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# **The Role of Organisational Support in Adjustment of Self-initiated Expatriates**

A Case Study of a Finnish Multinational Company

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**ABSTRACT:**

Globaali liikkuvuus on yhä useammin osana nykyaikaisia työuria ja globalisoituvassa maailmassa yritykset tarvitsevat työntekijöitä, joilla on taitoa suoriutua kansainvälisissä tehtävissä. Monet organisaatiot lähettävät omia työntekijöitään tilapäisesti ulkomaille, mutta yhä useammat hakeutuvat töihin ulkomaille itsenäisesti kasvattaakseen omaa urapääomaansa ja hakemaan uusia kokemuksia sekä mahdollisuuksia. Itsenäisesti ulkomaille hakeutuneet työntekijät (eng. self-initiated expatriates) sekä organisaatioiden lähettämät ekspatriaatit joutuvat sopeutumaan uuteen työhön, sekä kohdemaahan.

Ekspatriaatit saavat usein organisaatioilta tukea tähän muutokseen ja tutkimukset ovat osoittaneet tämän avustaneen yksilön sopeutumista uuteen ympäristöön. Kirjallisuus ei kuitenkaan laajemmin tunnista, että vastaavanlaista tukea saisivat myös itsenäisesti ulkomaille lähteneet, sillä yksilöt ovat tehneet itsenäisesti päätöksen siirtymästä ja tämän vuoksi tuen vaikutuksia ei ole juurikaan tutkittu. Tässä tutkimuksessa keskitytään tunnistamaan ja arvioimaan tapausyrityksen oma-aloitteisten ekspatriaattien saamaa organisaation tukea ja sen roolia sopeutumisprosessin tukemisessa.

Tämän tutkimuksen teoreettinen viitekehys perustuu Shafferin, Harrisonin ja Gilley'n (1999) sopeutumismalliin ja siinä esitettyihin organisatorisiin tekijöihin. Sopeutumismallin mukaan sopeutuminen on monialainen prosessi, jossa on ainakin kolme aspektia: sopeutuminen työhön, sopeutuminen vuorovaikutukseen kohdemaan kansalaisten kanssa, sekä yleinen sopeutuminen vieraaseen kulttuuriin. Teoreettisen viitekehysten organisaation tuen tekijöitä on laajennettu ottamaan huomioon myös aiheen tuoreemman kirjallisuuden löydökset. Tämä tutkimus on toteutettu laadullisena tutkimuksena, tutkimuksen aineisto on kerätty puolistrukturoiduilla haastatteluilla. Tutkimukseen haastateltiin seitsemää tapausyrityksessä työskentelevää oma-aloitteista ekspatriaattia, jotka ovat muuttaneet vuosien 2022 ja 2023 aikana työskentelemään toiseen maahan.

Tässä tutkimuksessa havaittiin, että tapausyrityksen oma-aloitteisille ekspatriaateille tarjottiin organisaation puolesta enemmän tukea siirtymään kuin mitä alan kirjallisuudessa on yleisesti tunnustettu. Normaalin organisaatiotuen lisäksi heille tarjottiin muuttoetuja (eng. relocation benefits), jotka yleisesti on tunnustettu vain ekspatriaattikirjallisuudessa. Tulokset osoittavat, että muuttoetuja arvostetaan suuresti, mutta oma-aloitteiset ekspatriaatit kokevat esihenkilöiden ja kollegoiden tuen merkityksellisimmäksi tuen muodoksi tukemaan sopeutumisessa uuteen ympäristöön. Esihenkilöiden ja kollegojen tuki auttoi erityisesti yleiseen sopeutumiseen sekä vuorovaikutukseen sopeutumiseen.

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**KEYWORDS:** self-initiated expatriates, adjustment, organisational support, expatriate management, international human resource management

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## Abbreviations

AE = Assigned Expatriate

IHRM = International Human Resource Management

Intra-SIE = Intra-organisational Self-initiated Expatriate

Inter-SIE = Inter-organisational Self-initiated Expatriate

HR = Human Resources

HRM = Human Resource Management

MNC = Multinational Corporation

SIE = Self-initiated Expatriate

## 1 Introduction

In an era of increasing globalisation, geographic mobility is becoming an increasingly common feature of today's modern careers (Fontinha et al., 2018). For organisations economic globalisation has created a need to have international talents with different skill sets to be able to compete globally and expand internationally (Altman & Baruch, 2012; Cao et al., 2014; Howe-Walsh & Schyns, 2010). Many companies assign their employees to work and live abroad, but many individuals also choose to move and work abroad on their own (Cao et al., 2014; Fontinha et al., 2018).

This study focuses on self-initiated expatriates; the individuals who have taken their own initiative to work and live abroad on their own arrangement rather than being sent or being supported by an organisation (Cao et al., 2014; Doherty et al., 2013; Fontinha et al., 2018; Wechtler et al., 2023). Even the motivations for the relocation vary on the individual level, these individuals are an important part of the global talent pool and are a strategically valuable resource for multinational companies due to the talent shortages. There is also a demand for such individuals as a result from globalisation (Cao et al., 2014; Wechtler et al., 2023).

Self-initiated expatriates are a valuable asset to organizations as they cost less than assigned expatriates in terms of living costs, salaries, and other financial issues, but also, they are an excellent source for knowledge, cross-industry skills, and network capital (Al Ariss & Crowley-Henry, 2013, Hussain & Zhang, 2021). To obtain workers with a higher potential for innovation, SIEs offer a viable option. These individuals bring fresh and creative concepts and viewpoints that can help to overcome local workforce skill gaps, but they also bring diversity to the organization to support flexibility and problem-solving. However, SIEs need to be able to adjust well in order to be able to innovate (Hussain & Zhang, 2021).

Since self-initiated expatriates change their working and living environments, they need to adjust to new environments and cultural settings of the new countries and

organisations (Kumpikaitė-Valiūnienė et al., 2022). The adjustment process is multidimensional, and according to some models it has at least three aspects: work adjustment, adjustment to interacting with host country nationals and general adjustment (Black et al., 1991; Shaffer et al., 1999; Strubler et al., 2011). The aim of the adjustment process is successful acculturation – to be able to cope with the new environment, reduce uncertainty, and understand the behaviours and attitudes that are proper in the new cultural setting (Hofstede, 2001, p.426).

One of the most studied aspects of IHRM has been expatriate adjustment. During the past a bit over a decade the SIE adjustment has also gained more attention and is currently one of the most studied topics in SIE literature as well (Brewster et al., 2021; Howe-Walsh & Schyns, 2010). However, most of the literature focuses on the individual factors influencing the adjustment and the performance of the SIEs without giving sufficient attention to organisational antecedents (Cao et al., 2014; Kumpikaitė-Valiūnienė et al., 2022). The impact of organizational culture and cultural novelty has been identified to influence the adjustment process (e.g., Black et al., 1991; Shaffer et al., 1999; Stubler et al., 2011), but more practical research on organizational factors and support is lacking from SIE literature (Brewster et al., 2021; Howe-Walsh & Schyns, 2010; Khedher & Asadullah, 2020; Kumpikaitė-Valiūnienė et al., 2022).

The expatriate literature has focused on the HR management practices prior to leaving the host country (e.g., Suutari and Bruch, 2001), but this cannot be directly implemented to the same extent with SIEs. As mentioned earlier, SIEs take employment abroad on local terms and are themselves responsible for organizing the relocation, meaning they often do not get incentives from the organization upon the relocation (Fontinha et al., 2018). Therefore, it becomes more relevant to pay more attention to organizational support after relocation to enhance the SIEs adjustment (Fontinha et al., 2018; Howe-Walsh & Schyns, 2010; Khedher & Asadullah, 2020). Organizational support has also been identified as an effective way to facilitate the adjustment of the SIEs, as well as

support the career satisfaction and intention to stay in the host country and organization (Cao et al., 2014; Howe-Walsh & Schyns, 2010).

Howe-Walsh and Schyns (2010) in their study suggested that HRM practises can lead to a more successful adjustment but provided no empirical evidence to support this claim. Khedher and Asadullah (2020) found in their empirical study focusing on Tunisian SIEs, that social and organisational support can help SIEs to adjust to the host country. There are multiple studies covering the aspect of organisational support practises when discussing about assigned expatriates (e.g., Suutari & Burch, 2001), however more extensive research is still lacking on covering the offering and the impacts of the organisational support for SIEs.

The common understanding in the SIE literature is that as the SIEs make the decision to relocate themselves, the companies do not offer any additional benefits or extra support upon the relocation, or that the offering is somewhat limited (Cat et al., 2014; Froese and Peltokorpi, 2011; Howe-Walsh & Schyns, 2010, Kheder & Asadullah, 2020). Hence, it is necessary to investigate whether the offering has changed as a result of increased globalisation, and to gather evidence on how the possible organisational support practises provided have impacted on the adjustment of the SIES.

## **1.1 Objectives and research questions**

This study analyses the impacts of the organisational support for the SIE adjustment in the host country, to understand what kind of support SIEs value the most, and to discover the possible unmet needs. The theoretical framework of this master's thesis is based on the adjustment model by Shaffer, Harrison, and Gilley (1999), but the focus is on the organisational factors presented in the model: supervisor support, coworker support, and logistical support. The organisational factors are slightly expanded to reflect also the more recent literature, including the organisational culture as a form of support. The objective of this thesis is to broaden the understanding of what kind of organisational support is provided for SIEs and to examine the impacts of the support and possible

relocation benefits. In addition, the thesis aims to identify how the support is perceived as well as the most valuable support factors that facilitate the adjustment.

The research question of this thesis is:

1. “What kind of organisational support is provided, and how such support impacts the adjustment of the self-initiated expatriates?”

## 1.2 Definitions of Key Concepts

To gain better understanding of the subject, the definitions of key concepts of this thesis are presented in this subchapter.

**Assigned expatriate:** An employee who is sent abroad to execute work by their employer, often to gain international experience, improve transfer knowledge of the managers or implement business opportunities. The length of the stay is predetermined, and the AE often receives a favourable contract, covering various support practises during, before and after the assignment e.g., accommodation, health care system, work arrangements for spouse, school, and day care arrangements for children. (Altman & Baruch, 2012; Andersen et al., 2008. p. 11; Doherty et al., 2013; Peltokorpi & Froese, 2009; Suutari & Bruch, 2001).

**Expatriate:** A person who is executing work abroad and has an employment contract with home or host organisation (Andersen et al., 2008. p. 28).

**International adjustment:** The level of psychological comfort and familiarity of the foreign environment. Can be seen as the level of ease or difficulty when being faced by the various issues related to living abroad. The adjustment can be understood as having at least three dimensions: adjustment to work, adjustment to interactions with host country nationals and adjustment to general environment. (Bhaskar-Shrinivas et al., 2005; Black et al., 1991; Peltokorpi & Froese, 2009; Shaffer et al., 1999)



**Inter-SIE:** Self-initiated expatriate that is not changing their employer when relocating abroad by their own initiative (Andersen et al., 2013, p. 30).

**Intra-SIE:** Self-initiated expatriate that is changing both, the employer, and the country on their own initiative (Andersen et al., 2013, p. 30).

**Self-initiated Expatriate:** An individual that moves abroad to work on their own initiative. They are employed with a local employment contract and often do not receive any relocation benefits. The length of their stay is often not determined beforehand, and it may vary even greatly on what they initially planned. The motivations to relocate are personal and may vary from finding career opportunities, gain skills to finding ways to prolong their travels. (Andersen et al., 2013, p.30; Doherty et al., 2013; Suutari & Brewster, 2000)

### **1.3 Structure of the Thesis**

This thesis is divided into six chapters. The first chapter introduces the work by presenting the background and research gap in the literature, as well as presenting the research question and the objectives of this thesis. The first chapter also includes the definitions of the key concepts. The literature review of this thesis is divided into two chapters; chapter two, which presents the main term of this thesis, 'self-initiated expatriate', in relation to assigned expatriates and migrants, and chapter three that focuses on the theoretical framework of the adjustment, followed by a closer examination of the determinants of the adjustment that are then linked to the self-initiated expatriates. Lastly, in chapter three, the theoretical framework of this thesis is presented.

The chapter four presents the methodology of this thesis, covering the methodological approach, data collection process and ethical considerations, data analysis, and trustworthiness. The fifth chapter presents the empirical findings of this thesis. In the last chapter, the findings of this thesis are discussed followed by the practical

implications, as well as the limitations of the study and recommendations for future research.

## **2 Self-initiated Expatriates**

In this chapter the focus is on self-initiated expatriates. The chapter starts by explaining the concepts of self-initiated expatriates, assigned expatriates, and migrants. This is followed by a discussion of the existing research on self-initiated expatriates in more detail.

### **2.1 The Concepts of SIE, AE, and Migrant**

Several researchers agree on the difference between the terms 'assigned expatriate' (AE) and 'self-initiated expatriate' (SIE) (Andersen et al., 2008. p. 11). The assigned expatriation path has been initiated and coordinated by the employer of the expatriate (Altman & Baruch, 2012; Peltokorpi & Froese, 2009). The purpose of the assignment may be to gain international experience for the expatriate, to improve transfer knowledge of the managers, to facilitate communication between the headquarters and subsidiaries to develop or implement business opportunities (Altman & Baruch, 2012; Andersen et al., 2008. p. 11; Doherty et al., 2013; Peltokorpi & Froese, 2009). The expatriation contracts of the AEs are often favourable, and the expatriate's family often relocates with the expatriate (Altman & Baruch, 2012; Andersen et al., 2008. p. 11). The length of the expatriation is predetermined within a certain time frame and after the expatriation the AE is expected to repatriate (Andersen et al., 2008, p. 16).

