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# **Self-Initiated Expatriates' career sustainability: the role of career adaptability**

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**ABSTRACT:**

**This research delves into career adaptability and sustainable careers in self-initiated expatriates (SIEs) using the lens of Sustainable Career Theory and Career Construction Theory. It centres on the mobility and relocation of individuals in relation to the changes in their health, happiness, and productivity during the transition of their careers. Meanwhile the study explores the role of career adaptability in shaping such career sustainability.**

**The study embraced a qualitative research design in order to understand participants' lived experiences. Nine self-initiated expatriates, representing various professions and nationalities and disparate international contexts, participated in semi-structured interviews. The data collected were subjected to thematic analysis, which consisted of both inductive coding and deductive reasoning. The analysis pinpointed themes reflective of career transition, resources for adaptability, adjustment impediments, and sustainability of careers in the long term.**

**International relocation posed certain stresses, especially workloads, uncertainty, and cultural adjustment, as well as a temporary decline in productivity. All of these challenges were initially experienced by the participants. Still, the personal development, along with improved employability and career progression, all brought enhanced career satisfaction. The research also illustrated that the sustainability of one's career is impacted more by the congruence of individual aspirations and the workplace with one's long-term career goals, more so than geography and the workplace.**

The study adds to existing literature of self-initiated expatriation by indicating that career adaptability is a critical resource by which international careers can be sustained. The findings offer implications for both individuals and organizations. For SIE professionals, the study highlights the value of developing career adaptability when navigating international career transitions. For organizations, the results emphasize the importance of creating supportive environments that facilitate SIEs' adjustment, integration, and long-term career sustainability.

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**KEYWORDS:** Self-initiated expatriates (SIEs), Career adaptability, Sustainable careers, International mobility, Career construction theory

## **AI STATEMENT**

No AI tools, generative AI, or automated writing technologies were involved in the preparation, drafting, analysing, editing, interpreting, or completing this thesis. The author independently performed all work, including the literature review, data analysis, interpretation of results, writing, and all revisions. All the content included in this thesis is the original work and understanding of the author.

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## Abbreviations

SIEs – Self-Initiated Expatriates

PhD – Doctor of Philosophy

UK – United Kingdom

UAE – United Arab Emirates

AI – Artificial Intelligence

# **1 INTRODUCTION**

## **1.1 OVERVIEW**

Rapid technological advancement, globalization, and international labour shifts have left careers highly uncertain and increasingly flexible. In light of this, sustainable careers construct looks at how individuals sustain their health, satisfaction, and productivity, over time. For self-initiated expatriates (SIEs), this is particularly relevant. SIEs pursue international career opportunities independently and unassisted by the organizational structure and support. Given the frequent job changes and cross-cultural and employment condition shifts SIEs experience, sustaining a career over the long-term is not only complex, but also highly uncertain. Of the many resources individuals may draw on, career adaptability has been linked most closely to the ability to navigate changes, challenges, and uncertainty in a career. This thesis examines the influence of career adaptability on the sustainable global career pathways of self-initiated expatriates. In the context of SIEs, this research aims to understand how adaptability aids in sustaining a career in the context of the mobility of global careers.

## **1.2 BACKGROUND OF THE STUDY**

Globalization and technology, as well as the integration of global labour markets, have altered the career landscape by expanding global employment opportunities and diminishing the prevalence of linear career pathways in organizations. As a consequence, there is greater flexibility and discontinuity within careers, as individuals move between different organizations, roles, and countries, which has created a greater ambiguity in the development of long-term career goals as shown in figure 1 below. While Figure 1 shows data from 2020, the main finding about flexibility and adaptability is still pertinent to today's labour market. Later studies show that adaptability remains a key career asset in the post-pandemic period, particularly concerning ongoing volatility in the labour market, technology advancement, and non-linear career paths. Adaptability is not a temporary trend, crisis-induced, but a fundamental characteristic of modern careers, particularly in flexible, internationally mobile, and self-directed career paths, including

self-initiated expatriation (De Vos et al., 2020; Rudolph et al., 2017; Jayawardhana, 2024).

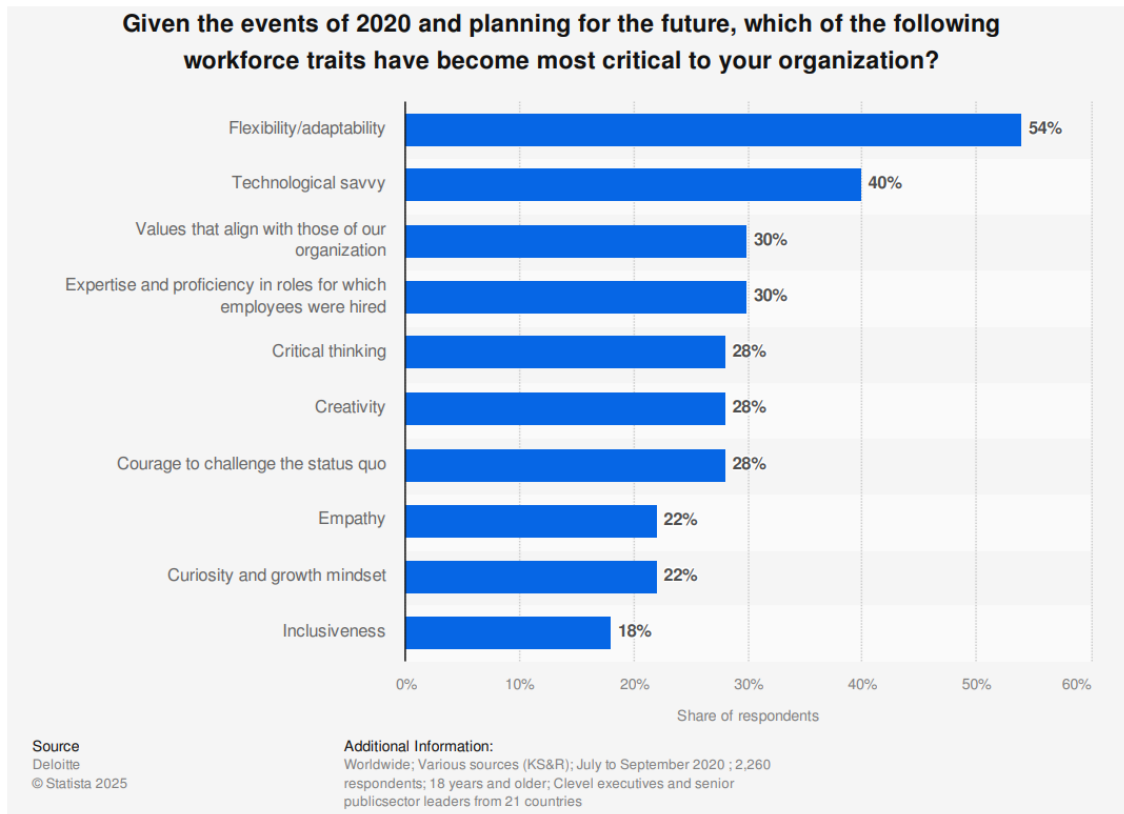


Figure 1 Leading employee traits critical for companies globally (Statista, 2020)

The process of international mobility continues to rapidly develop, as international employment is no longer limited to organisation-assigned expatriation, but also includes employees seeking jobs abroad on their own. Studies show an increase in self-initiated, international employment, indicating employees are seeking to work abroad for themselves, which is indicative of the increased individual career agency and protean career orientations in the work environment (Shaffer et al., 2012; Jayawardhana, 2024). Self-initiated expatriates are self-motivated individuals who relocate to a different country for work, and who were not assigned a position by an employer. These individuals differ in this sense from assigned expatriates, as their international career

mobility is operationally structured within a firm's boundaries, along with firm-provided relocation support, financial packages, and structured career planning (McNulty & Brewster, 2017).

