his PhD overseas and an increase in income. He used this as an example to narrate his 'vision' for the future and the actions needed in the present:

> I can't continue living on a rented house, then I got land, I started constructing my own house, because my vision was that, wait, I should have a big house [laugh]… So now the foundation was constructed … Now I will create capacity in the future, capacity will come in the future, I do have more opportunities in the future. *Our vision cannot be limited by the existing capacity.'* (Case 13; emphasis added)

The returnees' aspiration to realize alternative future possibilities was not limited to their personal or professional goals but also extended to their expectation of possible system change. For example, one believed that 'Ethiopia has enough skilled people and knowledge' and talked about the need for people to start realizing this and for the government to take action (Case 22). For some, their personal experience made them more acutely aware of the developmental gap/disjuncture between the developed (host) and developing (home) countries. This appears to instil in them a 'catching-up' mentality and the desire to do something positive back at home. One engineer (Case 4), who had professional training in Europe in his early career and was now in a senior position in the Ethiopian Railway Corporation, reflected on his sentiment and vision for the future of his country:

> I mean it's quite different in terms of standard of living and service level when you are in any of the developing countries and in the other industrialised or developed countries like UK or US. Yes, you have everything at your fingertips, but this has not been there hundred years ago, it has come through time, it has come through knowledge, it has come through a concerted effort, it has come through the good strategies of government and so on, so that should be the mentality. If something is not working in your house or if you go to a bank and it's not working, you could say: 'yes, today it has happened so tomorrow it shouldn't happen'. We have to work towards improving all these.

Transnational leaning not only provided the returnees with knowledge of alternative possibilities but also led them to envision better futures for themselves and their workplaces or society at large. As such, aspirational learning from overseas experience stimulates the imagination of desired futures for their country of origin. Beckert (2013, p. 220) refers to such imagined futures as 'fictional expectations' that are cognitively accessible through mental representation and provide justifications for actions in the present. Likewise, Mische (2009, p. 695) speaks of the 'mobilizing force of imagined futures'. More generally, research in social psychology reveals that imagining a desired future serves as a motivational force for action (Vasquez & Buehler, 2007). In short, transnational learning equips return migrants with the necessary reflective capabilities and psychological resources to act as knowledgeable agents.

DEVELOPMENT AND TRANSFER OF RELEVANT KNOWLEDGE: ENGAGEMENT, ALIGNMENT AND IMAGINATION

What actions did the returnees undertake to harness the knowledge and perspectives that they had acquired overseas in their home contexts? This section examines how the returnees transform their overseas learning into relevant knowledge back at home. It focuses on their 'work of reconciliation' in resolving the disjuncture between what they had learned overseas and the experience back at home and between their aspired futures and the constraints of the present. This occurs in two ways. The first is the creation of 'organizational spaces' for local engagement and alignment. The organizational spaces enable the returnees to route the new knowledge and practices to those local actors who are most likely to be receptive and engage with them through a mutual discovery process of situated interaction. The second is the development of 'future-making' activities that aim at changing the workplace or society at large to an imagined better future state. They do so by taking small steps to realize their desired future possibilities. Their future-making effort entails the combination of 'imagination' and 'alignment' in that they seek to realize their aspired future visions in concert with others.

In what follows, we present five focal cases to illustrate the returnees' work of reconciliation in knowledge transfer. The first three cases (6, 9 and 5) exemplify engagement and alignment, and the other two (12 and 4) illustrate imagination and alignment.

Creating organizational spaces for promoting new practices: Engagement and alignment

A consultancy company for change advocacy (Case 6)

This is an example of a diaspora professional returnee who set up an engineering consultancy company in his homeland both as a business and a vehicle for promoting best engineering practices. This returnee was a professional engineer educated in the United States and had over 40 years of work experience there before returning to Ethiopia in his late career. In the interview, he stated his strong desire to promote change and improve building safety in Ethiopia. The consultancy company was founded in partnership with his professional contacts in the United States soon after his return to Ethiopia. His overarching ambition was to use consultancy work to share best practices in safety standards and to advocate for regulatory change at the governmental level:

> 'We want to change the way we do things [here], you know, better delivery of safe buildings. So in my field, my concern is to really make sure there are safe buildings, because there are best practices'.

So how did he go about doing this? Internally, he used recruitment and workplace socialization to impart their knowledge and experience to young people. He developed a clear strategy of recruiting only fresh graduates and taking on interns directly from universities and not hiring any experienced people with 'bad habits'. In this way, the company sought to inculcate a group of receptive young people with the new knowledge and work practices that they had brought from overseas. Externally, he used the company's consultancy activities to build relationships with local actors including government agencies to demonstrate alternative ways of doing things and advocate for incremental changes. In the interview, he reported an example of accepting a soil test project for a chemical company on the condition that the test must be conducted in a local government lab. His intention was to use the project to persuade the authority to purchase the necessary basic testing equipment: 'Before we accepted the project', we said 'OK, we want to make sure it's tested here', so the Ethiopian Road Authority had a lab to do this … So, if you're going to do that test then you have to equip the lab better'.