Self-initiated expatriates on the other hand, have made their own decision to relocate across national borders. Doherty, Richardson and Thorn (2013) suggest there are two essential components defining the SIEs: 1) a national border must be crossed during the relocation process, and 2) the initiation for the relocation must come from the individual, with individual choice being at the heart of the concept. SIEs take a proactive approach to the relocation process. In some cases the new employer may facilitate the process, but mostly the individual is responsible for the process (Altman & Baruch, 2012; Andersen et al., 2008. p. 11; Doherty et al., 2013). SIEs are less likely to gain career benefits directly from the relocation; SIEs relocate with the local contract and therefore

the contract is often not as favourable as what AEs receive (Andersen et al., 2008, p. 12, 29; Doherty et al., 2013). Unlike AEs, the length of the stay abroad for SIEs is often not predetermined; in general, SIEs tend to spend more time abroad than AEs (Andersen et al., 2008, p.16).

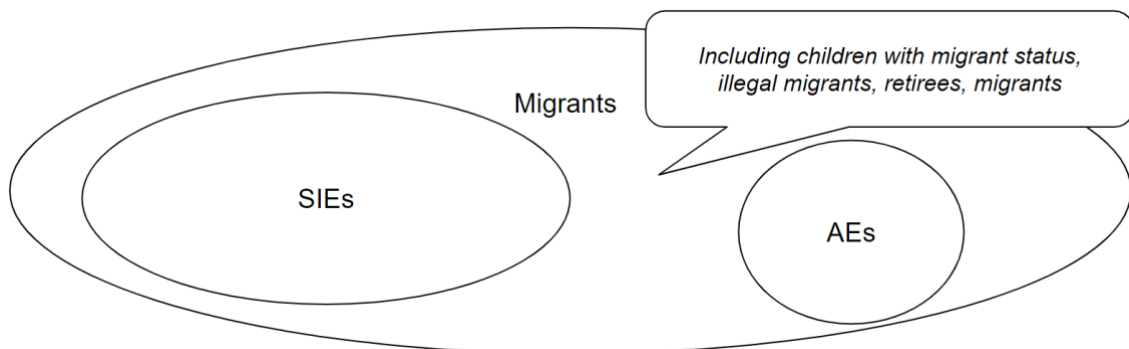
While the AEs are sent by the organisations, SIEs are a very diverse group what comes to the motives and the drivers of the relocation (Suutari & Brewster, 2000; Suutari et al., 2018). Suutari and Brewster (2000) identified six subgroups for self-initiated expatriates based on the different characteristics and individual variables: 1) young opportunists, 2) job seekers, 3) officials, 4) localized professionals, 5) international professionals and 6) dual career couples. Altman & Baruch (2012) on the other hand, identified two groups of SIEs in their analysis: career oriented SIEs and non-career oriented SIEs where the interests were things such as personal self-development.

The difference between self-initiated expatriates and migrants is somewhat less obvious. According to the United Nations definition, international migration refers to "a person who moves away from his or her place of usual residence, whether within a country or across an international border, temporarily or permanently, and for a variety of reasons" (International Organization for Migration, 2016).

According to Andersen, Al Ariss and Walther (2008, p.27) in contrast to assigned expatriates and self-initiated expatriates, the primary focus for migrants is movement across geographical borders rather than career opportunities and experience or organizational context and goals. The literature also identifies settlement in the new country and improvement of individual economic conditions as motives for migration. In addition, migrants are often categorized according to their political characteristics e.g., country of birth, country of residence and visa status. The expatriation literature does not identify these circumstances. When the term 'migrant' is being used, the emphasis is often on work, employment, under-employment, or unemployment than careers. (Al Ariss & Crowley-Henry, 2013; Andersen et al., 2008, p.27)

Doherty, Richardson, and Thorn (2013) suggest that the key difference between migrants and self-initiated expatriates is that migrants are expected to leave their home country on permanent basis, whereas SIE moving abroad will only be temporary. The careers of self-initiated expatriates are often described as boundaryless, meaning they can freely choose where to go and when to return (Al Ariss & Crowley-Henry, 2013). However, these perceptions are somewhat problematic; defining the temporary basis may be complicated as the temporariness may change over time, and it can also be outside of the consciousness of the individual (Doherty et al., 2013). SIEs also may get citizenship or permanent visa status and so become migrants (Andersen et al., 2008, p.12).

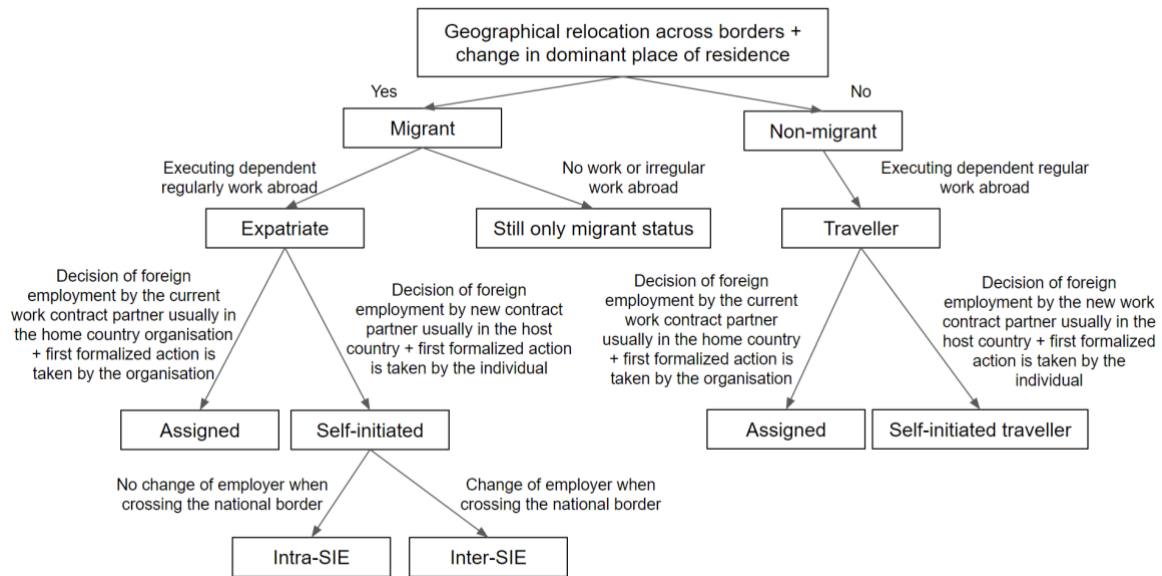
Al Ariss and Crowley-Henry (2013) state that the literature concerning the difference between self-initiated expatriates and migrants is ambiguous as it tends to focus more on the most privileged expatriates who are highly educated and skilled individuals. Therefore, when self-initiated expatriates come from less developed countries, or with less educated background they are more likely to be labelled as 'migrants' or 'immigrants' with no theoretical or methodological foundation (Al Ariss & Crowley-Henry, 2013). According to the study of Andersen et al. (2008) the term 'migrant' seems to be more of an umbrella term, also for SIEs and AEs (see Figure 1), even previously it was claimed to be a separate group from expatriates.



**Figure 1** Illustration of the terms (Adapted from Andersen et al., 2008, p. 32).

Andersen et al. (2013) conducted a qualitative content analysis of 244 definitions from sociological, psychological, and business journals to determine the difference between

AE, SIE, and migrant. As an outcome of this study, they created a decision tree (see Figure 2) to visualise the process of differentiating the terms mentioned. (Andersen et al., 2013, p. 30)



**Figure 2** Decision tree modelled from Andersen et al. (2013, p. 30).

The model illustrates the outcome of the study by Andersen et al. (2013), how anyone crossing the national borders and changing their dominant place of residence is considered as a migrant. A person who is executing dependence regular work abroad is considered as an expatriate. If the first initiative to work abroad is taken by the organization, the individual is categorized as an assigned expatriate. In contrast if the first initiative is taken by the individual, the person is considered a self-initiated expatriate. In conclusion, those groups located on the left side of the figure belong to a category of migrants, whereas those on the right who travel without changing their dominant place of residence are considered as travellers.

As seen in the Figure 2, self-initiated expatriates can be divided into two different groups: intra-organizational SIEs and inter-organizational SIEs (Andersen et al., 2013 p. 11). The first mentioned stay with the same employer but change the country. According to

Doherty et al. (2013), these individuals often seek international opportunities within their own organization, rather than 'waiting to be sent by the employer'. Inter-organizational self-initiated expatriates on the other hand change both the employer organization and the country. (Andresen et al., 2013 p. 11).

To conclude, the term 'self-initiated expatriate' (SIE) refers to an individual who moves to work abroad by their own initiative (Andersen et al., 2013 p. 11; Bieman & Andersen, 2010; Fonthinha et al., 2018, Wechtler et al., 2023). As self-initiated expatriates relocate with their own initiative without an organization sending them abroad, they are often responsible for the funding of their own expatriation. They will be employed under a local contract, although they may have the opportunity to negotiate some benefits. Furthermore, their length of the stay is often unknown at the time of the moving abroad but it also may vary from what they initially planned. (Andersen et al., 2013 p. 12; Suutari & Brewster, 2000; Tharenou, 2009)

In general, SIEs' motivations for moving abroad are personal: SIEs seek employment to follow an individualized boundaryless career path that offers them opportunities to gain skills, to build social networks that will enhance their careers, and to identify their own drivers and motivations that can be applied in the work context (Andresen et al., 2013 p. 11, 16; Doherty et al., 2013; Jokinen et al., 2008).

## **2.2 Existing Research**

The first studies that were focused on SIEs were by Inkson et al. (1997) where the differences between corporate expatriates and young New Zealanders were examined, and by Suutari and Brewster (2000) where the characteristics of those who voluntarily moved to another country to live, and work were explored. Since then, there has been a growing number of studies about the topic, and the number has increased rapidly within the past years (Brewster et al., 2021).

Up to now, the SIE literature has been focused to four major themes (Brewster et al., 2021, Doherty et al., 2013): 1) definition and analysis of the different types of SIEs (e.g., Al Ariss et al., 2010; Andersen et al., 2013; Doherty et al., 2013), 2) motivation and reasons to undertake the expatriation (e.g., Suutari & Brewster, 2000; Froese, 2012), 3) career aspects and outcomes (e.g. Jokinen et al., 2008; Biemann & Andersen, 2010), and 4) adjustment (e.g., Howe-Walsh & Schyns, 2010; Khedher & Asadullah, 2020; Kumpikaitė-Valiūnienė et al., 2022; Peltokorpi & Forese, 2009)

As mentioned, the relocation process of the SIE differs from the relocation process of the assigned expatriates and therefore the adjustment process also starts from different basis as there is no organisational preparation for the relocation in advance. Froese (2009) was one of the first to explore the factors influencing the SIE adjustment. It was found that the shorter the intended stay is, the more satisfied the SIE is. Adjustment was more difficult for those who had difficulties in understanding the local socialisation patterns or in finding a common language with host country nationals. Atay et al., (2023) on the other hand concluded that the language proficiency and cultural knowledge does not guarantee the success in work and life adjustment.

Even though the adjustment of SIEs has been one of the most researched aspects in the SIE literature, the focus has been more on the individual perspective, such as how the individuals features and motivation impacts on the adjustment (Cao et al., 2014; Peltokorpi & Froese, 2009). The literature on AEs has a strong focus on how the organisational factors and support facilitate the adjustment of the expatriates, but very little is still known about the impacts of the organisational support for the adjustment of SIEs.

Some studies have been conducted about the organisational factors' impacts on the adjustment of SIEs. Howe-Walsh and Schyns (2010) presented suggestions to HRM practises that can support the adjustment of the SIEs but provided no empirical evidence on this. Singh et al. (2022) investigated the causes of SIEs' work adjustment, finding that



the perceived organisational support and role clarity impact positively on the adjustment of the SIEs. Kumpikaitė-Valiūnienė et al. (2022) found that organisational culture that promotes involvement, informality between groups, and high communication can support the adjustment of SIE to their work and the host country in general. This paper aims to gain further understanding of the offering of the organisational support and their influence on the adjustment of the SIEs.

### **3 International Adjustment**

This chapter focuses on the international adjustment of self-initiated expatriates. First, the theoretical framework of adjustment is presented, followed by a closer examination of the determinants of the adjustment that are then linked to the self-initiated expatriates. Finally, the organisational factors influencing the adjustment of self-initiated expatriates are investigated. The last subchapter presents the theoretical framework of the thesis.

#### **3.1 The Framework of International Adjustment**

The expatriate adjustment process can be viewed from the point of psychological or sociocultural adjustment. A stressor-stress-strain framework has usually been used to understand this phenomenon (Bhaskar-Shrinivas et al., 2005). The idea of this is to view the uncertainties and demands in a foreign environment as stressors where the unfamiliarity of the new environment disrupts established routines and generates psychological uncertainty (Bhaskar-Shrinivas et al., 2005; Black et al. 1991). The adjustment can be specific to an organization, country, or the individual (Bhaskar-Shrinivas et al., 2005).