Expatriation is often understood along a continuum portraying different levels of involvement from the organization and the individual. On one end are assigned expatriates, whose careers are completely shielded due to the organizational support and a more systematized global mobility framework. On the other end of the continuum are self-initiated expatriates, who have the freedom to choose the timing, location, and content of their international employment, and are more vulnerable to the risks of the labour market (McNulty & Brewster, 2017). There are other combinations that exist in between, but the fundamental aspect of self-initiated expatriation is the shift of career and employment risks from the organizations to the individuals, which has large ramifications for the sustainability of careers.

In addition to outlining the formative elements of contemporary careers, the theory of sustainable careers seeks to define special careers as long term and dynamic processes, and as such, the relationships and interactions between the individual and career environments are of principal importance for the modification of the career over time. In addition to the conventional focus of sustainable careers on the success and advancement of the career, sustainable careers focus on the maintenance of individual health, happiness and productivity over the life course (De Vos et al., 2020; De Vos & Van der Heijden, 2015). Context, career shocks, and individual proactivity are, for example, salient within the empirical literature on career sustainability (Pak et al., 2021; Gerritsen et al., 2024). In international contexts, and in particular for self-initiated expatriates, sustaining the aforementioned indicators is made more difficult owing to the positioning of the individual within multilayered and fractal transitions, the complexity of cross-cultural interactions, and the volatility of labour markets (Jayawardhana, 2024).

The ability to adapt to a given situation has been characterized as a key psychosocial resource for describing, assessing, and managing specific conditions. Career adaptability

is a theoretical construct based in the Career Construction Theory, and it describes the capability of individuals to manage and navigate career-related transitions, uncertainties, and changes through some adaptive responses, as opposed to fixed traits (Savickas & Porfeli, 2012). Adaptability has been proven to be associated with positive adjustment, employability, and well-being in a number of career-related situations, particularly those that are characterized by a high level of uncertainty and instability (Rudolph et al., 2017; Wehrle et al., 2019). The adaptability construct as described in the literature is also characterized by a contextualized and temporally dynamic operating process, and not as a static, individual, unidimensional attribute (McMahon et al., 2012). Recent literature has largely focused on domestic employment and organisational context, limiting its ability to account for careers categorised based on high international mobility and low organisational support. Focusing on the domestic employment and organisational contexts when researching sustainable careers, while in expatriation research the analysis continues to privilege assigned expatriates, the remaining groups not being the major focus (De Vos et al., 2020; Shaffer et al., 2012). As such, career adaptability research has been primarily driven by quantitative methodology, and so, the research still lack understanding to what extent and how adaptability is achieved and experienced over time within self-managed international careers (Rudolph et al., 2017; Talluri et al., 2022). Qualitative research focusing on SIEs that intertwines the frameworks of sustainable careers and career adaptability, to explain how individuals manage to sustain their health, happiness, and productivity along their international career pathways, is still lacking and is what this study attempts to answer (Jayawardhana, 2024).

### **1.3 RESEARCH OBJECTIVES, AND RESEARCH QUESTIONS**

This study aims to investigate the career sustainability experience of self-initiated expatriates and the role of career adaptability in shaping such experiences. Thus two research questions are formed :

- 1. What kinds of career sustainability experiences SIEs had during their international moves?**

## **2. How does career adaptability impact career sustainability of SIEs?**

### **1.4 SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY**

#### **1.4.1 Theoretical Significance**

Studies applying sustainable career theorizing within the international career literature remain relatively scarce. The majority of sustainable career research has theorised the construct in relation to stability, employability, and overall career wellbeing within the national labour market, thus leaving a gap in the understanding of sustainable careers within the global context involving multiple transitions, and the associated challenges of employability and wellbeing (De Vos et al., 2020, De Vos & Van der Heijden, 2015). Given the context of self-initiated expatriates, the study addresses the call for more research on individual-led international careers, beyond the organisational assignment frameworks (Shaffer et al., 2012, Jayawardhana, 2024).

Although many previous research studied adaptability, most of them utilized quantitative methodologies that provide scant understanding on the enactment of adaptability across the different stages of one's career, and different contexts (Savickas & Porfeli, 2012; Rudolph et al., 2017; Talluri et al., 2022). The research also adds to the existing literature on career adaptability by framing adaptability not as a fixed attribute, but as a psychosocial resource that works as a process, enabling career sustained functioning over longer durations.

#### **1.4.2 Practical Significance**

The studies' results give regard for self-initiated expatriates, specifying the individual resources that assist in sustaining health, happiness, and productivity in the different phases of the global career. Possessing career adaptability may assist SIEs (Self-Initiated Expatriates) in overcoming the challenges of uncertainty in the career, the shifts in the labour market, and the cycles of cross-border relocation (Savickas & Porfeli, 2012; McMahon et al., 2012). The case also sheds light on the organisations that hire or collaborate with globally mobile professionals, especially in acknowledging the specific

challenges self-directed global professionals and the adaptable support practices (Shaffer et al., 2012) may offer.

Moreover, the findings may enrich practices of career counselling and guidance by pinpointing adaptability as a prominent resource in traversing international career challenges and sustaining the functionality of the career over the long haul (Wehrle et al., 2019). More generally, the study may imply for policymakers focusing on attracting the global talent and the integration of globally mobile professionals (Jayawardhana, 2024).

### **1.5 SCOPE AND DELIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY**

The self-initiated expatriates and their sustainable career experiences within international contexts are the sole emphasis of this study. Assigned expatriates are not considered in the study as their careers are developed through other organisational configurations, support frameworks, and patterns of risk, which create a boundary for analytical comparability to self-initiated expatriation (McNulty & Brewster, 2017). Also, the study does not consider trait personality frameworks and dispositional perspectives, as they may be insufficient for the explanation of the dynamic and adaptive nature of career development. The study also does not engage in quantitative hypothesis testing, as a qualitative research methodology is more suitable to explore the career sustainability processes through experiential and detailed insights (McMahon et al., 2012).

### **1.6 STRUCTURE OF THE THESIS**

Chapter 2 discusses the literature relevant to the constructs of the study, including sustainable careers, career adaptability, and self-initiated expatriation. Chapter 3 describes the research methodology, including research design, data collection, and analysis. Chapter 4 presents the empirical results of the study. Chapter 5 is the discussion of the found results. In Chapter 6, the thesis is brought to a close with a summary of the findings, followed by a chapter 7 with a discussion of the theoretical and practical implications, and suggestions for further research.



## **2 LITERATURE REVIEW**

### **2.1 OVERVIEW OF THE LITERATURE REVIEW**

This chapter reviews literature on sustainable careers, self-initiated expatriation, and career adaptability to build the theoretical grounding for this study.

Career adaptability is chosen as the main factor in shaping career sustainability. Career adaptability entails the individual's ability to take action, successfully navigate, and prioritize career changes and uncertainty, hence, offering a more procedural approach to how the goal of achieving sustainable career outcomes could be attained (Savickas and Porfeli, 2012).

Self-initiated expatriates (SIEs) are chosen as the particular career context because their SIEs careers are marked by high individual agency, limited organizational support, and increased market and cultural uncertainty, which heightens the challenges of sustainability (McNulty & Brewster, 2017). This is what makes SIEs particularly apt to study the effect of career adaptability on sustaining careers over time.