One might argue that the consultancy project was used as a 'boundary object' for articulating the differences between the local and international standards and made the local governmental agency aware of the need to improve basic infrastructures. Carlile (2002, p. 452) argues that boundary objects 'facilitate a process where individuals can jointly transform their knowledge'. The soil test and the necessary test equipment were boundary objects that made the idea about complying with international standards concrete and relatable for the local actors. They were contextualized ways of raising local awareness about the need for improvement. In the interview, the returnee pointed out that persuading the governmental lab to purchase cost-effective machinery for conducting the test was much more realistic than imposing blanket international codes:

> You have to reconcile the reality here and what you have learned outside. I mean Ethiopia's not going to be United States … Even if we propose changes, you have to propose it in such a way that do we have the manpower to do it, to implement it, do we have the educational level to understand it … You have to be very realistic, whatever I bring in there, you know, the 32 years of experience that I've had I can't bring everything in here and say 'try to do it'. *But, you try to make it relevant*. (Emphasis added)

What this case has illustrated is that making overseas knowledge relevant requires skilful effort in engaging with local actors and having the necessary contextual understanding for adaptation. The soil test and the process of persuading the local government agency to buy the test equipment helped to kick-start the dialogue with the key local actors for promoting change from the ground up.

A start-up company and a national Kaizen institute for disseminating Japanese work practices (Cases 9 and 5)

These are two examples of professional training returnees actively involved in transferring and disseminating Japanese work practices after obtaining their postgraduate qualifications in Japan. Case 9 was a long-serving public sector employee who obtained an MA qualification in engineering in Japan and decided to form his own start-up company soon after returning to his former employer in Ethiopia. In the interview, he stated that his main motive was 'to start from the scratch to make things right'. His exposure to Japanese work discipline and quality standards made him acutely aware of the absence of these at home: 'We don't demand quality materials, here in Ethiopia there is no project completed within specific time … Because everybody is very negligent'. What was previously taken for granted had become disconcerting and triggered response actions. However, he perceived insurmountable institutional and attitudinal barriers to change in the public sector and reckoned that forming a private company would give him a fresh start and provide a more conducive environment for trying out Japanese work practices.

The narratives in the interview were permeated with stories about how he strived to emulate Japanese ways of working in his interaction with employees and business clients:

> 'Actually what I did to my crew is like, it's a lot of things, but especially every week we have a [team] meeting … I try to import something that is good. You know, people will change when they see the results'.

His approach was to start with small things in everyday work routines, such as adopting a Japanese-style team approach within his company and building trust with his clients by ensuring that projects were completed on time: 'Look, it might seem very, very small things, but you can feel it. It changes things totally'. The entrepreneurial start-up, in this case, serves as a vehicle for transferring work practices and organizational knowledge.

Case 5 is a PhD graduate returnee who played a pivotal role in facilitating the establishment of a national Kaizen institute for promoting and disseminating Japanese work practices at home. He was a think tank researcher who obtained his doctoral degree in development economics in Japan. During his time in Japan, he conducted research with his Japanese professor on Kaizen management techniques for productivity improvement and continued this work with the professor after returning to Ethiopia. In the interview, he revealed his enthusiasm for experimenting with Kaizen at home:

> Well I wanted to come back because, you know, as I told you I had this good linkage with the government officials here and I was, you know, connecting the Japanese side, you know, so for example the Kaizen issues, the Japanese research mission.

His continued engagement in researching and writing about Kaizen techniques subsequently led to a collaborative project with his former Japanese professor, with funding from the Japanese government, to conduct a pilot study of transferring Kaizen to Ethiopia. The study involved bringing over a team of Japanese Kaizen experts to train 30 local small and medium-sized enterprises and evaluate its impact on productivity improvement over a period of time. Throughout this process, the returnee played a pivotal role in brokering the relationship between the local actors and the Japanese experts. He also mobilized support among the local firms and obtained high-level government endorsement for the project. The apparent success of the pilot project eventually led the Ethiopian government to set up a Kaizen institute within the Ministry of Industry and Trade for disseminating Japanese productivity improvement practices in Ethiopia. Both the interview and documentary evidence (e.g., academic writing and blog posts) show the ongoing involvement of this returnee in the activities of the institute and his instrumental role in stimulating local demand for diffusing Kaizen practices and in engaging local actors with overseas experts.