Hofstede (2001, p. 426) suggests that adjustment to the new culture and environment happens in four stages. At first there is a honeymoon stage, then frustration stage followed by a stage where some new behaviours have become routines. The last stage is when the adjustment is completed. According to Hofstede (2001, p. 426) there are three possible outcomes from the adjustment process: a) continue to feel alien and discriminated against, b) bicultural adaptation and c) going native. Out of those three outcomes, the last two can be considered as successful acculturation. The aim of adjustment to the new culture is acculturation; to be able to cope with the new environment, reduce uncertainty caused by the relocation, and discover and understand what behaviours and attitudes are appropriate within the new environment. (Black et al., 1991; Hofstede, 2001, p. 426; Howe-Walsh & Schyns, 2010)

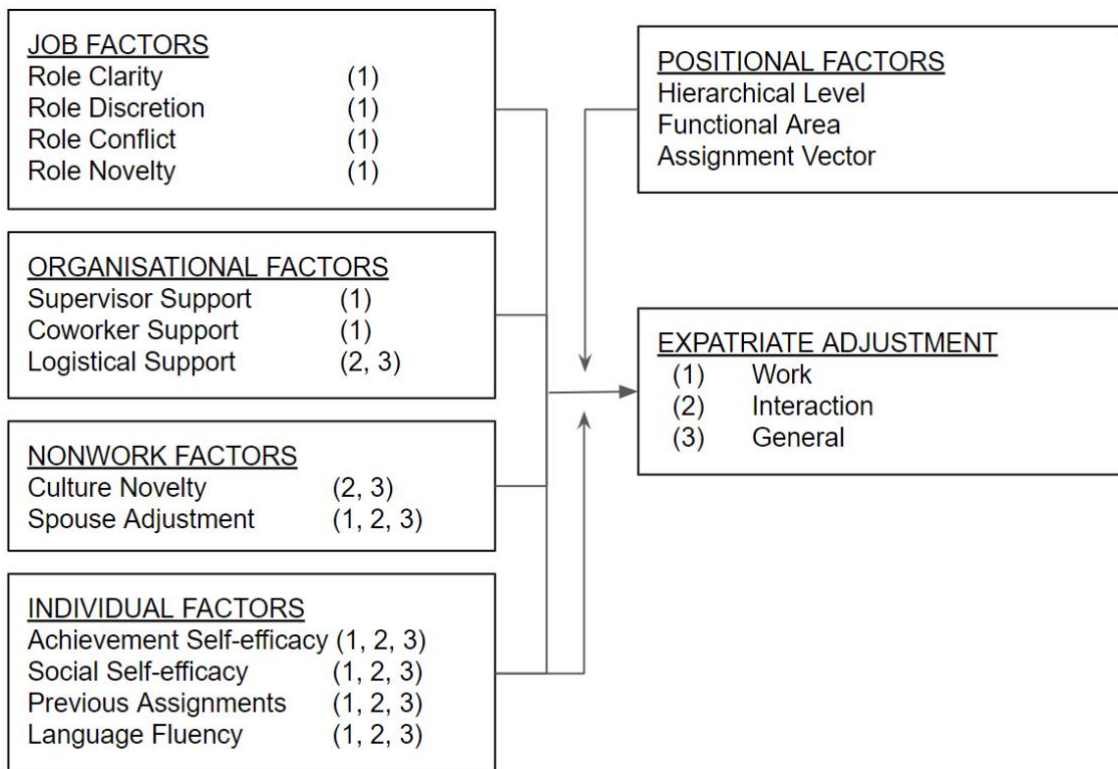
If an individual is unable to cope with and adapt to the stressors, stress emerges. Stress can impact the expatriate's adjustment and maladjustment causing strains, reactions to stress, that can be affective, cognitive, and behavioural. This can result in the expatriate becoming dissatisfied with the job, returning early, or underperforming at the job (Bhaskar-Shrinivas et al., 2005). The extent of adaptation challenges depends on both the originating and the recipient cultures; this level is also known as culture novelty or cultural distance (Black et al., 1991; Hofstede, 2001, p. 423). The greater the difference compared to the previous environment and experiences, the longer it would take to reduce the uncertainty to a comfortable level (Black et al., 1991).

Black, Mendenhall and Oddou (1991) developed a model of adjustment by integrating the theoretical and empirical work from international and domestic adjustment literatures. It is one of the most cited and influential theoretical models in expatriate adjustment literature, but it has been criticised as it is not empirically tested and is based on a small database and that the adjustment is seen as linear outcome (Agha-Alikhani, 2017; Brewster et al., 2021; Haslberger et al., 2013; Howe-Walsh & Schyns, 2010; Bhaskar-Shrinivas et al., 2005; Shaffer et al., 1991). The model identifies that the adjustment process is rather complex process (Bhaskar-Shrinivas et al., 2005; Black et al., 1991).

According to the model the international adjustment is a multidimensional process and has at least three aspects: 1) work adjustment, 2) adjustment to interacting with host country nationals and 3) general adjustment to the foreign culture (Black et al., 1991; Shaffer et al., 1999). Work adjustment refers to the level of comfort experienced with performance standards and expectations and work values (Bhaskar-Shrinivas et al., 2005; Peltokorpi & Froese, 2009, Shaffer et al., 1999). Peltokorpi and Froese (2009) define the adjustment to interactions in the host country as "the degree of psychological comfort regarding different communication and interpersonal styles used in the host culture". General adjustment can be defined as the extent of psychological comfort with aspects

of host country's culture environment, such as climate, health care, housing conditions or food (Bhaskar-Shrinivas et al., 2005; Peltokorpi & Froese, 2009, Shaffer et al., 1999)

Shaffer et al. (1999) expanded the model by Black et al. (1991) to include a broader understanding of the expatriate adjustment. They tested the model empirically and adjusted some factors to better capture the aspects of the adjustment; previous assignments and language skills to individual factors, and three positional factors, including hierarchical level, functional area, and assignment vector. The model by Shaffer et al. (1999) is presented in Figure 3 below. Even though the determinants are discussed individually after the Figure 3, it is crucial to comprehend that there are spillover and crossover effects between these aspects, and therefore the factors should be considered as a whole (Bhaskar-Shrinivas et al., 2005).



**Figure 3** Determinants of adjustment to international assignments (Adapted from Shaffer et al., 1999). The numbers indicate the corresponding variables.

**Job factors** such as role clarity, role discretion, role conflict, and role novelty have been identified as job factors that strongly relate to the expatriate's work adjustment (Black et al., 1991; Shaffer et al., 1999, Strubler et al., 2011). Role clarity has been identified to reduce uncertainty caused by the new environment, as clearly defined roles to support the expatriate's success. (Black et al., 1991, Shaffer et al., 1999). Clear role definition also supports role discretion, which allows individuals to shape their role to fit their work environment rather than adapting to the role (Black et al., 1991). This reduces uncertainty in new settings, as employees can transfer their previous work patterns to their new role (Black et al., 1991; Shaffer et al., 1999).

Role conflict and role novelty can generate uncertainty experienced by an individual (Black et al., 1991). If an individual experiences conflicting signals about what is expected of them, they are more likely to experience uncertainty, which inhibits the adjustment. A novel cultural setting can generate conflicting messages since individuals may not have enough comprehension of the cultural environment to understand the messages and determine whether, and how, to follow them (Black et al., 1991; Howe-Walsh & Schyns, 2010; Peltokorpi & Froese 2010). Similarly, the level of uncertainty increases with role novelty, the extent to which the individual's new role differs from the previous ones (Black et al., 1991). The greater the novelty, the greater the need for organizational support to avoid uncertainty (Strubler et al., 2011).

Black et al (1991) and Shaffer et al. (1999) identified culture novelty and spouse adjustment as **nonwork factors**. The level of the cultural novelty impacts the adjustment the same way as previously mentioned job novelty, both are expected to inhibit the adjustment; job novelty impacts the work adjustment, but culture novelty is believed to impact the other dimensions of adjustment (Black et al., 1991; Froese, 2009; Shaffer et al., 1999; Strubler et al., 2011).

The spouse and family adjustment impact the adjustment of the expatriate as well; if the family of the expatriate does not adjust to the new culture, it will have a direct impact

on the expatriate's adjustment (Bhaskar-Shrinivas et al., 2005; Black et al., 1991; Hofstede, 2001, p. 426; Khedher & Asadullah, 2020; Shaffer et al., 1999). In the study conducted by Khedher & Asadullah (2020) some SIEs even stated that they would be ready to return to the home country, if one of their family members would not manage to fit.

Shaffer et al. (1999) identified achievement self-efficacy, social self-efficacy, language fluency, and previous assignment experience as **individual factors** impacting the adjustment. General self-efficacy can be defined as individual's own beliefs in their capability shaped by their past experiences. Self-efficacy can be divided into social self-efficacy, which focuses on interpersonal relationship development, and achievement self-efficacy, where the focus is on the individual's performance achievements. Individuals' confidence and the beliefs of their own ability play a significant role in facilitating the adjustment. (Shaffer et al., 1999)

In their model, Shaffer et al. (1999) introduced previous assignments and language skills to their model to complement the view on factors impacting adjustment. Those individuals who have previous international experience tend to be more adaptive, as they already have experience on the adjustment process to the new environment. This experience helps the individuals in the adjustment process as they already know what has worked for them, and focus on those practices, rather than spending time on something that was not beneficial in the past. Similarly, they may be able to cope with the stress caused by the culture novelty better (Shaffer et al. 1999).

Black et al. (1991) identify three **organizational factors** that impact the adjustment of the expatriate: logistical support, organizational culture novelty, and social support. Shaffer et al. (1999) on the other hand identified the organizational support factors: logistical support, supervisor support, and co-worker support, playing a significant role in positive predictors of adjustment. They suggested that distinguishment between

organizational cultural novelty and cultural novelty in general is almost impossible and therefore they did not include this aspect to their model.

The international adjustment models by Black et al. (1991) and Shaffer et al. (1999) are both based on the traditional assigned expatriate literature; however, the framework can be applied to the self-initiated expatriates as well with some modifications. Both, assigned expatriates and self-initiated expatriates, change their dominant place of residence and they need to adapt to the new cultural setting in the host country (Andersen et al., p. 30), so their situations are similar on some level. However, the models are based on the literature about the assigned expatriates and therefore it cannot be applied directly as such.

The level of social support and logistical help differs greatly between the assigned and self-initiated expatriates. The social support mentioned in the model by Black et al. (1991) takes into consideration the support received from the home organisation and the host organisation, and the level of logistical help is greater with assigned expatriates. Black et al. (1991) also mention the organisation culture novelty and define it as the differences between the cultures of host and home organisations. However, this can only be applied to assigned expatriates and intra-SIEs as they only change the country, not the employer. As this thesis focuses on the organisational factors that impact the adjustment of self-initiated expatriates, the following subchapter will investigate these factors and their impact on adjustment based on the literature in more detail.

### **3.2 Organisational Factors and International Adjustment of SIEs**

In the expatriate literature on assigned expatriates, it has been recognized that the focus on HR management can be in support prior to leaving the home country and support in the new host country (Black et al., 1991; Suutari & Baruch, 2001; Waxin & Panaccio, 2005). Most of the expatriate literature on assigned expatriates has focused on the training in the home country (Black et al., 1991; Suutari & Baruch, 2001; Waxin & Panaccio, 2005), yet this cannot be applied to the SIEs as their situation differs from the

assigned expatriates. However, this does not mean SIEs would be unprepared, but that the preparation for the relocation is the responsibility of the individual in question (Howe-Walsh & Schyns, 2010). Therefore, the emphasis should be more on the in-country adjustment after the arrival (Kumpikaitė-Valiūnienė et al., 2022).

Assigned expatriates have a job arranged by the organisation in the host country, and the expatriation is often supported with training, assistance and compensation package that cover things like accommodation, education for children, support for spouse, and other support to help with settling to the new country (Howe-Walsh & Schyns, 2010; Suutari & Burch, 2001). Expatriate supporting practises have been identified to positively impact on the international adjustment of an expatriate (Shaffer et al., 1999; Wu & Ang, 2011)

As SIEs relocate due to their own initiative and take the employment on local terms, the organisational support in the host country becomes crucial; it is unlikely they get financial compensation from the host organisation or any specific support for the expatriation process (Cao et al., 2014; Fontinha et al., 2018; Howe-Walsh & Schyns, 2010; Peltokorpi & Froese, 2009).

One major factor affecting the attitudes and behaviours adopted by the employees is perceived organisational support (POS). Perceived organisational support means the level of which the individual believes the organisation values their contribution and cares about their well-being (Cao et al., 2014; Khedher & Asadullah, 2020). Even POS is fully subjective experience, organisations can endorse it with different practises, e.g., job training, rewarding, favourable job conditions, and supervisor support (Cao et al., 2014). The organisational factors that facilitate the adjustment process of self-initiated expatriates also enhance the perceived organisational support.