Furthermore, this chapter discusses the research gaps, define the study's aim, and specific research questions that frame the current research.

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### **2.2 SUSTAINABLE CAREER THEORY**

Sustainable career theory describes careers as dynamic processes that unfold over time and are shaped through continuous transactions between individuals and their contexts. In contrast to classic career models focusing on ladder-like progression, definable success, or short-term goals, sustainable career theory stresses the long-term maintenance of career functioning despite changing situations (De Vos et al., 2020). From this perspective, the most crucial point concerns the need to assess careers from a long-term perspective, because individuals are constantly negotiating work responsibilities, personal resources, and situational barriers through their life (De Vos & Van der Heijden, 2015).

Beyond looking at promotions, salary, or job title, sustainable career theory looks at the long-term effects that consider three aspects including health, happiness and productivity (De Vos et al., 2020). Sustainable Career Theory manages the gap of including the sustainability of one's career when looking beyond the short-term indicators of success and including the individual's well-being and future employability (Van der Heijden et al., 2020). The critiques focused on sustainability's conceptual breadth is constructive in that it helps refine its focus on the mechanisms individuals use in sustaining specific careers (Tordera et al., 2020). More specifically, the theory has tended to emphasize the extent individuals can exercise agency, particularly in sustaining promote careers in the context of labour market scant organisational backing. This is especially true in internationally mobile and self-directed careers, where the onus to sustain career functioning rests mostly on individuals. Thus, more explanatory than descriptive approaches focused on sustainability's outcome indicators are warranted.

### **2.3 INDICATORS OF CAREER SUSTAINABILITY**

Career sustainability is most often understood through three interconnected indicators, and they are, health, happiness, and productivity over time. Such construct is established within the boundaries of sustainable career theory, where career sustainability is defined as the long-term positive functioning of one's career, as opposed to solely focusing on short-term career success (De Vos et al., 2020). Each of these dimensions offers a perspective on how to evaluate the meaning or viability of a career over time.

Health is defined as the psychological and physical aspects of one's health. De Vos and Van der Heijden (2015) argue that within sustainable career theory, one's career could not be deemed sustainable if the individuals had to endure chronic strain, burnout, or deteriorating health, even if there were concrete and positive accomplishments. However, there is a divergence in the literature on how health is oriented within a time frame of such models of sustainability. Some view health as a precursor to sustainability, yet others perceive health as an outcome of a career that is continuously influenced by the demands and contextual factors of a career. This variance in orientation leaves an

ambiguity in the frameworks of sustainable careers and illustrates the complexity of the role of health (De Vos & Van der Heijden, 2015).

Happiness is individuals' evaluation of their own career and includes evaluation of satisfaction, meaning, and congruence of personal values and work roles. Happiness, unlike health, has more literature interpretive treatment, and is more dependent on the individual's level of expectation, culture, and normative definition of the career stage. The literature suggests that lacking satisfaction, engagement and commitment tend to be low, even in the health and productivity are maintained (Van der Heijden et al., 2020).

Productivity is more than an individual's performance an output in the short term. It is the ability to remain employable and functional, even with the changes in career conditions. So, productivity is not just about the immediate outcome, but also about the overall continuity of the individual's career (De Vos et al., 2020).

These three indicators are highly interdependent and often involve trade-offs, as they do not align in a simple linear fashion. For example, attainment of a productive state may come at the expense of one's health, or prioritisation of one's well-being may come at the expense of losing a productive state. Thus, when study career sustainability, it is important to consider how individual's balance these three aspects, rather than assume they align automatically (Van der Heijden et al., 2020).

## **2.4 GLOBAL MOBILITY AND SUSTAINABLE CAREERS**

Global mobility creates a context that threatening career sustainability to be attained over a prolonged period of time. Relocations in multiple countries can lead to job discontinuities, segmented career paths, and a lack of organizational support, which can compromise the individuals' ability to sustain the individual's health, happiness, and productivity (Shaffer et al., 2012). Building on the sustainable career theory, individual's career sustainability is shaped by the interaction between contextual demands and individual agency. While individuals may influence how they respond to such demands, their career outcomes are also constrained by broader institutional, organizational, and social contexts (De Vos et al, 2020).

The empirical body of literature illustrates the opportunities and threats to career sustainability that come with international mobility. On the positive side, international mobility has been associated with the development of new competencies, increased employability, the building of career capital, and, perhaps, long-term positive productivity (Shaffer et al, 2012). On the negative side, mobility or international careers often have weak career continuity, fragile professional ties, greater exposure to unregulated precarious work in the local employment market, and, thus, the diminishing of career sustaining functions over time (Shaffer et al, 2012).

The challenges that global mobility poses to career sustainability are further demonstrated by the impact of international mobility on wellbeing. While changes of residence, in some instances, are associated with more positive autonomy and meaning in work, they are accompanied by negative stressors such as changes in culture, new role identities, and increased transitions. These psychological and work-related satisfaction stressors, particularly in self-initiated job mobility, tend to be worse in the case of unassisted moves (De Vos & Van der Heijden, 2015). The evidence suggests that to successfully sustain careers, mobile individuals are required to self-regulate and enact changes to adjust to the new challenges.

The literature suggests that international job mobility increases uncertainty, discontinuity, and self-management demand, resulting in fragile career sustainability. Such vulnerabilities differ among mobile workers, depending on organizational support, individual agency, and the self-guided mobility decision. This specificity allows us to examine self-initiated expatriates. Their careers epitomize the confluence of heightened mobility, paucity of institutional support, and high sustainability risk, thus requiring special theoretical attention (McNulty & Brewster, 2017).

## **2.5 SELF-INITIATED EXPATRIATES AS A CAREER CONTEXT**

Self-initiated expatriates (SIEs) are defined as persons who seek overseas employment on their own (Al Ariss & Crowley-Henry, 2013). These persons are not assigned by an employer (or) sponsored by an organizational partner. By virtue of this definition, SIEs are differentiated from traditional expatriates not by nationality or geography, but by a

greater degree of personal choice and responsibility pertaining to career path and relocation (McNulty & Brewster, 2017). Although early research on expatriation considered international relocation predominantly as an organizational activity, more recent studies have observed that a sizeable number of global workers are the ones who make independent mobility decisions, thus calling for the need for more accurate conceptualization of SIEs (Al Ariss & Crowley-Henry, 2013).

The differences noted between assigned expatriates and SIEs are starting to be framed more as a continuum than a binary classification. Assigned expatriates are at one end of the continuum and have careers that are fully integrated within employer systems that provide relocation support, maintain role continuity, and do career scaffolding. SIEs are at the other end of the continuum. They independently choose destinations, obtain employment, and self-manage career development within the host labour markets with minimal support from an institution. There are, of course, hybrid forms between these two extremes, but the defining characteristic of SIEs continues to be a lack of employer support and therefore an employer sponsorship of the career is transferred to the individual (McNulty & Brewster, 2017). This continuum suggests that SIE careers are only minimally impacted by organizational frameworks and instead largely depend on an individual's capacity to access external labour markets. This ability is critical from the career sustainability perspective.

From a structural standpoint, SIE career paths embody increased agency and exposure to risk. Unlike assigned expatriates, SIEs typically possess greater operational freedom regarding career mobility and direction, yet this freedom comes with some organizational and career advancement unpredictability, as well as a higher reliance on the institutional arrangements of the host country. Research has demonstrated that SIEs tend to have short employment prospects, lack of access to organizational internal labour markets, difficulties with the international transferability of career capital, and decreased long-term career continuity (Shaffer et al., 2012). These structural variables impact SIEs not just on the basis of motivation, but equally on the type of structural resource and constraint configurations that shape their careers.