In sum, the three cases presented above show the pivotal role of returnees in creating organizational spaces that serve as focal points for local actors to participate in the knowledge relevance discovery process. The returnees are boundary spanners who do the work of knowledge translation and invest their efforts in connecting local activities to the knowledge and perspectives that they have acquired overseas. Knowledge relevance, in this sense, arises from engagement and alignment that involve relationship building and situated interaction between the returnees and local actors.

Future-making activities for catching up: Imagination and alignment

Small changes for improving the work environment: An office printer

Case 12 is a think tank researcher who obtained his PhD in Denmark and had worked for 2 years as a postdoctoral researcher in the United Kingdom. He returned to his former research organization after having spent 7 years overseas. While recognizing that his overseas academic training was 'technically a very good experience', he stressed that the most relevant and useful knowledge acquired was 'ways of doing things and how things are organized' and 'knowledge about what could be possible'. His overseas experience made him aware of what a good research environment should or could look like and the desire to seek improvement back at home. In the interview, he spoke about his attempt to transfer his overseas work experience and make small changes in his workplace at home:

> These are things I don't necessarily learn at the School [in Denmark], but these are things that you see around and stuff like that that actually enhances the way you do things. And definitely there is transfer that this is how I do things … It doesn't have to be very technical sometimes, but it's the way things are organised, and we have a lot of institutional issue, like there are quite a lot of differences in terms of research institutes set up here, as opposed to in Denmark or UK or elsewhere, so it is small changes.

One notable example was his request for an office printer, equipment that was 'just there' in the research institute in Denmark but not readily available back home in his workplace:

> I mean even a simple thing, if you go around in each office [in Denmark] you'll see a printer, and so a printer is just there, where actually you can use and stuff like that, so these things, you say, like this is how things should be …

In the interview, he also spoke about the possibility for the returnees in his organization to start building the momentum to develop the 'kind of systems' that they had seen overseas. His effort in engendering incremental small organizational changes appears to be influenced by his past experience overseas as well as his imagined possible future for his workplace back at home. The 'office printer' is a material artefact that provides an anchor and symbolizes a possible, better future.

National capacity building: The railway

Case 4 was a long-serving public sector employee in utilities and public transport whose mid-career professional development overseas (the United Kingdom and the Netherlands) inspired a strong belief in the critical importance of infrastructural capacity building as engines of economic development. During his time in Europe, he was struck by the centrality of railway systems for economic growth and became acutely aware of their steep decline back at home.

Soon after returning home, he seized an opportunity to take up an appointment in the newly formed national railway corporation:

> Because I realise here in this country railway we had that quite a century ago but that has declined and I have in, much enjoyed of all other things in Europe, all over Europe that the railway is most important, the life of all things, all activities, economic or even non-economy activities. So when this new idea comes I say I should be part of the history-making, this is a big opportunity.

Since then, he rose from a junior expert to a senior executive of the railway corporation. In the interview, his career narratives were intertwined with his expressed desire and vision for national capacity building: 'I think I have assumed this one [senor executive] to make an effort just to shape what has to come'. In other words, it was a role that gave him the opportunity to realize his imagined better future for the country. He spoke of the need for knowledge transfer by learning from overseas experts and was instrumental in forging links with them to help develop the necessary skills and capabilities needed for catching up. Ultimately, his aspired future revolved around developing the country's railway networks:

> 'In terms of capacity building, we have started a big programme, aggressive programme in the railway. And this, we believe in that railway is not only transport in the Ethiopian context, it's an engine for growth and development.'

The railway—what he saw and experienced in Europe some years ago—was a symbol of progress that drove his forward-looking and capacity-building activities back at home.

The two cases presented illustrate how the returnees made their aspirational learning relevant by undertaking future-making activities with the potential to shape the local context. These activities range from small-step changes initiated in their immediate work environment to national capacity building efforts. They are driven by the returnees' imagined desired futures expressed through expectations, ideas and plans about a possible better future. Their imagined futures are made real and concrete through acts of intervention in the contexts of their work and professional development and through material connection to the locality. The office printer and railways are 'material things' that participate in future making.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

This study has shown that transnational learning not only endows return migrants with new knowledge and perspectives but also provides them with the capabilities and cognitive-behavioural orientations to engage in knowledge transfer. It contributes to our understanding of knowledge transfer in an international migratory context in three ways. First, in contrast to the migrant transnationalism literature that overlooks the active role of individuals in learning and knowledge transfer, the situated and relational perspective adopted in this study stresses the agentic role of returnees in translating and transforming their overseas learning into relevant knowledge at home. It argues that return migrants are knowledgeable agents operating in multiple social, relational and temporal contexts. They are able to see familiar objects in a new light and have the capacity to modify their knowledge in response to situational exigencies. Their 'work of reconciliation' by means of engagement, alignment and imagination is what drives the development of relevant knowledge. Engagement and alignment reflect their capacity for critical intervention in resolving the disjuncture between the knowledge acquired overseas and the situation that confronts them back at home. Imagination denotes their ability to take themselves out of their sensory engagement with the present and to envision future possibilities. Emirbayer and Mische (1998) argue that actors positioned at the intersection of multiple relational-temporal contexts and face changing situations can expand their 'practical-evaluative' and 'projective' agentic capacity. The former refers