POS can affect the SIE's career satisfaction, organisational commitment, intention to stay, and improve SIE's adjustment to the host country and adjustment to work (Cao et al.,



2014; Khedher & Asadullah, 2020; Singh et al., 2022). The members of the host country organisation play a huge role in the adjustment process of self-initiated expatriates (Khedher & Asadullah, 2020). Also, the way the self-initiated expatriates are managed in the host country will contribute to their adjustment (Fontinha et al, 2018; Kumpikaitė-Valiūnienė et al., 2022).

Social support has a significant impact on the adjustment of expatriates, and it can be defined as a buffer for the stressors created by the uncertainties and demands of the new environment (Bhaskar-Shrinivas et al., 2005; Lee et al., 2013). From the organisational perspective social support can be categorised to supervisor and co-worker support (Shaffer et al., 1991; Stroppa & and Spieß, 2011). Supervisor and co-worker support promote the adjustment of an individual to work, but it has also been identified to impact positively to adjustment to the interaction with locals and adjustment to the general environment (Lee et al., 2013; Lee & Van Vorst, 2010). The social interactions within the organisation and the supervisors' availability to any questions have been identified to positively influence job performance, job satisfaction, and job stress (Stroppa & and Spieß, 2011), and so reduce uncertainties that support the adjustment of the expatriate. The co-workers have also a role in creating the feeling of belonging and acceptance, which facilitates the adjustment as well (Stroppa & and Spieß, 2011).

As discussed, SIEs take the employment on local terms instead of being supported by the sending organisation in the host country (Howe-Walsh & Schyns, 2010). As SIEs may lack the relocation support, or the level of support is lower compared to the AEs, they are more dependent on the social support of supervisor and co-worker support in the host country (Cao et al., 2014). This type of social support offers valuable information to SIEs, helping them to adapt to their new environment and culture by providing emotional support and guidance on adapting to the behavioural standards and cultural differences of the host country (Cao et al., 2014; Kawai & Mohr, 2015; Khedher & Asadullah, 2020; Lee et al., 2013; Mäkelä & Suutari, 2009). This type of assistance helps SIEs to adapt to

the new behavioural standards, but also it may help to shape the SIEs' own efforts and attitudes, thus further facilitating the adjustment process (Howe-Walsh & Schyns, 2010; Khedher & Asadullah, 2020; Suutari & Burch, 2001).

Recent SIE adjustment literature has also identified organisational culture as one organisational factor influencing the adjustment of SIE, not from the point of cultural novelty, but more as a facilitating factor for certain values that ease the adjustment (Khedher and Asadullah, 2020; Kumpikaitė-Valiūnienė et al., 2022). According to the results of the study conducted by Khedher and Asadullah (2020), some self-initiated expatriates defined organisational culture as an important form of organisational support. The reasoning for this was that it endorses certain values, like collaboration, distribution of responsibility, and teamwork, that impact the overall atmosphere and well-being positively.

Kumpikaitė-Valiūnienė et al. (2022) identified that organisational culture that supports employee involvement, friendly communication, employee commitment, and concern and trust with people facilitates the adjustment to work and non-work factors the best. This kind of culture also has informality between group members and friendly relationships, and it is also based on communication, loyalty, and interpersonal connections. It has been identified that organisational culture with supportive aspects facilitates the adjustment of the expatriates as it aids the expatriates to understand the new organisational and cultural setting better (Black et al., 1991; Kumpikaitė-Valiūnienė et al., 2022).

Dealing with matters related to the host country's environment, such as climate, health care, housing conditions, or food, are typically not relevant in normal HR practices on the local level, but they do become relevant when dealing with assigned and self-initiated expatriates (Howe-Walsh & Schyns, 2010). According to Wang and Tran (2012) the best way to support the expatriates' adjustment is to provide them relevant knowledge and support them to get to know the host country.

Logistical support is the support from organisation that eases the pains caused by the relocation and the support is often dealing with nonwork issues and supporting the nonwork aspect of adjustment (Black et al., 1991). Suutari and Burch (2001) identified various settling-in and support practices for assigned expatriates, including arrival and reception, accommodation, shopping, banks, transportation, public authorities, local laws/rules, health care system, schools and day care, free-time possibilities, work arrangements for spouse, and family social activities. As previously stated, support focusing on nonwork issues is more reported in literature on assigned expatriates than in literature focusing on SIEs (Cao et al., 2014; Fontinha et al., 2018; Howe-Walsh & Schyns, 2010; Peltokorpi & Froese, 2009). However, in the study conducted by Khedher & Asadullah (2020) HR arrangements and social events were identified as some of the primarily important forms of support from the organisation to endorse the SIEs' adjustment in the host country socially.

One additional form of support to enhance the adjustment of SIEs is logistical support or relocation benefits. This kind of benefits for SIEs have gained limited attention in the literature, despite the increasing amount of SIEs and global competition for talented employees. As mentioned, SIEs lack most of the nonwork support that traditionally is offered to assigned expatriates sent by an organisation, such as living allowances, payment for the education for children, and tax equalization (Howe-Walsh & Schyns, 2010; Konopaske & Werner, 2005; Peltokorpi & Froese, 2009). In AE literature it has been identified that logistical or relocation benefits can possibly reduce the uncertainties experienced during the international assignments (Sousa et al., 2017; Suutari & Burch, 2001).

As mentioned, relocation benefits and other financial benefits are typically not offered to SIEs, but some authors have identified that this kind of support could be offered to SIEs to support the adjustment (Howe-Walsh & Schyns, 2010) but also has been offered to SIE as well (Khedher & Asadullah, 2020), at least on some level. The article by Khedher

and Asadullah (2020) revealed that some SIEs have received per diems and other living allowances and rented apartment by the organisation at least for some time as their own flat was under construction.

Howe-Walsh and Schyns (2010) identified in their theoretical article that partner job search assistance, continuing education and allowances for professional seminars and conferences could further facilitate the adjustment of the SIE. Providing relocation benefits for SIEs can support the nonwork adjustment of the individual and strengthen the perceived organisational support and so also strengthen the work adjustment (Howe-Walsh & Schyns, 2010; Khedher & Asadullah, 2020).

Providing additional support can be expected to engage the individual's adjustment efforts as well and so further support the adjustment process (Howe-Walsh & Schyns, 2010). As this area has gained limited attention in academic literature, one objective of this thesis is to increase the existing research on the topic and find whether this kind of benefits, or if any, are provided to the SIEs in the case company.

### **3.3 Conclusions: The Theoretical Framework of the Study**

The international adjustment is a multidimensional and complex process where the individual is facing different stressors and if they are unable to cope with them, stress emerges (Bhaskar-Shrinivas et al., 2005; Hofstede, 2001, p. 426; Howe-Walsh & Schyns, 2010). Stress can cause strains, which are reactions to stress and may have a massive impact on the satisfaction levels of the individual related to the job and life in general in the host country, which can lead to underperforming or early repatriation (Bhaskar-Shrinivas et al., 2005).

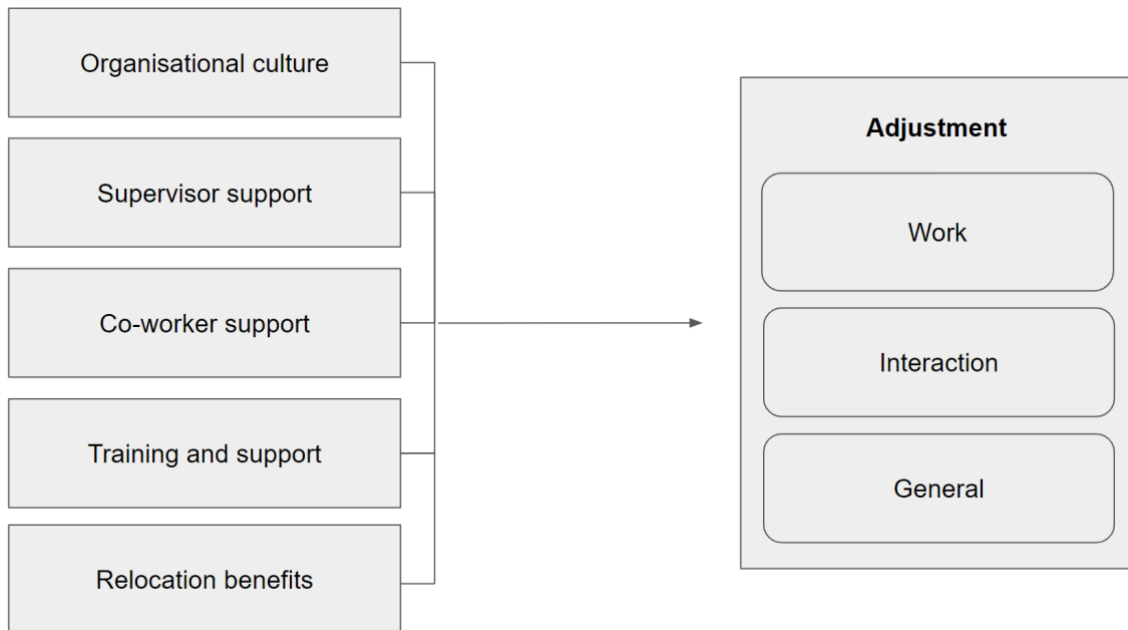
The multidimensional international adjustment has at least three aspects: 1) work adjustment 2) adjustment to interacting with host country nationals and 3) general adjustment (Black et al., 1991; Shaffer et al., 1999). The model by Shaffer et al., (1991)

includes five factors affecting the aspects of the adjustment; job factors, organisational factors, nonwork factors, individual factors, and positional factors.

The organisations can support the adjustment process of the self-initiated expatriates in multiple ways; however, the support practises are not traditionally incorporated with the self-initiated expatriates in the expatriate literature (Howe-Walsh & Schyns, 2010). When the organisations provide these support practises to SIE, they can reduce the time to proficiency and support job performance, but also support the employee experience, and so maintain the talent in the organisation (Al Ariss & Crowley-Henry, 2013; Howe-Walsh & Schyns, 2010; Hussain & Zhang, 2021).

Novel cultural setting in the host country and in the organisation bring challenges to the SIEs that are trying to adjust to the new environment. As SIEs often change their employer as well, and so enter to a completely new environment, support from the receiving organisation is almost crucial to support the smooth transition for the SIEs. Even though adaptation depends a lot on the individual - their skills, abilities, and past experiences - the organisation can still support the transition with practises related to practical, informational, and emotional support. The support provided by the organisation does not only help with to adjustment, but it also helps to increase the organisational commitment, intention to stay, and career satisfaction in general. (Howe-Walsh & Schyns, 2010; Cao et al., 2014; Khedher & Asadullah, 2020; Suutari & Burch, 2001)

Even though this study introduced in further detail the determinants of adjustment presented in the study conducted by Black et al. (1991) and Shaffer et al. (1999), the focus of this paper is on the organisational factors that support the adjustment process. The research model used in this study to understand the benefits of the organisational relocation support practises more in-depth is presented below in Figure 4. The advantages of these support practices and the perception of support for SIEs are investigated in more detail.



**Figure 4** The theoretical framework of the thesis.

The framework presented in Figure 4 is based on the literature review. The organisational culture aspect was included as the relevance of it as an organisational support practise to facilitate the adjustment was mentioned in some recent studies (Khedher & Asadullah, 2019; Kumpikaitė-Valiūnienė et al., 2022). The aim by adding this aspect to the theoretical framework is to further evaluate whether it has an impact on the adjustment of self-initiated expatriates and can be classified as support practise in this context, and if so, how the organisational culture is perceived and what kind of impact it has on the adjustment.

Supervisor support and co-worker support were also identified as forms of organisational factors that support the adjustment of self-initiated expatriates (Bhaskar-Shrinivas et al., 2005; Cao et al., 2014; Kawai & Mohr, 2015; Khedher & Asadullah, 2020; Lee et al., 2013). Supervisor support and co-worker support are used in this theoretical framework instead of social support as it captures better the form of the possible support provided, outlining for example home organisation support that is not applicable in this context.

In the theoretical framework of the thesis, the logistical support mentioned in the model by Shaffer et al., (1999) is replaced with training and support, and relocation benefits, to capture the forms of the support better in the context of self-initiated expatriates. In this thesis support and training are understood as for example training, information packages, help to build networks, or any other kind of support that may also be offered to a local employee with a local contract. Relocation benefits are understood as more tangible financial support practises, such as various kinds of allowances, tax benefits, use of consultants to help settling in, paid accommodation, flight tickets, or moving services that are agreed because of the *relocation* of the employee.

## **4 Methodology**

This chapter covers the methodology of the study. First different research methods are explained from the theoretical viewpoint. Then this section continues to explain further why certain methods were selected for this study and how this study was planned and conducted. Finally, the chapter discusses the reliability and validity of this study.

### **4.1 Methodological approach**

The aim of this master's thesis is to gain understanding on how the organisational support facilitates the adjustment of self-initiated expatriates, and what kind of support the MNC in question offers to its SIEs. Therefore, it can be stated that this is an explanatory study. Explanatory study refers to research where the aim is to conduct the research to understand the causal relationship between different variables in a certain situation (Saunders et al., 2007, p. 134). The different variables in this study are the support practises offered by the organisation, and their impact on the adjustment of the SIEs.