Growing SIEs are still largely underrepresented in the literature on the expatriation phenomenon, which overwhelmingly focuses on assigned expatriates. The concluding models of ex-patriation typically incorporate some support from the organization, unambiguous assignment goals, and specific pathways for post-assignment repatriation, which is un-relatable for SIEs. SIEs, therefore, remain largely ignored, or perhaps seen primarily as a subcategory of assigned expatriates, rather than a distinct career phenomenon. This unequal treatment constrains the models in defining and explaining distinguishable phenomena careers that unravel beyond the frontiers of organizational structures and the intercultural labour markets (Al Ariss & Crowley-Henry, 2013).

Most of the existing literature on expatriation is based on organisational-assigned expatriation where the literature presumes defined role continuation, and the provision of expatriate employer organisational support from the assignment frameworks (McNulty & Vance, 2017). While such frameworks provide an excellent explanation of careers that develop within the confines of an organisation, they provide limited understanding of self-initiated expatriation, where the individual is required to assume the responsibility of managing their own international mobility and career continuity.

Consequently, the literature on self-initiated expatriation tends to be under-researched, and self-initiated expatriates are seen as an extension of assignment-based models where expatriates are employed under different sets of careers with different conditions of diminished institution support and greater career uncertainty (McNulty & Brewster, 2017). There is a significant literature gap on self-initiated expatriates and how they manage to sustain their health, happiness, and productivity over time without an organisational anchor.

## **2.6 CAREER ADAPTABILITY AS A CORE FACTOR IN SHAPING SIE'S CAREER SUSTAINABILITY**

Building on sustainable career theory, an individual, as the core career actor, actively participates and modifies their career in response to their career-related challenges. Thus, a career involves a self-directed process, instead of a linear one, which involves moving through a set of predetermined positions. Such positive and self-directed responses to career challenges, transitions, and adaptation demands are captured by the concept of career adaptability (Savickas & Porfeli, 2012). From the perspective of career construction theory, career adaptability represents a key psychosocial resource through which individuals exercise agency in managing career uncertainty, change, and transition.

Career adaptability is a psychosocial remnant and is composed of an individual's readiness and the ability to manage and overcome career-related tasks, transitions, and disruptions in the present or the future (Savickas & Porfeli, 2012). Most importantly, career adaptability is not a scientific or psychological, social, or outcome success of a career; it is a continuous ability, which an individual possesses to cope with a career's uncertainties; it positively differentiates career adaptability from concepts such as job satisfaction and employability, which static outcomes are achieved at a certain time.

There are four core elements for the definition of adaptable: concern, control, curiosity, and confidence (Savickas & Porfeli, 2012). Each element is crucial. Concern deals with an individual's expectations and preparations for the future with regards to awareness of any and all future career activities or adjustments. Control is the degree to which an individual internalizes and takes responsibility for the structure of their career as an outcome of their choices. Curiosity conveys the extent to which an individual is willing to evaluate present and future career options, as well as alternative options. Finally, confidence is the belief in oneself that obstacles can be overcome and career decisions can be executed. Individually and collectively, the elements underscore the degree of adaptability an individual exhibits in developing their careers in the face of uncertainties.

Multiple studies have chronicled and documented the growing importance of career adaptability in relation to and its association with positive adjustments in one's career, one's employability, and accomplishment of a set of objectives in one's career,

especially in environments with a lack of organizational support and high levels of variability (Rudolph et al., 2017; Wehrle et al., 2019). Career adaptability, or the changing of an individual's characteristics to meet differing career challenges, is an assistive mechanism that enables individuals to optimize their career progression without signal characteristics.

In international career environments, professionals face the most uncertainty, cross-cultural challenges, and unpredictability due to the agile and ever-changing nature of the international business landscape. There is evidence that career adaptability fosters psychological well-being and helps individuals adjust and thrive in new and unfamiliar environments, leading to individuals' successful management of career-related stressors (Wehrle et al., 2019). However, most of existing literature focus on domestic or organizational career boundaries, leading to a lack of understanding of career adaptability in self-managed international careers.

In the case of self-initiated expatriates, especially outside the assistance of organizing sponsorship due to the lack of organizational sponsorship and institutional buffering of 'hosting' organizations, self-initiated expatriates, contrary to organization-assigned expatriates, are required to independently address career continuity, skill transferability, and employability within and across national borders (McNulty & Brewster, 2017). Thus, in this study, career adaptability is considered as one of the silent agency factors within the personal dimension of the sustainable career framework, which fosters the maintenance of positive health, happiness, and productivity over time.

## **2.7 THEORETICAL STAND OF THIS STUDY**

Building on the above promise, this study investigates SIE's career sustainability and the role of career adaptability in shaping such experience. Career adaptability is described as the psychosocial resource of an individual that helps the individual to cope with career transitions, the uncertainties of a career, and the self-regulation of the career over time via self-direction or self-adaptive an individual (Savickas & Porfeli, 2012). Career adaptability is not conceived as a fixed personality trait or an outcome of career success, but as a dynamic capacity, which means that it is a resource that individuals

possess and would activate, utilize or 'mobilize' in response to career demands (Rudolph et al., 2017).

Numerous empirical studies have shown that career adaptability is related to positive adjustment, employability and well-being, especially when the careers are characterized by limited support from the organization and an elevated sense of ambiguity (Wehrle et al., 2019). These traits mirror the career situation of self-initiated expatriates, as they work in environments characterized by a high degree of personal agency and low levels of organizational buffering, along with increased responsibility for the management of career continuity (McNulty & Brewster, 2017).

Thus, the current study views career adaptability as the pivotal agency construct through which self-initiated expatriates maintain career sustainability. As elaborated in Figure 2, career adaptability serves as the key mechanism connecting SIE's international experience with sustainable career outcomes defined as the health, happiness, and productivity over time. This integrated framework articulates the theory in a tangible manner to answer the question of how self-initiated expatriates employ agency in sustaining their careers in volatile and uncertain global work conditions (McNulty and Vance, 2017; Jayawardhana, 2024). Most research has examined domestic careers and organizational expatriation. There is a larger gap in understanding self-initiated expatriates, especially how they maintain their health and happiness while remaining productive in self-initiated international careers. This research investigates this gap by focusing on career sustainability of self-initiated expatriates (SIEs), through the lens of career adaptability.

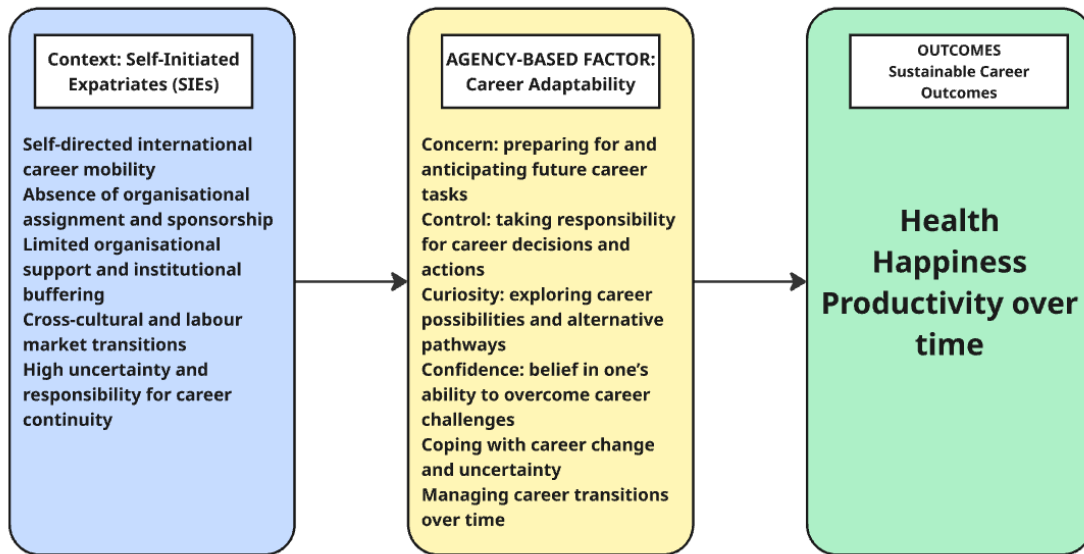


Figure 2 Conceptual framework of career adaptability as an agency-based factor in sustaining careers of self-initiated expatriates