to the ability of actors to make practical judgements and choices in response to emerging demands of presently evolving situations, and the latter entails reconfiguration of received patterns of thought and action in relation to aspired futures. One might argue that the returnees' work of reconciliation in knowledge transfer encompasses these two aspects of agency: engagement and alignment constitute practical-evaluative agency, and imagination reveals projective agency. Projective agency was most apparent among the professional training returnees who were younger and displayed a stronger future orientation.

Second, the study challenges the assumption underlying much of the migrant transnationalism literature of a one-way linear flow of knowledge from the developed (host) country to the developing (home) country. The analysis shows that the knowledge and perspectives that return migrants acquired are products of transnational learning and not merely a unidirectional transmission of a stock of 'advanced' knowledge or 'new' ideas from overseas. As Akesson and Bazz (2015, p. 2) note, the successful return of migrants 'is a manifestation of a multi-directional transfer of various forms of capital, also acquired "at home" before migration and upon return'. More crucially, the relevant knowledge developed and transferred to the home context is a 'transformed mixture' of overseas knowledge deemed to be useful and local knowledge about its applicability. As the focal cases illustrate, return migrants play a pivotal role in creating opportunities for knowledge transfer through situated problem solving and interaction with local actors. They are 'knowledge transformers' who create new knowledge by blending and reconfiguring knowledge from host and home bases.

Third, the study also sheds new light on transnational learning as a mechanism linking return migration and development in the developed-developing country context. It broadens the conception of the learning experience acquired by return migrants and its impact on their propensity to act as agents of change in their home contexts. In addition to technical/professional and encultured learning commonly discussed in the literature, this study also highlights the 'aspirational' aspect of returnees' transnational learning. Aspirational learning gives these returnees the knowledge about alternative possibilities and provides them with the cognitive resources to aspire to a future that is different from the present. One might argue that aspirational learning endows returnees with 'psychological capital' in the form of confidence, self-efficacy, optimism and hope (Newman et al., 2014) that drive their engagement in future-making and change-oriented activities. Much of the existing debate about the migration-development nexus has been preoccupied with return migrants' mobilization of tangible economic, human and social capital to participate in local development. This study draws attention to the intangible, social psychological aspect that has been overlooked in the literature.

The study also contributes to Wenger's theory of situated knowledge and learning by extending its analytical scope beyond the traditional focus on groups and organizational boundaries to examine learning and knowledge transfer in an international migratory context. This brings into sharper focus the relational forces that influence learning and knowledge transfer and the agentic effort required to negotiate knowledge differences at the boundary. The developed-developing country migratory context accentuates the differences that characterize the relational property (e.g., novelty) at a knowledge boundary. Wenger's theory views knowledge differences as a source of tension and focuses on how individuals undertake the work of reconciliation to maintain community stability. This study argues that knowledge differences can be a catalyst for learning and energizing change-oriented initiatives.

Although this study is based on a group of highly skilled returnees in Ethiopia, the findings have wider relevance for our understanding of the development potential of return migrants and offer some practical implications. Policies for reversing the brain drain in developing countries have revolved around enticing the return of highly skilled migrants for transferring human capital in the form of advanced technical/specialist knowledge to induce technological innovation and business entrepreneurship. This study highlights the need for adopting a broader policy discourse on the meaning of development to include the wider realm of benefits, notably the organizational and social psychological aspects that return migrants may bring. This is particularly important for developing countries where resources for leveraging advanced technical knowledge may be limited, but micro-level efforts to pursue desired better futures through incremental organizational change may prove to be more generative and consequential in the long run. Particularly notable is the role of professional training returnees whose aspirational, forward-looking mindset appears to be an important

driver of change and development. Greater attention should be given to this group of returnees, which is currently less visible than the experienced diaspora returnees in scholarly and policy debates.

Finally, the nature of the sample calls for some qualification. The analysis is based on a small sample of highly qualified professional returnees with successful careers both at home and abroad. It may have exaggerated the positive transnational learning and knowledge transfer experiences of returnees. Research in the Eastern European context shows that highly educated return migrants may experience marginalization or that their knowledge may be perceived by employers at home in the negative light (Tzanakou & Behle, 2017). A more varied sample to include those who have been less successful in settling back at home would shed light on the difficulties that returnees face in reintegration and offer a more balanced portrayal of returnees' knowledge transfer experience.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

Research data are not shared (the interviews were conducted on a confidential basis).

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