Research approaches can be inductive, deductive, or abductive. Deductive approach means that the hypothesis is developed and tested, whereas in inductive approach data is collected and the theory is developed as the result of the analysis (Saunders et al., 2007, p. 117). Abductive approach on the other hand means that the theory or the results are formed based on the theoretical framework and the findings of the research (Tuomi and Sarajärvi, 2018). In the present study, abductive approach was adopted.

The research strategy of this thesis is case study. In case study research the research questions are related to solving and understanding the case in question by empirical investigation (Eriksson & Kovalainen, 2011, p. 115; Saunders et al., 2007, p 139). Case study research allows to present complex real-life issues in rather accessible and understandable way (Eriksson & Kovalainen, 2011, p. 115). A case study approach was



adopted to gain detailed understanding of the phenomena that is not fully known, but detailed examination is needed.

Case studies can be single case studies or multiple case studies (Eriksson & Kovalainen, 2011, p. 118; Saunders et al., 2007, p. 140). The focus of a single case study is on aiming to get deep understanding on a unique case and to provide in-depth understanding of it, whereas multiple case studies focus on drawing and producing generalizable constructs by contrasting similar cases (Eriksson & Kovalainen, 2011, p. 118-119; Saunders et al., 2007, p. 140). As this study focuses on one organisation, the study can be considered as single case study.

Another dimension of case studies is embedded v. holistic. Embedded case study focuses on sub-units within the case in question, e.g., departments within an organisation. Holistic case study on the other hand sees the case, e.g., the single organisation as a whole (Saunders et al., 2007, p. 140). As the aim of this thesis is to gather awareness of the impacts of the support practises to facilitate the adjustment of SIEs within the whole organisation, this study can be considered as holistic case study.

This thesis examines a Finnish multinational corporation founded in 1948 that operates in oil and gas industry focusing on the renewable solutions, also on polymers and chemicals industries. The company has production in four countries and is operating in 16 countries globally with a strong focus on the markets in Europe and North America. The company had an average of 6 018 employees in 2023. The revenue in 2023 was EUR 22.9 billion, and the comparable EBITDA was 3,458 million euros. The mission of the case company is to create a more sustainable future by developing innovative solutions and responsible business practises. The case company aims to be the global leader in sustainable aviation fuel and renewable diesel, and to create value with renewable and circular solutions. (Case company annual report, 2023)

From the human resources point of view, according to the case company's annual report 2023, the company wants to provide meaningful work for competent talents and aims

to create an environment where individuals are encouraged to be drivers of their own personal growth, and feel safe, be respected, and can be themselves. The company is highly relying on the individuals who work with passion and have a strong drive to create change. This has also been included to their employer value proposition. (Case company annual report, 2023)

The company hired around 1 400 new employees globally during the year of 2023, from which 66 per cent were to permanent positions. The company has identified in their risk evaluation that they are dependent on the highly skilled employees, and due to the intense competition for talent there is a risk that they may struggle to recruit and retain talents that are critical for the operation and strategy development in the future. (Case company annual report, 2023)

#### **4.1.1 Qualitative research method**

There are various data collection techniques that can be divided into quantitative and qualitative methods. Quantitative methods, such as questionnaires, produce numerical data. On the other hand, qualitative methods such as interview or observation, create non-numerical data. Videos and photographs, data that is something else than numbers or words, can also be classified as qualitative data (Saunders et al., 2007, p. 139, 145). Quantitative methods try to generalize data, whereas qualitative methods are aiming to understand the phenomenon and the reasons behind it (Kananen, 2017, p. 32)

In quantitative research the questions to carry out the data collection can be predetermined as the phenomenon and the theories are well known. Qualitative research is used when the aim is to understand a certain phenomenon that is unknown and to get a profound understanding of it. As the phenomenon is unknown, the precise questions to collect the data are hard to determine upfront. Therefore, understanding the factors, influential relationships of the phenomenon, and what the phenomenon is really about is vital. (Kananen, 2017, p. 32-33)

Interviews are the most used data collection methods in qualitative research (Kananen, 2017, p. 88). There are multiple interview types, such as structured interview, in-depth interviews, and semi-structured interviews (Kananen, 2017, p.88; Saunders et al., 2007, p. 311-312). The interviews can also be divided based on the number of participants to individual or group interviews (Kananen, 2017, p. 88).

Semi-structured individual interview was selected as the data collection method of this study. The semi-structured approach was chosen because the aim is to understand the causal relationships between the adjustment of SIEs and the organisational support. Semi-structured interview provides an opportunity to ask additional questions if needed and so gain a deeper understanding of the topic in question (Saunders et al., 2007, p. 312).

In semi-structured interview the list of certain themes and questions that will be covered during the interview are determined before the interview by the researcher, however the exact questions and their order may vary in every interview (Kananen, 2017, p. 88; Saunders et al., 2007, p. 312). The aim of the interview is to capture the understanding of the phenomenon that is being in the centre of the research (Kananen, 2017, p. 90). The pre-determined questions produce pieces of information that is then further investigated with clarifying questions. The outcome of the interviews is a holistic view of the experiences of the interviewee supporting the understanding of the phenomenon in question (Kananen, 2017, p. 90).

## **4.2 Data collection process**

As mentioned earlier, the semi-structured interview was selected as the research method, and it requires the list of themes and questions to be covered during the interview. The plan for the interview themes and questions was formed based on the theoretical findings presented previously in this paper. The interview plan is presented in Appendix 1. Before starting the interview process with the self-initiated expatriates of

the case company, a test interview was conducted with a self-initiated expatriate working in a different organisation.

The interview plan was created in a manner that would allow the respondents to fully understand the questions, therefore the use of theoretical concepts and jargon was avoided, as suggested by Saunders et al. (2007, p. 324). To develop a good holistic understanding of the respondents' experiences and thoughts, the questions were only open-ended questions.

The data for this thesis was collected from the self-initiated expatriates of the case company who have relocated during 2022 and 2023. In September 2023 a review of the self-initiated expatriates' experiences on the relocation was conducted in the case company. In this survey the participants were asked to enter their contact details if they would be interested in participating interviews for this master's thesis related to the same topic. Twenty respondents from five different countries left their contact details and ten of them were asked to attend the interview. The candidates were selected randomly, but at least one person from each country was being contacted. Out of all the ten respondents that were contacted seven were interviewed. Four interviews were conducted in English and three in Finnish. The language of the interview was planned to be English, however as the researcher is Finnish, it felt more natural to speak in Finnish with the Finnish interviewees.

The interviews were conducted during January 2024 via MS Teams. The MS Teams was selected as the tool for the interviews as the interviewees were located across the world and the researcher and the participants were familiar with using the MS Teams. The interviews were recorded and transcribed via MS Teams. The transcripts were later anonymised and proofread to ensure the quality of the data.

The interviewee profiles can be seen below in Table 1. The interviewees were originated from four different countries: Finland, Türkiye, South Africa, and Portugal. They relocated

to five different countries: Singapore, Germany, Finland, USA, and Netherlands. Three of the interviewees had been employed with the same company also in another country before relocating to a new host country and can so be considered as intra-SIEs. The rest of the interviewees did not have any previous experience working in the case company. Five of the respondents were reported to work in dispersed or distributed teams and had either supervisor or some team members located in another country.

**Table 1** Overview of the interviewees.

	Nationality	Country of relocation	Intra SIE / Inter SIE
SIE 1	Finland	Singapore	Intra SIE
SIE 2	Türkiye	Germany	Inter SIE
SIE 3	Türkiye	Finland	Inter SIE
SIE 4	Finland	USA	Intra SIE
SIE 5	South Africa	Germany	Inter SIE
SIE 6	Finland	USA	Intra SIE
SIE 7	Portugal	Netherlands	Inter-SIE

All of the respondents were highly educated: two had completed bachelor's degree, four respondents had master's degree and one respondent had completed doctoral degree. All respondents had at least some level of previous international experience, ranging from travelling and business trips abroad (N=1), participation on PhD programme abroad (N=1), multiple (SIE) assignments completed abroad (N=2), completing additional studies or student exchange abroad (N=2) and having a summer job abroad (N=1).

Four of the respondents relocated with their family (partner and at least one child), one relocated with their partner, one relocated alone, and one respondent had their partner in the host country already. The reasons behind the relocation varied from personal reasons to personal growth and career aspirations and finding a safer place to live and grow for the children.

#### **4.2.1 Ethical considerations**

Ethical issues should be anticipated and handled throughout the research process, starting from the designing stage (Saunders et al., 2007, p. 182). *Being ethical* means that there is no harm caused by the research project for the participants or are affected by it (Saunders et al., 2007, p.178, 182). According to Saunders et al. (2007, p. 181) general ethical issues relate to privacy of the participants and possible participants, voluntary nature, consent, maintenance of confidentiality, reaction of the participants on how the data is being collected (e.g., stress, embarrassment or discomfort), effects on the participants (e.g., stress, embarrassment or discomfort), and the behaviour and objectivity of the researcher.

To avoid ethical issues the participants were informed about the participation rights and the use of data. The respondents were informed about the purpose of the study beforehand and that the study was organised in collaboration with the case company. The nature of the data collection method, interview via MS Teams was informed beforehand, as well as the estimated length of the interview. It was also highlighted that attendance to this research is entirely voluntary and that the interviewees have a right not to answer questions or topics they wish not to answer. The interviewees were also informed that the researcher will be the only one to have full access to the raw data and that the anonymity and confidentiality will be protected. The researcher also informed the participants that in case they have any questions at any stage about the research they can contact the researcher.

#### **4.3 Data analysis**

The aim of the data analysis is to understand, describe and narrate the phenomena in question and end up to successful interpretations (Juuti & Puusa, 2020/2020, chapter IV., Laadullisen aineiston analysointi). Content analysis is one of the most commonly used methods in qualitative research. Implementing the content analysis includes choosing the analysis units (what is interesting and valid for the study), getting to know the

content, labelling the analysis units, and separating them from the main content, categorising or theming the units, and lastly summarising the content (Juuti & Puusa, 2020/2020, chapter 9., Näkökulma laadullisen aineiston analyysiin; Tuomi & Sarajärvi, 2017/2018, chapter 4.1., Yleinen kuvaus analyysin toteuttamisesta). The analysis process is multiphase, and the various stages occur simultaneously during the entire process. The challenge of content analysis is to determine what is meaningful for the study; some information may be relevant even if it was not considered previously, while other information may not be relevant no matter how interesting it is (Tuomi & Sarajärvi, 2017/2018, chapter 4.1., Yleinen kuvaus analyysin toteuttamisesta)

The theoretical review has an impact on the analysis and therefore the researcher should simultaneously go through the theoretical literature (Juuti & Puusa, 2020/2020, chapter IV., Laadullisen aineiston analysointi). This supports the researcher to understand what kind of categories or themes should be used in the analysis to increase the understanding of the phenomena. (Juuti & Puusa, 2020/2020, chapter IV., Laadullisen aineiston analyysi)

After the transcripts were proofread and anonymised and then read through carefully a couple of times, the data was coded based on the relevancy based on the research questions and the theoretical review. After this, the data was categorised based on the themes identified in the theoretical part and the theoretical framework of this thesis (see Figure 4). The themes were marked with different colours and notes. After each transcript was processed separately, the final table was formed to help with the analysis.

#### **4.4 Trustworthiness**

A part of good research practise is the evaluation of the trustworthiness of the research practises and the principles of why the research can be considered as reliable (Juuti & Puusa, 2020/2020, chapter 11., Mitä laadullisen tutkimuksen arvioinnissa tulisi ottaa huomioon?). *Reliability* means the degree the outcomes of the study can be repeated and are consistent with the previous findings (Tuomi & Sarajärvi, 2017/2018, chapter

6.2., Laadullisen tutkimuksen suhde luotettavuuskysymyksiin). In qualitative research the reliability of the research cannot be expressed with objective and measurable factors, but the reliability is viewed within the framework of the research and based on what kind of methods have been used (Juuti & Puusa, 2020/2020, chapter 11., Mitä laadullisen tutkimuksen arvioinnissa tulisi ottaa huomioon?).

It has been argued that there are four possible threats to validity: subject or participant error, subject or participant bias, observer error, and observer bias. The time of the week may generate different answers depending on the respondents' feelings; during the Friday afternoons the respondents may feel more positive than during the Monday mornings and this can be seen from the results. Therefore, the aim would be to time the interviews or questionnaires during a neutral time of the week to avoid subject or participant errors. (Saunders et al., 2007, p. 149-150)

The participants may also answer questions in the way they expect the research wants them to answer, causing subject or participant bias. The researcher should have this on their awareness and try to avoid this problem when designing the research, for example by ensuring anonymity in questionnaires or paying extra attention when analysing the data. (Saunders et al., 2007, p. 149-150)

The researcher may also impact negatively on the reliability. The questions should be asked in a way that the researcher is not influencing the answers, causing observer errors. Structuring the interview will reduce this threat. Lastly, observer bias may occur during the analysis process if the researcher is influencing the interpretation of the replies. (Saunders et al., 2007, p. 149-150)

*Validity* evaluates whether the phenomenon in question is being measured unbiasedly and accurately and whether the study is focusing exactly on the phenomenon that was intended to be studied. Validity can be internal or external. *Internal validity* shows the causal relationship between two variables and *external validity* whether these findings



can be applied to other population as well, e.g., the research outcomes can be generalised to other situations, organisations, or persons. (Juuti & Puusa, 2020/2020, chapter 11., Mitä laadullisen tutkimuksen arvioinnissa tulisi ottaa huomioon?; Saunders et al., 2007, p. 151)

Saunders et al. (2007, p. 150-151) present six possible threats for validity. Firstly, history may impact the outcome of today's research. Secondly, testing may impact the outcomes if the respondent believes they will disadvantage them in some way. Thirdly, if the instrumentation varies through the study, the outcomes may also change and vary. Fourthly, the attendees dropping out during the study, especially during longitudinal study. Similarly, any other events during the study may impact the outcomes. Lastly, ambiguity over causal direction that refers to the position where it is not known whether the examined variable is causing the effect identified on dependent variables.