### **3 RESEARCH METHODOLOGY**

#### **3.1 OVERVIEW OF THE RESEARCH METHODOLOGY**

This research analysed the methodology used for the study of self-initiated expatriates and their enduring careers in the face of international mobility and uncertainty. It looked deeply into the adaptability of careers and how sustainable outcomes for a career are achieved, and in this case, there was no need for measuring the outcomes through the stationary relationships of certain variables. Hence, a qualitative study provided means for a subjective and context-centred study of the self-initiated expatriates. The methodology was bound by the availability of the issues pertaining to individual career narratives (Pervin & Mokhtar, 2022; Muzari et al., 2022)

As for the studies, it was predominately of the interpretivist variety. The interpretivist construct the individual career experience as the result of a socially formulated experience, mostly influenced through the interactions and the network of the individual and their environments. This works well with the theory of sustainable careers. It posits careers as changing trajectories with the course influenced by the individual's own choices, and the surrounding circumstances. This also corresponds with the career construction theory, focal to which is meaning construction and self-regulation in response to changes around the individual (De Vos & Van der Heijden, 2015; De Vos et al., 2020; Wang & Li, 2024)

Data were collected via semi-structured interviews with self-initiated expatriates, which also provided the opportunity to capture career transitions, sustainability trade-offs, and adaptive responses, and retain flexibility in pursuit of the research objectives (Ruslin et al., 2022). Thematic analysis was conducted to address the relations of empirical findings to the theoretical dimensions of career adaptability and career sustainability and to describe the patterns found in the interviews (Naeem et al., 2023). Quantitative methods were not chosen because they are concerned with generalisation and relationships at the level of variables, and are deficient in obtaining the process and

context-related career experiences, which are the focus of this study (McMahon et al., 2012; Rudolph et al., 2017).

### **3.2 RESEARCH PHILOSOPHY AND APPROACH**

This study used an interpretivist research philosophy in order to make sense of Self-Initiated Expatriates (SIEs) and the career experiences they endure in relation to their geography. Interpretivism is centred around understanding social experiences and perceptions of contextual realities. For the purpose of this study, an interpretivist philosophy provides boundaries to understand responses to career transition, and conditions of career uncertainty, and volatile situations (Pervin & Mokhtar, 2022). This is especially true here, as the goal of this study is to understand the career dynamic that emphasizes adaptability rather than those that might be considered static and quantifiable in nature.

The interpretivist approach provided this study the ability to document the experiences of the participants. It further provides the ability to understand the participants' career challenges, organization structures, and social realities. In this case, a career path is defined as something that is not static, but something that is actively created and re-created (De Vos & Van der Heijden, 2015; De Vos et al., 2020). This view of career paths provides a means to understand how a career is something that is mutually shaped and defined, a creation of the person exercising their agency in the context of their environment (Wang & Li, 2024).

This study did not adopt positivist and post-positivist approaches which would have forced the study to focus largely on rigid hypotheses and perhaps restricted the study to fitting the expatriate experience into a box of a limited contextual framework as defined by the static variables those approaches tend to rely on. These approaches tend to interpret career adaptability reductively, and in the process miss the experiences through which participants develop and exercise career adaptability (McMahon et al., 2012; Rudolph et al., 2017). In contrast, this study provided the context of global

mobility for examining the experiences of participants and developing an understanding of the multi-dimensional, context-based nature of dynamic careers for each participant.

### **3.3 RESEARCH DESIGN**

This study uses a qualitative research design to examine career adaptability among self-initiated expatriates and how it influences the attainment of sustainable career outcomes. Given the nature of the research, it aims to capture the individual's interpretation, implementation, and management of adaptability within an intricate globally embedded career context. The processes are temporally oriented and lived; therefore, qualitative research is necessary to capture them. The qualitative design of this study facilitated the comprehensive exploration of participants' career development alongside the contextual elements shaping their experiences of international mobility and expatriation.

This study used a qualitative, retrospective research approach to chart the career paths of self-initiated expatriates. Participants reflected on their longitudinal career journeys. This allowed the study to capture the temporal aspects of the retrospective format, whose characteristic longitudinal component focuses on a single data collection. The approach allowed the depth and richness of temporal dynamics of career adaptability and sustainability to be preserved while making comparisons across expatriates. This design also allowed for the richer identification of similarities in how participants addressed similar career obstacles and transitions. Data were produced from semi-structured interviews allowing a balance of standardization and freedom. Semi-structured interviews facilitated the ability to touch upon areas of interest, while standard interviews were able to capture and respond to the experiences of each individual. This allowed the interviewees to answer the questions of the interview in a way where they could express how they make the decisions they do, how they respond to unknowns, and how they cope with unknowns. This provided a way to support interpretation of how in each individual instance of the interview, the differentiation of the individual and situation contributed to the phenomenon of adaptability (Ruslin et al., 2022; Wang & Li, 2024).

The ambiguity, the need for the subject, and the requirement for the subject to adopt a continuous cycle of change make the qualitative design especially fitting for studying self-initiated expatriates' careers. That said, careers of self-initiated expatriates, where the subject has the most control, where the subject has to leave their home of origin and where the subject may not have or is not provided with the resources to support their decision, make the qualitative design especially fitting for studying self-initiated expatriates' careers. Thus, within the international career frameworks quantifiable approaches are inappropriate as they limit the emphasis to generalizable and measurable avenues, which could potentially miss the subject and complexity of the situation of the particular framework (Rudolph et al., 2017; Pak et al., 2021).

### **3.4 RESEARCH CONTEXT AND PARTICIPANT SELECTION**

For this study, self-initiated expatriates served as the primary research context to understand the role of career adaptability in sustaining positive career outcomes concerning international mobility. For the study, self-initiated expatriates referred to people who independently move to another country for work without being assigned to, sponsored by, or formally supported by an employer. This definition captures the self-directed and self-managed character of international careers that can be undertaken by the individual, thereby differentiating self-initiated expatriates from assigned expatriates, whose mobility is structurally and organizationally supported (Shaffer et al., 2012; Jayawardhana, 2024).

To be included in the study, participants must have been employed self-initiated in a foreign country and must have undergone at least one year work during their time abroad. Individuals who were deployed abroad via an organisational assignment, government posting, or formal expatriate programmes were excluded, as their career experiences are influenced by differing structures that constrain personal exposure to career risk and uncertainty (Shaffer et al., 2012). This purposefully maintained conceptual consistency with the primary research focus and prevented the analytical dilution of what are, in essence, different forms of expatriation.

A purposive sampling technique was used to select cases that would provide the most rich and detailed data regarding adaptive career processes. For the current study, purposive sampling was most appropriate because the study sought to obtain relevant theoretical insights. The collection of data was prioritised from participants who had relevant, firsthand, and direct experiences corresponding to the study's conceptual framework which focused on career adaptability and sustainability (Ahmad & Wilkins, 2025). In qualitative research, a small sample size is often justified because the purpose of qualitative research is to achieve a thorough understanding, and that is a form of analytic saturation, rather than to achieve a particular number. This is a common approach in the qualitative research literature on career sustainability and adaptability processes (McMahon et al., 2012; van den Groenendaal et al., 2022).

For the purpose of analytical breadth, heterogeneity was considered across host countries, industry sectors, and career stages. The inclusion of participants across various levels of their international careers facilitated the examination of adaptive strategies and sustainability challenges. This analytic breadth and heterogeneity supported the study of processual career adaptability in relation to the diverse self-initiated expatriate career pathways of individual participants (De Vos et al., 2020; Pak et al., 2021).

### **3.5 DATA COLLECTION METHODS**

Data were collected by means of semi-structured interviews to facilitate an in-depth understanding of the participants' sustainable career narratives in the context of global mobility. A semi-structured interview format was chosen in order to provide a balance between theory and flexibility while participants provided elaborate narratives of their experiences without diverging from the key theoretical constructs of the study (Ruslin et al., 2022). The interview questions were formulated through deductive reasoning based on the Sustainable Career Theory and Career Construction Theory, particularly, health, happiness, and productivity (De Vos et al., 2020) and on the four career adaptability resources: concern, control, curiosity, and confidence (Savickas & Porfeli, 2012).

The interview questions were designed to make the sustainability indicators concrete and suitable for qualitative exploration. For instance, participants were asked to speak about physical health (e.g., sleep, strain from workloads), psychological health (e.g., stress, burnout, uncertainty), career satisfaction (big picture satisfaction vs life satisfaction), productivity (how many goals, roles in leadership, publications, performance, and other goals), and employability (how easy it is to move and the opportunities available). There was an effort to obtain behavioural examples and particular instances to add to the verifiability and the reliability of the responses (Ruslin et al., 2022).

Interviews were conducted in English due to the participants' linguistic proficiency, and were held on an individual basis, each interview being cross-sectional and retrospective on all the pre-migration and post-migration career stages the interviewee went through. This pattern of responses made it possible to gather information on the impact of the available resources on adaptability and how these influenced the outcome of sustainability through time.

The ongoing process of reflexivity was present during the interviews, and the interviewer stayed aware of the level of cultural closeness and did not use any of the leading questions that would guide the interviewee in one direction so that the interviewee could develop their own interpretative frameworks (Muthanna & Alduais, 2023). Before the analysis phase commenced, study participants were briefed on the study's objective, were cautioned that their involvement was voluntary, and were made aware that they could withdraw from the study at any time. Audio consent for recording was requested and obtained prior to the data collection stage. In addition, committed to maintaining the participants' anonymity, identifiable information and names were removed from the transcripts and reports. Also, the participants were given pseudonyms (Drolet et al., 2023).

### **3.5.1 Sampling Strategy**

For this study, a purposive sample of nine self-initiated expatriates (SIEs) was created. To meet the study's research objectives, participants were chosen based on their diverse

international career trajectories and professional backgrounds. The study’s participants belonged to the varied professions of healthcare, academic research, engineering, logistics, finance, and corporate management. The sample included study participants who were at different phases of their career. For instance, the study includes junior professionals, senior professionals, as well as doctoral researchers. This diversity was a key element in the study’s aim to outline career adaptability and sustainable career experiences in different contexts (De Vos et al., 2020).

Participants were from India, Syria, Indonesia, Albania, and Nigeria. They moved to Finland, Canada, and Luxembourg as shown in table 1 below. Participants came from India, Syria, Indonesia, Albania, and Nigeria, moving to several host countries including Finland, Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Singapore, Hong Kong, Canada, Malta, the UK, and Luxembourg. Some participants underwent multiple international relocations and transitioned careers across sectors, which provided more robust insights into career sustainability across a variety of international contexts. This focused on a broader picture of employability and its relation to the well-being and productivity of individuals and the progress of their career over time. The sustainable career theory and the career construction theory were the primary guiding theories for the sampling strategy. These theories shaped the alignment of the participants’ experiences to the study’s research objectives (Savickas & Porfeli, 2012).

Table 1 Demographic Profile of Self-Initiated Expatriates (SIEs)

Participant	Age	Nationality	Host Countries Experience	Occupation / Role	Career Stage	Educational Background
P1	21	Indian	Finland	Bachelor’s Student and	Early Career	Bachelor’s in Business Administration

				Warehouse Worker		
<b>P2</b>	27	Indian	Finland	Registered Nurse	Mid Career	Bachelor of Health Care in Nursing
<b>P3</b>	27	Indian	Finland	Doctoral Researcher	Academic Research	Master's in Applied Mathematics
<b>P4</b>	33	Indian	Finland	Delivery Driver	Early Career	Bachelor's in Business Administration
<b>P5</b>	21	Indian	Finland	5G Cloud RAN Test Engineer at Nokia	Professional / Mid Career	Master's in Information Technology
<b>P6</b>	33	Syrian	Saudi Arabia; United Arab Emirates; Finland	PhD Researcher and Former Engineer	Academic / Professional	Master's in Computer and Control Engineering
<b>P7</b>	44	Indonesia	Singapore; Hong Kong; Canada	Financial Specialist	Senior Professional	Bachelor's Degree

<b>P8</b>	37	Albanian	Greece (study); Malta; Albania; Luxembourg	Director in Corporate and Private Wealth	Senior Professional	University Studies in Greece
<b>P9</b>	44	Nigerian	United Kingdom; Finland	PhD Researcher and Former Procurement Specialist	Academic / Professional	Master's Degree

### 3.6 DATA ANALYSIS STRATEGY

An understanding of sustainable careers among self-initiated expatriates was developed using a theoretically informed approach and a structured thematic analysis approach. This analysis was step by step and systematic to align to current guidance within qualitative modelling (Naeem et al., 2023). A combination of deductive and inductive coding was completed.

Within coding's first cycle, an inductive approach was adopted to identify initial patterns, meanings, and themes emerging from the interview data. Then deductive approach was used within the Sustainable Career and Career Construction theories frameworks. The three sustainability indicators of De Vos et al., 2020, (health, happiness, and productivity) and the four adaptability resources of Savickas & Porfeli, 2012 (concern, control, curiosity, and confidence) were used to code interview transcripts. This guaranteed a theoretical alignment to the empirical material and the conceptual constructs. References to stress and sleep were, for instance, coded as

health. Leadership roles, publications, and performance targets were coded as productivity and expressions of proactive preparation were coded as concern.

Emergent sub themes such as relocation anxiety, funding ambiguity, absence of structured growth, language barriers, and performance pressure were identified and refined inductively within the second cycle. This facilitated conceptual integration (Naeem et al., 2023).

The analytical model results are shown in Figure 3. The framework explains how career adaptability resources helped participants respond to structural constraints, including organizational pressures, national-level barriers, and labour market challenges, in ways that shaped their experiences of integration, health, happiness, and productivity. Concern, control, and curiosity, as well as confidence played strong roles. In reducing transition-related uncertainty and support, control aimed at regulating stress and balancing work and life, while curiosity raised employability and skill acquisition, confidence reinforced resilience in pressure high situations.