In this qualitative research the reliability and validity threats were tried to minimise with careful planning. The participants were able to choose the time best for them to have neutral timing for the interview and so avoid possible participant errors. The questions for the interview were planned in a non-directive way, tested in a pilot interview, and edited as needed to avoid participant bias and observer errors. As this research was organised in collaboration with the case study organisation, and the researcher was also employed at the case organisation during the research, the confidentiality of the interviews and the anonymity of the interviewees were highlighted to build trust and encourage the participants to speak freely, and so avoid the participant bias. All interviews were recorded to allow the researcher only to focus on the interview and the interviewee.

## 5 Empirical Findings

This chapter presents the findings of the interviews conducted for this master's thesis. The chapter is structured based on the theoretical framework presented in Figure 4 which was also the basis of the interviews: organisational culture, supervisor support, co-worker support, training and support, and relocation benefits. Finally, the chapter discusses the development ideas recommended by the interviewees.

### 5.1 The Impact of Organisational Culture

In this section the characteristics of the host organisation's organisational culture is being discussed, followed by discussion on how such characteristics impact on the adjustment of the self-initiated expatriates. The respondents had positive experiences of the organisational culture; they used positive adjectives when being asked to describe the organisational culture. The most common features in describing the organisational culture were related to flat organisation, low hierarchy and the overall environment being supportive and multicultural.

*I can say very positive, I always feel very positive about the organisation. Why? Because the bureaucracy is low and the opportunity to think of new things is high, very easy. The relationship between the colleagues or the management is very healthy and respectful. Really good environment. (SIE 3)*

*I think it's very flat organisation here – we have an open office, and everyone is seated in the same space, and you can go talk to anyone. It is not like you cannot talk to someone who is 'higher rank', I think it is very flat organisation. (SIE 1)*

*I have a good impression of the organizational culture. I would say that it is very transparent. So, we would know what to, what are the main goals and what to what is the focus. (SIE 7)*

Individuals with prior experience working for the case company in a different location noted similarities in the overall atmosphere of the office compared to their previous experiences. The similarities were related to the values and the ways of doing things, e.g., workplace dress code being quite casual. However, some differences were also

identified. It was noted that the organisation in the host country seems to be flatter and more outgoing than what it was in the home country due to the size of the organisation. One respondent also identified that the organisation in the host country is not as international and diverse compared to their previous experience.

*Here it's easier to approach the local management versus that you would approach the management in Finland -- I feel like the organisation here is flatter. (SIE 6)*

*Yes, I maybe feel that it is fairly local, that most of the employees at the office are local. There is only a few who had come from somewhere else, that it was a bit surprising. I somehow thought that because [case company] is a Finnish company, there would be more people from elsewhere and maybe more international environment, but it is quite local. (SIE 1)*

When being asked whether the organisational culture in the host organisation has had an impact on their adjustment to work, the answers varied from positive to neutral impact. The experiences of the positive impacts were related to the supporting, open, and welcoming culture that enables to ask for help and support when needed and having clear goals on what is expected. One interviewee said that the adjustment to work has taken a bit more time than anticipated due to the cross-cultural differences, e.g., different communication styles within the organisation, but that their past experiences have helped to overcome it.

The familiarity of the organisational culture helped the intra-SIEs to adjust to work as the ways of working and operating at the host organisation were similar compared to their previous experiences. However, one mentioned that the impact was neutral, as the job in the host country is very much the same as they had in the home country, and for example many colleagues were already familiar for them.

*I would say the saving grace has been that the [case company] is Finnish company. If I would work in a company that is not Finnish, but truly American, there would be a lot more to adjust to. (SIE 4)*

*I kind of cannot figure out any easier way to adjust, I have familiar company, familiar job, familiar colleagues, familiar city, so it was kind of like packing the bags and jumping to another city [--]. (SIE 6)*

The interviews did not reveal any notable impact of the organisational culture on the interaction adjustment in the host country. However, the majority of the interviewees felt that the caring and open organisational culture has had a positive impact on the general adjustment as there has always been help and support available if needed, also with the topics that are not related to work. The open culture has also facilitated the support if an individual has experienced difficulties in their personal lives.

*It is very sound culture; I mean it is accepted by everybody and it is performed by everybody, let me say, [--] everybody is following these organisational culture aspects and there's not much difference between people. So, there is a really quite high standard that I didn't expect any surprises. This helps a lot. I mean when you want to talk to somebody new for something, you can easily do that. (SIE 3)*

*Oh, it tremendously supported. I must honestly say the care I experienced that that people care, and that people come alongside you, that they help you. So, they're ten out of ten. I really appreciated it and as I indicated, uh, the German HR office was very supportive, and I felt that times they went the extra mile and my line manager as well. (SIE 5)*

One interviewee noted that the locality of the organisational culture is having some negative impact on the interaction adjustment, as the locals have their own lives and therefore, they may not be that interested in spending time and getting to know someone who is there only for a few years.

## **5.2 Supervisor Support**

This section first explores how the SIEs perceive their relationship with their supervisors. Then, the focus shifts to how the relationship with the supervisors and their support has impacted the adjustment of SIEs. When being asked to describe the relationship with their *supervisor*, most of the respondents described it with positive adjectives. It was

stated that the relationship is good, the supervisor is supportive and encouraging, and the supervisor is respected. Two of the interviewees work in dispersed or distributed teams where the supervisor is located in another country, or the closer supervisor is from another company. However, they still had a local supervisor or a supervisor from the case company as well. In these cases, the role of the supervisor was more distant compared to those whose direct supervisor was in the same location and from the same organisation.

*We met during the induction week at the office and said hi, and that's about it. So, it's a bit weird how it goes in my case, because the supervisor I have as an official supervisor in the organization, I'm not involved with them at all. In practise they only approve my travel invoices. (SIE 4)*

*In the beginning it was difficult as [--] the team has a leader, but I'm not in that team, my supervisor is in Finland. So, at first it was like how this goes, as I'm not in that team, but I kind of am here in Asia. It was a bit of a weird pattern in the beginning, but yes, eventually everyone found their place. (SIE 1)*

Those whose direct supervisor was co-located reported a stronger and even close relationship with their supervisor. The supervisors were reported to be available on any questions the interviewees had and provided support on work or non-work related topics actively. One mentioned that they knew their supervisor already before the relocation and had quite close relationship already before the relocation. The interviewee told that the supervisor helped them to receive the keys to their rented apartment when the lease started, and they were not in the country yet. The supervisor also offered to take the interviewee to furniture stores and order packages to the supervisor's house in case they would like to order some kitchenware already before their arrival, so everything would be ready when they arrived. Similar support was also mentioned by other interviewees.

*My supervisor, my manager had to leave the keys of his apartment that he uses when he comes to the city to me, I mean he gave the keys so we can stay there during the Christmas time. (SIE 2)*

*He really was supportive, in meeting me when we came to look, to see the side. Meeting me and my wife and my family, uh, living the care value. I think that is essential providing you comfort that he will support. And when we had difficulties, he would reach out to HR and find out how the company could support and overcome our challenges. (SIE 5)*

The co-located supervisors of the interviewees were actively supporting the adjustment to work. Many supervisors were reported to help the interviewees to get to know the local colleagues and partners, offering trainings for the job if needed and providing clear expectations and goals as well as being available to any questions.

*Um, so in the beginning, so during the recruitment process, I would say that he gave me a very clear explanation about what I would need to... what would be my role in the in the in the team [--] and shared additional trainings that are not part of the welcome onboard [package], I would say they are more focused on our jobs [--] in the first days or weeks we had frequent conversations to see 'how are you doing, how are you adapting, do you need anything from me?' [--] (SIE 7)*

Three interviewees said that they have had discussions about the local culture or cultural differences with their supervisor. These discussions were supporting the interaction adjustment as the aim was to understand how to interact with the locals and navigate in the cultural differences within the dispersed teams.

*At the beginning I was asking him for example 'what does it mean if Finnish person do this, does mean something positive or negative?' The famous silences or things like this. (SIE 3)*

*He is German guy, so he knows German culture and he actually can look at the German culture from outside, because he also spent a lot of time outside, and he knows the multicultural environment and so on. So, he was empathic and trying to explain me everything about the country, about the culture. (SIE 2)*

The supervisors were also reported to support the general adjustment to the host country. As mentioned, many supervisors were available on all the questions the interviewees had. Five respondents stated that their supervisors provided support on general adjustment, e.g., finding a good area to live, where to get furniture, where to

find local services or where to spend time on the weekends, but they also provided mental support to overcome the challenges caused by the relocation.

*He cared that it wasn't a line manager who didn't understand that you are relocating and you're finding your feet as a family. I think it's extremely important from an organisational perspective, that there's understanding. (SIE 5)*

*He was the only person I could reach, so I reached him. [--] At the weekend, where should I take the kids for skiing or leisure? He has similar age kids and ok, I could google and find some solutions, but things all around the kids get sick, ok, what is the best way to solve that moment, even those type of things I contacted him. Or deciding on the location of the house for example, for the rental. (SIE 3)*

Those who had a close relationship with their supervisor really appreciated and were grateful on the support, and level of help they got from their supervisors.

*The most important part of my adjustment procedure was him, because as I said, he, he helped me in in my social life, in like arranging my life here and also, he helped me in the company as a professional. (SIE 2)*

*Well, probably so much that I will never be able to pay back. I have been arranging all kinds of dinners et cetera as a thank you and tried to help them with everything if they have needed any help. (SIE 6)*

### **5.3 Co-worker Support**

Exploring another form of social support from the organisation, this section starts by focusing on the relationship between the SIEs and their co-workers in the host organisation, followed by a discussion about the impacts these relationships and support has for the adjustment of the SIEs. The relationships with *co-workers* were found generally supportive and mutually respectful. One interviewee referred to their own team as a little family who supports each other, and the personal chemistries work very well. Another interviewee stated that they have a lot in common with their team members, like similar mindsets and they were happy to work with them.

*It is kind of a cliché to say, but the team we have here, we are kind of like a little family. (SIE 6)*

*We have a very good relationship, with a lot of things in common [--]. I think we have a similar mindsets and similar way of being like... we care about each other's and so. We also have a good match in working ethic. So besides, we like to talk about other things besides work [--]. (SIE 7)*

However, two respondents reported that even though the relationship is supportive, there have been some conflicts in their own team due to cultural differences and conflicting points of views, but these issues were addressed with cultural training and open dialogue. One also noted that the team spirit was not as warm what they were used to. In the host country, it appeared that everyone went to have lunch by themselves, whereas the respondent was used to a culture where colleagues often asked to have lunch together.

Based on the interviews the biggest impact on the co-worker support was to general adjustment. All respondents had had at least some level of support from their co-workers, but the level of the support varied a lot. The co-workers were also reported being available for questions the interviewees may had and providing information when needed. However, it was discovered that the individuals who found others with similar backgrounds received significant support from them in terms of general adjustment.

*So particularly one based in Dusseldorf, he helped me a lot. I mean, he offered like his help, and we did everything together. We just discovered, uh, everything in the company together. So, he helped me a lot and that was great. [--] I mean he has two small daughters, and he understands what we were going through. He also relocated from USA to Germany some time ago. So, that he is sharing his experience helped a lot. (SIE 2)*

*Let's just say, the colleagues who are from Finland have helped me tremendously and without these Finnish colleagues it would have been a lot harder to adjust. During the first weeks we went to see a baseball match, and all that kind of stuff. There was something to do during the weekends and evenings. If someone needed to go to do groceries but didn't have a car, we went together and that kind of stuff. It helped a lot. (SIE 4)*



*It's quite an international office from a European context perspective, and they were other colleagues that went through similar relocation experiences. And umm, I could speak to them, ask advice, and in general they were very helpful and supportive so... just knowing that other families, other people have gone through a similar experience, and you could reach out that was helpful. (SIE 5)*

Similarly, those individuals who received support for general adjustment from co-workers with similar background, received also support for interaction adjustment from them. The other respondents did not mention that they would have received support to understand the local culture or interpersonal styles used in the host culture from the co-workers. However, one mentioned that they have learned little by little after interactions with the locals, even though they have not received any direct support.

Some respondents also mentioned that they have received some support for work adjustment from their co-workers. One valued that the co-workers are more experienced in the company so they can always ask help from them. Another interviewee stated that they actively give and get feedback from their co-workers and that the co-workers explain things in more detail if needed, support is always available. Two respondents also felt they did not receive any support, or only minimal support from their co-workers to work adjustment. The main reason for the other respondent was that they were already quite familiar with the job as an intra-SIE, but they also did not have any direct team members when they arrived.

#### **5.4 Training and support**

This section starts by identifying the training and support forms the respondents were offered based on the interviews, followed by the discussion on how such support impacted the adjustment of the SIEs. The *training and support* identified from the interviews is presented in Table 2. below. All the respondents received at least some training and support from the organisation. The most mentioned form of support was induction training for the job and the organisation. It was appreciated that the values of the company and the local employment matters were communicated clearly. However,

some of the online trainings were found boring, repetitive, and time consuming, but they were still found useful to understand the organisation better.

**Table 2** Training and support identified based on the interviews.

Training and support	N=
Induction training to job and organisation	4
HR support	3
Language course	2
Training related to relocation and life in the host country	1
Training about inclusion and diversity	1
Cultural training	1

The support from HR was mentioned by three participants. It was told that the HR supported also on the topics that were not related to employment matters. Several interviewees reported that the HR was being caring and going for an extra mile to support their comfort in the host country.

*I go to the office and there was someone from HR asking to have a coffee and a chat with them. They were asking if I had some hobbies and told that they know someone if I want to go do something with them, and all that kind of unofficial support. But also, official support. The support was from both aspects [--]. (SIE 6)*

*So yeah, so I must say I experienced the value care. I didn't once feel that from a [case company] perspective, they didn't try to support me. So, there I have to say when I struggled with getting the kids placed in the school, I felt actually that the [case company] HR went the extra mile that called the school. They tried to help, they supported, so that meant a lot to me. So, that went very well and that was surprising in the sense that I actually felt that they went the extra mile relative to support I got from my previous companies. (SIE 5)*

The development suggestions for the training and support were related to the coverage of the training and information packages to address general things, e.g., local housing, banks, local regulations, healthcare, pension funds, and generally what kind of documents are needed.

*Well, I would say it would have been definitely helpful, that there was some kind of information package, or some kind of cultural training available. (SIE 1)*

*I think the cross-cultural sensitivity training is a big gap and I think if [case company] wants to become an international company, they need to include that even if it's a one-hour session over Zoom with an expert consultant in this area, that can be a big a big help. (SIE 5)*

One inter-SIE also reported that there were some issues understanding what support comes from the global level and what is the responsibility of the local HR team as there have not been many internal relocations. This caused uncertainty and resulted the inter-SIE to solve the issues by themselves.

*From the [local] HR no one could not tell how things work from the home organisation's end, and there they said that Global Mobility will take care of everything because they are used to having only [assigned] expatriates there. But when you ask in Espoo, they said that they don't take care of your things are you are relocating with a local contract, that the local HR should take care of you. It was like a vicious circle that who will take care of this. At the end of the day everything was taken care of when you started to do things by yourself. (SIE 4)*

The overall impacts of training and support for the adjustment varied from neutral to positive. The training and support were identified to create a positive and caring environment where questions are welcomed, and the individuals feel appreciated, even though some aspects were vague. This supported the general adjustment and the work adjustment of the individuals as they had a feeling they were not alone, and help was always available on work and non-work related things.

*In a way, yes, in the sense that there was a feeling that the organization takes care of the employee. That if you have any questions, you can ask and we are here for you [--] that if there were any questions you knew where to ask, you were not left alone. (SIE 4)*

*So of course, the company expects you to deliver the work that you were hired to, but also you feel appreciated, like they care about you, not only as a professional person, but also like if everything is alright with you [--]. (SIE 7)*

The impact of the training and support on interaction adjustment was not identified during the interviews. However, the two interviewees who were offered to go to a language course to learn the local language stated that the course had a positive impact on their interaction adjustment in the host country.

*And then also I have to say what I appreciate is that the local German HR office arranged for all the newcomers and those interested who want to learn German, the language. I appreciated that tremendously and just being able to greet people in German, just being able to order something in German already helps with the adaptation to your new environment [--]. (SIE 6)*

*In the course, besides learning the basics, but it was also focus on the daily activities and a little bit about the history and the traditions they have here. So, it was also important to understand the little bit more the culture of the country. [- -] but I would say the course, it was also important for my adaptation, I would say for sure. (SIE 7)*

## 5.5 Relocation Benefits

This section starts by identifying the relocation support offered by the case organisation based on the interviews. Later, the impact of the relocation benefits on the adjustment of the SIES is discussed. When asked whether the interviewees received any *relocation benefits* upon their relocation, six out of seven respondents said they did receive some benefits. The relocation benefits mentioned by the respondents during the interviews are presented in Table 3. One respondent who did not receive any benefits said that it was never discussed as the decision to relocate was made before they got the job from the case company.

**Table 3** Relocation benefits mentioned during the interviews.

Relocation benefit	N=
Relocation allowance	6
Consultancy services with administrative issues	6
Moving of the belongings	5
Consultancy on finding house and/or school for children	5

Tax service for first year	3
Flights	3
Temporary accommodation for two weeks	3
Rental car for the initial period	1
Pre-visit	1

As shown on the Table 3 above, the most common relocation benefits based on the interviews were relocation allowance and consultancy services on administrative issues. Moving of the belongings and consultancy services on finding a house or school for the children were the second most common. Only one mentioned rental car for the initial period and the pre-visit.

*Umm, they supported us in moving, moving out stuff, all the visa procedures and documentation, and the Blue Card application. But still we had to pay the fees and so on. They supported us with two weeks of temporary accommodation, and I think like another relocation support for six months. I don't remember the amount, but they gave me six months of support to settle down. And the consultancy for all the administrative documentation things. (SIE 2)*

Two interviewees mentioned that they declined some of the support offered. According to one respondent, they declined some benefits as they did not feel they were necessary. Additionally, the benefits would have been considered taxable benefits in the host country. Another respondent stated that the benefit offering arrived too late, rendering it partly unnecessary.

*I was offered these after I was already living in Singapore, so the offering arrived a bit late. But I got a certain amount to spend on the new apartment and furniture and other things. And the flights to Singapore were covered. And if I would have had any hotel expenses before my own apartment was ready, they would have covered for two weeks of accommodation. But as said, this came too late so I couldn't use for like hotel. (SIE 1)*

Relocation benefits were considered adequate in terms of coverage, but the level of support was considered somewhat inadequate. All three inter-SIEs who arrived with their families found the level of benefits inadequate in terms of the relocation allowance

and the length of the accommodation provided. One intra-SIE considered the amount of the relocation allowance to be sufficient but suggested that the amount could have been higher to cover mandatory deposits when opening electricity contracts and other expenses due to the credit score system. Even the benefits were found somewhat insufficient, two respondents stated that they would have not survived or taken the opportunity to relocate at all.

*As I said, without them I would not survive, even though there were, like some obstacles and impediments to remove. But it helped me a lot really, helped me a lot. (SIE 2)*

*If the relocation benefits were not offered, I would not have taken the opportunity. (SIE 5)*

The consultancy services with administrative issues and finding a house and school were found the most useful form of the relocation benefits. One respondent mentioned that there were some issues with the communication with the consultant, but the help was still much appreciated. Overall, the consultant support was found to ease the pains caused by the administrative issues and settling to a new county.

*There was no need to stress about those things, someone just told you what needs to be done and booked the appointments for you [--] of course you can manage it by yourself as well, but it made it a lot easier as there was no need to stress about those things. (SIE 6).*

It was found that individuals who relocated with their families seemed to value the relocation benefits more highly than those who arrived alone or only with their partners. Those who arrived with their families worried about their family's adjustment and wellbeing. The relocation support provided by the case company was found to ease the adjustment challenges faced by the whole family, but also gave the SIEs some peace of mind.

*From my wife's perspective and from the family perspective, the support to find the school, the house and to settle as a family, I think for my wife that was far more important than for me. And I think what she appreciated really, is that*

*there's somebody who could help finding potential schools and potential houses. So, it provided a lot of comfort. Not just to me, but to my wife and children in general as well. (SIE 5)*

The interviews indicated that the relocation benefits had the biggest impact on the general adjustment perspective. The relocation benefits supported the SIEs to focus on their own adjustment and their partner's or family's adjustment as the benefits were able to tackle some of the challenges and time-consuming practicalities.

*Well in general they [the benefits] had a big impact, [--] if I had to take care of it all by myself it would have been quite a big task to take care of. There would have been the job and then you would have had to run all those things outside of working hours. So, that must have been quite a lot to do. They [the benefits] made it a lot easier. (SIE 4)*

*[--] there was a consultant appointed to support with the government registration, finding the house, all of those aspects that... was supported with. Took an immense amount of stress of me and my wife. (SIE 5)*

Two respondents also felt the relocation benefits supported their adjustment to work. One interviewee said they did not miss any days of work due to the administrative practicalities which helped them to focus on the job and other relevant things. One interviewee stated that the benefits made them feel more secure when they were at work as they knew someone was taking care of them and their family.

*It made it a lot easier [--] I did not miss any days at the office. So, in that sense it helped a lot, things did not go too hectic and that I was able to focus on more relevant things. Without those [the benefits] it would have been quite different. (SIE 6)*

*I felt little more secure when I'm doing my job. I mean I'm trying to get more used to the working environment and during the onboarding procedure. So, I mean someone is looking after me and taking the appointments from the city and so on. Of course, from work point of view it helped a lot. (SIE 2)*

A common view of the respondents was that the relocation benefits had no impact on the interaction adjustment. However, one respondent felt that the as the benefits saved

some time from mandatory practicalities, they had more time to meet local people and get to know them.

## 5.6 Perceptions on the Most Impactful Support

This section investigates the perceptions of the most impactful forms support based on the interviews. When the participants were asked to describe what they think had the biggest impact on their adjustment in general, the responses varied. These responses are gathered in Table 4.

**Table 4** Most impactful form of the support on the adjustment.

Most impactful form of support	N=
Co-workers	5
Supervisor	4
Consultancy	2
HR-team	2
Ability to meet colleagues at the office	1
Feeling connected to the company goals: proud of being part of the team	1

As shown in Table 4, it can be stated that the people in the host organisation played the biggest part in the adjustment of the interviewees according to their own views. Most of the respondents mentioned that their co-workers had the biggest impact on the adjustment on the adjustment, the second most mentioned form of support was the supervisors.

*As I said, and let me start with the job, as I said, my supervisor has the biggest impact. So, he helped me a lot. My colleagues here, not the teammates, but the colleagues here. The HR, the office manager, the ones that I see when I go to the office, they helped me a lot. I mean, just by like suggesting something new that I did not know, or the consultancy did not mention about, so, it helped me a lot. So, in the in the working environment, I think my colleagues and my supervisor. So, in in the daily life, consultancy helped us. But I think we were lucky, and we met with*



*nice people. (SIE 2)*

*It [the most impactful form of support] has been clearly the people here. Like the co-workers, and some of them have become very close to me. [--] as I know many of them beforehand it was easy to come as I knew I had the support for everything. (SIE 6)*

Out of the categories in the theoretical framework of this study, the consultancy services from the relocation benefits were found to be one of the most impactful forms of support by two respondents. In the training and support category, the support of the HR-team was also mentioned in two interviews.

## **6 Discussion and Conclusions**

This chapter presents the conclusions of the master's thesis and reflects on the research findings in relation to the previous theoretical literature. Additionally, the limitations of the research are discussed, and suggestions for future research are provided.

### **6.1 The Main Findings of the Study**

The aim of this research was to identify the organisational support provided to SIEs and evaluate the impact of such support on the adjustment of the SIEs. The research was conducted as qualitative approach and abductive approach were adopted. The data was collected by conducting semi-structured interviews with seven respondents, focusing on the theoretical framework of the thesis (see Figure 4). The themes of the interviews were organisational culture, supervisor support, co-worker support, training and support, and relocation benefits. The participants in this study were self-initiated expatriates who were employed by the case company and have relocated during the years 2022 and 2023.

The international adjustment of the expatriates, including the self-initiated expatriates, is a multidimensional process, that has at least the following three aspects: 1) adjustment to work, 2) adjustment to interaction with host country nationals, 3) adjustment to general environment. All the three adjustment aspects are defined based on the individuals comfort experienced in the certain environment, at work, when interacting with host country national or in the general environment of the host country (Bhaskar-Shrinivas et al., 2005; Peltokorpi & Froese, 2009, Shaffer et al., 1999). The aim of the adjustment is successful acculturation which means that the individual is able to cope with the new environment, reduce uncertainty and understand the behaviours and attitudes in the host country (Hofstede, 2001, p.426).

In the literature on assigned expatriates, it has been identified that the organisational support practises have impacted positively on the adjustment of the expatriates (Shaffer et al., 1999; Wu & Ang, 2011). The SIE literature has commonly understood that as SIEs

relocate with their own initiative and with the local employment contract, they are unlikely going to receive any other organisational support than what is being offered to a local employee (Cao et al., 2014; Fontinha et al., 2018; Howe-Walsh & Schyns, 2010). The results of this study revealed that the SIEs of the case organisation receive different forms of organisational support, also beyond the basic offering of the local employee.

In this study, it was identified that the characteristics of *organisational culture* of the case organisation was found similar in different the locations. The organisational culture of the case organisation was perceived to be flat organisation, with low level of hierarchy, where the overall environment is found supportive and the relationships within the company are perceived as caring. Kumpikaitė-Valiūnienė et al. (2022) identified that culture that promotes friendly relationships and informality between group members support the adjustment of the SIEs. In the study by Khedher and Asadullah (2020) it was found that organisational culture can promote certain values, such as collaboration and teamwork which has a positive impact on the atmosphere and wellbeing, and so supports the adjustment of the SIEs.