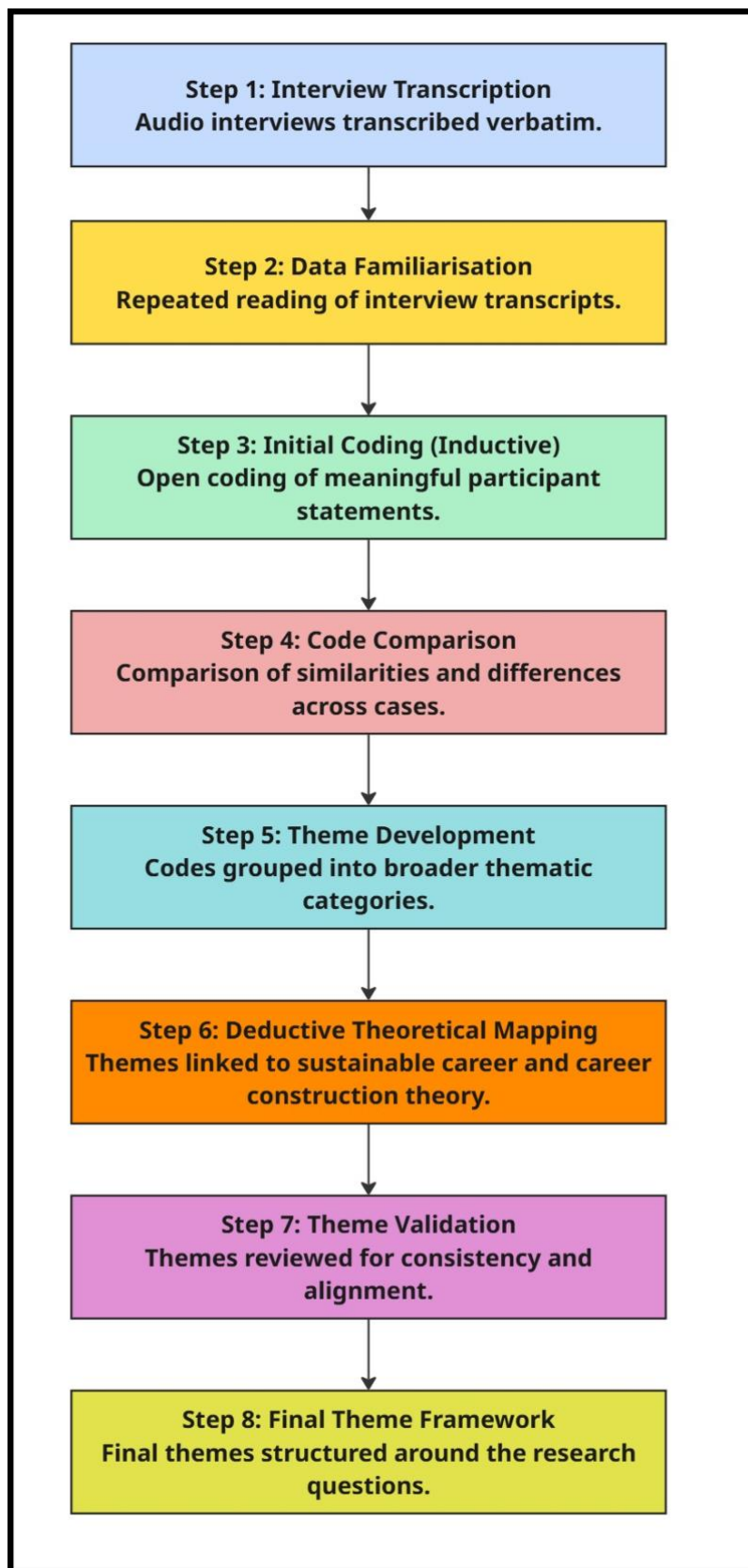


Figure 3 Data Analysis Flow for Career Sustainability Research

### **3.7 RESEARCH QUALITY, TRUSTWORTHINESS, AND ETHICS**

The research has outlined and applied various dimensions of trust, including credibility, dependability, confirmability, and reflexivity, to validate this qualitative study. Credibility, for example, was demonstrated through the use of semi-structured interviews of the participants that encouraged them to elaborate on and describe their experiences in detail. Credibility was demonstrated through the alignment of the interview questions, objectives of the study, and frameworks. The research described, analysed, and coded the same data multiple times, and described their engagement as prolonged, which contributed to the credibility of their interpretations of the data (Haq et al., 2023; Ahmed, 2024).

The research have also improved dependability with their use of transparent and detailed descriptions of their research processes. The data collection and the thematic analysis phases were implemented the same way across the interviews, which creates a robust research audit while documenting their methodological and analytical processes. This description and outline of the research process improves the possibility of replication of the study, while also recognizing the value of qualitative research in terms of its situational context, even where it cannot be generalized statistically (Naeem et al., 2023; Muzari et al., 2022).

Confirmability was achieved by using participants' accounts as a basis for interpretations, rather than the assumptions of the research. The research through coding and developing themes, demonstrated the analytical process, so that findings could be linked back to the data. Maintaining reflexive awareness throughout the research process involved acknowledging how the research shaped the process of data generation and the subsequent interpretations. Given the interpretivist nature of the study, the importance of reflexivity was heightened by the research's position within the academy, as it could affect the construction of meaning during the interviews and analysis (Muthanna & Alduais, 2023; Pervin & Mokhtar, 2022).

Trustworthiness stemmed from coding and transparency, systematic comparative analysis, case iteration, and raw narrative-themes alignment (Ahmed, 2024; Haq et al.,

2023). The combination of deductive and inductive approaches increased analytical rigor while maintaining authenticity of the narrative from the participants.

The study was designed to incorporate ethics at every phase of the process. Participants' rights and the purpose of the study were explained to them, and they signed informed consent prior to data collection. Pseudonyms were used, identifiable information was deleted from transcripts and reports, and files were locked to ensure the data were confidential and the participants were anonymous. These files were kept in a password protected digital space that only the researcher can access. These steps were in compliance with data protection and ethical guidelines of the institution to secure ethical approval for the study and ensure adherence to standards for conducting qualitative research with human participants (Drolet et al., 2023).

### **3.8 METHODOLOGICAL LIMITATIONS**

This research has some limitations that are considered in relation to its objectives and theoretical framework employed. First, the qualitative approach does not allow for statistical generalisation as the results do not aim to reflect the entire population of self-initiated expatriates. Instead, the study focused on analytical generalisation by creating theory-driven understanding of career adaptability that goes beyond the immediate sample and informs the understanding of sustainable global careers (Pervin & Mokhtar, 2022; Muzari et al., 2022).

Second, capturing the full range of perspectives is somewhat constrained by the small, purposively selected sample. However, this is a typical characteristic of qualitative research, which prefers deep, rich, and contextually sensitive findings, rather than broad numerical coverage. The sample size allowed for an in-depth investigation of the various career transitions, adaptability, and sustainability trade-off mechanisms which would not have been possible with a larger sample (Ahmad & Wilkins, 2025; van den Groenendaal et al., 2022).

The study used self-reported data which can be susceptible to recall bias or retroactive sense making. However, career construction theory embraces narrative reflection as a

legitimate and worthwhile means of accessing understanding about the ways in which individuals make sense of and manage their careers. Therefore, participants' accounts were regarded as valuable representations of their lived experiences, rather than as an abstract accounts or records of actual events (McMahon et al., 2012; Wang & Li, 2024).

All in all, these limitations demonstrate intentional methodological strategies that aligned with the study's objective to elicit process-oriented, contextually grounded insights about career adaptability and sustainability from self-initiated expatriates.

## 4 RESULTS AND FINDINGS

This chapter outlines the significant findings drawn from the participants' career experiences. The findings are based on qualitative interview data and demonstrates that SIEs differ in their levels of career sustainability, with these differences being strongly influenced by their degree of career adaptability.