Similar findings were identified in this study. The characteristics of the case company's organisational culture was found to support the work adjustment and the general adjustment of the interviewees by having an open and caring environment, where people were open to answer the questions of the SIEs as well as support them if needed. Those SIEs who had previous experiences from the case company found a lot of similarities in the host organisations culture and their previous experiences. It was discovered that the similarities e.g., ways of working and values, helped these individuals to adjust to the host organisation and helped to tolerate the cultural differences.

The impact of organisational social support has been identified to have significant impact on the adjustment of the expatriates (Bhaskar-Shrinivas et al., 2005; Lee et al., 2013). The organisational social support in this study was considered as supervisor support and co-worker support. This type of support has been identified to provide valuable

information, emotional support, and guidance to SIEs to help to adjust to the new environment and cultural setting (Cao et al., 2014; Kawai & Mohr, 2015; Khedher & Asadullah, 2020; Lee et al., 2013; Mäkelä & Suutari, 2009). Khedher and Asadullah (2020) identified that the members of the host country organisation play a huge role in the adjustment of the self-initiated expatriates. The findings of this thesis indicated similar results: the SIEs valued the most co-worker support and supervisor support.

The relationships between the respondents and their *supervisors* were found close and caring in the cases where the supervisor was working in the same location as the SIE. In the cases, where the respondent was working in dispersed or distributed teams the relationship with the supervisor was found to be more distant, or even non-existent. The co-located supervisors were reported to be open for any questions, help to get to know the local colleagues, and offer training to support the SIEs adjustment to work. The supervisors were also found to offer support the SIEs general adjustment by recommending the SIEs a good area to live, advising to find local services and provided mental support to overcome challenges caused by the relocation, and interaction adjustment by explaining the cultural features of the local culture to the SIEs.

Some of the respondents who had a close relationship with their supervisor reported that they had received support from their supervisors also on the things that were work related. Some of the supervisors really took an extra mile to help the respondents to support a smooth beginning in the host country, e.g., by giving keys to their apartment while they were away or helped to furniture the house. This kind of support was highly appreciated. In these cases, it was found the supervisor support had a great positive impact on the general adjustment of the respondents.

All the respondents received at least some level of support from their co-workers, e.g., emotional support, providing information related to work and general living, as well as help to navigate with the cultural differences. The co-worker support was identified to have the biggest impact on the general adjustment, and interaction adjustment.

Respondents who shared a similar background with a co-worker, such as being from the same country or someone who has also relocated, received significant support from them to help with general adjustment and interaction adjustment.

The offering and the impacts of the *training and support* were also identified. It was found that the most common training and support offered to SIEs was similar to what is also generally offered to new local employees, e.g., induction training to job and organisation and HR support. However, the level of the HR support was found to go beyond the job-related issues in some cases, such as helping to find a school for the children of the SIEs.

Two of the respondents were offered to attend a language course which was found to be greatly impactful on supporting the interaction adjustment. Only one mentioned they had received training related to relocation and life in the host country, similarly only one received cultural training. It was found that the SIEs would have seen this kind of training and support useful to support their general adjustment to the host country.

Overall, the impacts of the training and support varied between neutral to positive, and it was found to support the feeling of that the company cares about the individual and that they are not alone. This was identified to support the general adjustment of the individuals as well as the work adjustment. The respondents would have valued more emphasis on the cross-cultural training and information packages that could provide basic information about living in the host country, e.g., local housing, banks, local regulations, healthcare, and pension funds.

In the AE literature it has been recognised that relocation benefits can ease the pains and uncertainties caused by the relocation and so support the adjustment of the individual (Sousa et al., 2017; Suutari & Burch, 2001). Howe-Walsh and Schyns (2010) suggested that this kind of support could be offered to SIEs to support their adjustment. Khedher and Asadullah (2020) identified that some forms of relocation benefits have

been offered to Tunisian SIEs. This thesis had similar findings, identifying relocation benefits being offered.

Six out of seven respondents interviewed for this study were offered relocation benefits. All of them were offered relocation allowance and consultancy services with administrative issues, most of the respondents were also offered moving of the belongings and consultancy on finding house or school for children. Other forms of relocation benefits identified were tax service for the first year, flights and accommodation for two weeks. One also reported receiving a rental car for the initial period, and one reported having a pre-visit to the host country prior to the relocation.

The relocation benefits were found to support particularly the general adjustment of SIEs, as the relocation benefits, especially the consultancy services, helped to focus on the new normal everyday life from the beginning instead of 'running around all those things outside of the working hours'. It was also mentioned that due to the relocation benefits, not a single day of work was missed due to the administrative issues, which allowed the individual to fully focus on their new role and adjustment to work and organisation.

The offering of the relocation benefits was found sufficient in general; however, the level of the support was considered somewhat inadequate. The respondents who arrived with their families felt the level of two-week accommodation and the relocation allowance was not enough. Despite that, the respondents still felt they would not have taken the opportunity at all to relocate, and the relocation benefits helped them to 'survive'. Overall, it was found that the individuals who relocated with their families seemed to value the relocation benefits more than those who arrived alone or just with their partner. It was identified that the relocation benefits were able to ease the stress and give some peace of mind to the SIEs, when they knew someone was taking care of them and their family.

Consultancy from relocation benefits was highlighted as one of the most impactful forms of organisational support. Even though it was identified that the relocation benefits were able to ease the pains caused by the relocation, it was found that the consultancy had the most significant impact on the adjustment of the SIEs. It was also the only relocation benefit mentioned when the respondents were asked to reflect on the most impactful form of support.

## **6.2 Practical Implications**

The findings of this thesis offer valuable insights in understanding the relevance and the impact of the organisational support provided for SIEs. Based on the findings it can be stated that the support from the supervisor and co-workers is a significant facilitator in SIE adjustment, covering the three identified aspects of adjustment: work, interactions with host country nationals, and general adjustment. Therefore, improving the possibilities to enhance this kind of relationships is important. In practise, this would mean that it would be beneficial for the SIE to have their direct supervisor from the same location as they are and opportunities to meet their co-workers face to face. Similarly, the cross-cultural training could help the co-workers and supervisors to understand the SIE better, but also help them to understand the local environment better.

The organisational support provided for the SIE and the whole relocation should be well planned. It was found in this study that there were some misunderstandings on who provides and what when the question was about inter-SIE. The results of this study also pointed that the respondents found it a little confusing to follow many emails from different entities, and a well-structured procedure or a step-by-step guide would have helped with this. Also as found in this study, information about the local living environment and the host country in general would have been appreciated. Writing this kind of support practises is a low-cost practise that is fairly easy to adopt.

The results also indicated that the relocation benefits can be a major aid for the SIEs, especially if they arrive with their families. When offering the benefits, it would be

important to understand that the SIEs in different life situations require different types of support. It would be good to identify the support the individual needs and tailor the offering based on that.

Lastly, the relocation benefits offered were crucial for some of the SIEs. In the globalized world, where the competition on skilled workforce is high, companies can find a huge benefit in offering relocation support for the international candidates. As the relocation benefits, or more precisely the consultant support, was also identified to support the adjustment to work indirectly, as one can fully focus on the job itself without worrying the administrative issues, the employer benefits from this as well. The good support practises do not only strengthen the employee experience and commitment, but also help to increase time to proficiency.

### **6.3 Limitations**

Despite the valuable findings of this thesis, it is still acknowledged that this study has limitations that may impact the generalisability of the findings. Firstly, this thesis was conducted as a single case study, where all the respondents were from the same organisation. As the company may have global HR practises to set the standard on the self-initiated expatriates, the findings of this thesis cannot be generalised into a wider context. Similarly, the small sample on the qualitative study makes it hard to make broader generalisations.

It is assumed that all the questions asked from the participants were answered honestly, however it is still possible that some were not completely truthful. There could have been situations where the respondents were answering questions with respondent bias, and therefore answer to the questions a way that differently to e.g., show more adjusted, satisfied with the organisational support than they really were or some things that were just 'okay' were described as 'good' out of politeness. The fact that the researcher is also employed in the same organisation may have impacted the responses as well.



The adjustment and the impact of the support practises are both subjective experiences, which can be hard to put into words. Therefore, it is possible the results do not completely correspond the reality. Some of the respondents had previous experiences as SIEs which can make them more critical in terms of evaluating the support of the current organisation. Similarly, those who were on their first SIE assignment did not have any previous points of reference which may cause them to settle for less. Also, the fact that the researcher and the interviewees shared a native language only in three cases increases the risk of misunderstandings that may have had an impact on the results of this thesis.

#### **6.4 Future Research**

In the SIE literature, the SIE adjustment has gained a lot of attention and is currently one of the most studied topics (Brewster et al., 2021). As mentioned, there is not much research conducted on the additional organisational support practises on the self-initiated expatriates and the theoretical basis is that the offers are often limited due to the nature of the expatriation being *self-initiated* (Brewster et al., 2021; Howe-Walsh & Schyns, 2010; Khedher & Asadullah, 2020; Kumpikaitė-Valiūnienė et al., 2022).

In this thesis, it was found the organisation provides the SIEs comprehensive support, also covering relocation some benefits, but the sample was small and focused only on one organisation. Therefore, similar quantitative research with a larger sample to help to create more generalizable results could be conducted investigating the general level of the support. The scope of the study could be within the similar companies, or MNCs in a certain area, to find more evidence whether this kind of offering is more common trend due to the increased globalisation and competition for talent, and if there are any differences in different industries or areas. This kind of study would not only widen the support practises identified by the SIE literature, but also help the organisations to manage their offering and be more competitive in the global talent market. The organisational support practises do not only help the companies to attract the talent,

but also retain the talent as they have also an impact on the perceived organisational support.

Similarly, the impacts of the support could be evaluated with a larger sample. The impacts of the support are subjective experiences that are shaped by the previous experiences of the respondents. Therefore, the qualitative research approach could be better in finding more depth of the impacts of the support. This kind of study could contribute to build a more understanding of the impacts of the organisational support to adjustment in SIE literature, and to identify the possible areal differences. The evaluation of the impacts on a wider scale can also produce valuable insights for the companies to help to shape their support offerings and to find the best practises.

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## Appendices

### Appendix 1. Interview plan

#### Introduction

- Thanking for participation and introducing myself
- Introducing research aims
  - o The purpose of this study is to examine the organisational factors that support the adjustment process
  - o The interview will take approximately one hour
  - o The participant has a right not to answer any questions if wished
  - o Confidentiality and anonymity
  - o Request to record and automatically transcribe the interview

#### Background

- Could you provide some demographic information about yourself, such as age, nationality, educational background and whether you have any previous international experience?
- How long have you been in the host country now? Did you relocate with someone? Why did you choose or what were the main drivers to relocate to another country?
- How different is the host country compared to your home country (culture, language, climate, food, etc.)? How did you perceive the new cultural environment?
- Did you face adjustment issues after arriving to the host country? Was there something that was relatively easy?

#### Organisational culture

- How would you describe the organisational culture?
- Have you faced any difficulties in adjusting to the organisational culture?
- How did the organisational culture impact to your adjustment to work and organisation?
- How did the organisational culture impact your interactions with your co-workers or other locals in the host country?
- How did the organisational culture impact on your general adjustment to the host country?

#### Relocation benefits

- What relocation benefits did the organization offer to assist during or after your relocation process? What relocation benefits did you utilize?
- Were there certain relocation benefits you found particularly helpful supporting your general adjustment? Do you feel there was something lacking?
- How did the relocation benefits impact your adjustment to work?

- How did the relocation benefits impact your interaction adjustment?
- How did the relocation benefits impact your general adjustment?
- How would you evaluate the relocation benefits have impacted on your adjustment overall?

### **General organisational support**

- How did the organisation support you in practical ways to adapt to the host country and organisation (e.g. training, information, other support)?
- What kind of support did you find most valuable during your adjustment?
- How did the organisational support impact your adjustment to work?
- How did the organisational support impact your interaction adjustment?
- How did the organisational support impact your general adjustment?
- How would you evaluate the organisational support has impacted on your adjustment overall?

### **Supervisor support**

- Can you describe your relationship with your supervisor?
- How did your supervisor impact your adjustment to work?
- How did your supervisor impact your interaction adjustment?
- How did your supervisor impact your general adjustment?
- How would you evaluate your supervisor has impacted on your adjustment overall?

### **Co-worker support**

- How would you describe your relationship with your colleagues and your team dynamics? *Were there any notable differences in team dynamics compared to your previous experiences?*
- How did your co-workers impact your adjusting to the job?
- How did your co-workers impact your interaction adjustment?
- How did your co-workers impact your general adjustment?
- How would you evaluate your co-workers have impacted on your adjustment overall?

### **Conclusion**

- Were there any specific needs or challenges you faced that you feel were not adequately addressed by the organisational support?
- Looking back on your relocation experience, how would you evaluate the overall support provided by the organization, your supervisor, and co-workers? *What had the biggest impact on your adjustment?*
- Do you have any suggestions or recommendations for the organizations on how to effectively support employees in the similar situation?
- Is there anything else you would like to point out that has not still been discussed?