### 4.1 CAREER SUSTAINABILITY OF SIEs

SIEs' career sustainability was understood in three key indicators: health, happiness, and productivity. Rather than viewing career sustainability solely as long-term career continuity or objective career success, participants described it as a combination of maintaining personal well-being, experiencing satisfaction and meaning in their careers, and sustaining their capacity to perform and develop professionally.

#### 4.1.1 Health

The majority of participants reported that their health during international mobility was only slightly disrupted. Many participants felt that they were able to keep their health due to their daily habits. P1, who were in services that included physical activity, such as cleaning or engaging to physical child care, they further explained, *“Working in the warehouse or cleaning, it was demanding on the body, especially with long hours and night shifts. I had disturbances with sleep too.”*

For example, P3 stated, *“Physically, I was okay. My routine was normal, and I didn't have any major health issues. My sleep was good.”* Similarly, P1 noted, *“Physically, I was good, like I didn't have any health issues. I had decent sleep also because I was mainly studying at that time.”* This further indicates that structured daily activities contributed to maintaining physical health.

Maintaining the mental health was more of a challenge. The majority of participants were exposed to physically and mentally challenging services, which affected their mental health. The workload, culture, and uncertainty of the environment gave some participants a high level of strain which interrupted their mental and physical health. P3 stated that, *“There was mental pressure. PhD research does not have a fixed structure*

*like a job, so one is left to manage their work and deadlines. This pressure is a little overwhelming considering everything relies on one's ability to plan in order to maintain balance."*

#### **4.1.2 Happiness**

Participants happiness was mainly expressed through satisfaction with their working environment, a sense of fulfilment derived from achieving personal goals, and overall career satisfaction. The experiences of happiness were closely related to their ability to manage the work-related challenges arising from international mobility. Although a familiar environment provided routine and emotional stability, job requirements, career progression, and work-life balance all affected happiness.

Some respondents noted a high level of satisfaction, maintained by a stable routine, while others experienced happiness variance affected by shifts in work and cultural environments. For instance, P4 said *"I was physically stable, and I followed a routine. I would sleep for about 7 hours."* It appears to show that, in this sample, stability during this period of their life was a factor in overall happiness. Similarly, P7 noted, *"I had to get used to a new, much colder climate than I was previously accustomed."* This shows environmental adjustments could affect the level of happiness and overall comfort of the participants.

Although participants experienced happiness related to a stable routine, high performance expectation affected happiness positively. Increased work-related pressures including higher performance expectations and role demands reduced satisfaction and happiness. For instance, P5 explained, *"Mentally, the pressure was due to me having sales targets. For instance, in my position at Tata Motors I had to meet the performance expectations and that was a stressor."* Thus, work related pressures lead to overall satisfaction.

Participants reporting better alignment with their roles and expectations and their personal goals experienced greater continuity of happiness. P1 here stated that, *"initially, I was slow because I was not able to understand the systems, like at the*

*warehouse, I had never used a scanner to manage order. I am now better. I can do the tasks in the shortest time and with a high level of efficiency.”*

Findings indicate that the happiness of self-initiated expatriates was impacted by the difference between the expectations and the realities of the international work environment. Some participants saw international relocation as a means to professional advancement and opportunities; however, the relocation process, at the beginning, caused negative emotions and dissatisfaction from a new environment that was unfamiliar to the participants. Emotions of isolation, confidence loss, and emotional instability, among other things, were expressed when participants felt that they were being asked to perform roles that were outside their expectations and goals. Although positive emotions were eventually experienced in international careers, they were the result of adjustment to the new environment.

The results also showed that the happiness of self-initiated expatriates was influenced by the perception of progress and the performance of meaningful work. When participants experienced a positive emotional and professional balance between their roles, aspirations, and values, they felt more satisfaction, confidence, and stability. Positive emotions were also experienced once participants adapted to the new workplace, created a positive social network, and established a positive work routine. The relocation culture showed that sustainable career happiness was the product of a positive balance between the context of the career and the individual's expectations.

*Table 2 Health Challenges During Relocation*

<b>Challenge Area</b>	<b>Observed Issue</b>
<b>Mental Health</b>	Stress and uncertainty
<b>Sleep</b>	Sleep disruption
<b>Work Pressure</b>	Performance expectations
<b>Environment</b>	Climate and cultural adjustment

**Work-Life Balance** Difficulty balancing roles

Furthermore, participants noted that happiness was influenced by the ability to strike a balance between professional obligations and personal wellbeing as shown in table 3. The increased volume of work, insecurity around finances, and the stress of adjusting to the new environment created a negative impact on emotional wellbeing. Despite this, many participants reported a higher emotional and occupational satisfaction after they became comfortable in the new environment and gained the confidence to handle the challenges of the new job. The findings indicate that the element of happiness in an international career is flexible and largely contingent upon coping with the various dimensions of an evolving profession and culture.

*Table 3 Happiness Challenges During Relocation*

<b>Challenge Area</b>	<b>Observed Issue</b>
<b>Job Satisfaction</b>	Misalignment between qualifications and job roles
<b>Emotional Adjustment</b>	Feelings of isolation and uncertainty
<b>Career Expectations</b>	Gap between expectations and reality
<b>Professional Fulfilment</b>	Difficulty finding meaningful work initially
<b>Social Integration</b>	Adjustment to new social and cultural environments
<b>Career Progression</b>	Delayed alignment with long-term aspirations

**4.1.3 Productivity**

Initially, most of the participants showed a dip in productivity after relocating as they got used to new systems, roles, and work environments as shown in table below. Participants pointed out challenges in coping with new processes and job expectations. For instance, P1 explained, *“Initially, I was slow because I was not able to understand*

*the systems, like at the warehouse, I had never used a scanner to manage order.*” Lack of familiarity with the system interfaces disrupted initial performances. Yet, productivity was enhanced as the participants became more accustomed to the context and more adept with the new skills. With learning and exposure, participants were able to accomplish the role expectations with greater ease. For example, P5 stated, *“In terms of productivity, I was able to achieve my targets and engage in the customer support activities,”* demonstrating recovery in performance. Similarly, P4 noted, *“I feel I have been quite productive. I have been involved in several papers and have been doing MATLAB-based simulations.”* Here, productivity shines through both academic contribution and technical work. P3 said, *“My employability transitioned from the scope of industry analytics to that of research specialization.”* In conclusion, the disruptions and the recovery in productivity were shaped by skill and efficiency development, and improved employability.

*Table 4 Productivity Adjustment Process*

<b>Stage</b>	<b>Participant Experience</b>
<b>Initial Stage</b>	Low efficiency
<b>Adjustment Stage</b>	Learning new systems
<b>Adaptation Stage</b>	Improved confidence
<b>Stabilisation Stage</b>	higher performance and personal development
<b>Long-Term Outcome</b>	Increased employability

The findings show that productivity was a function of the self-initiated expatriate’s ability to cope and adjust to the various configurations of the international relocation. Most participants reported a significant drop in productivity during the first few months of adaptation to the new workplace systems. Most participants cited the unfamiliar workplace systems, the language barrier, different workplace expectations, and the pressure of adjusting to the new environment as reasons for declining productivity. The

relocation to the new workplace systems demanded a coping period, and during this period, participants were not familiar with the technologies, frameworks, and the systems used in the organization. The coping period created ambiguity in work role expectations and a lack of confidence in the ability to perform work assignments.

Although there were some challenges at the beginning, productivity steadily increased. Participants learned about their new work environment and became more confident. Their efficiency at work and the regularity of their performance were bolstered through repetition with workplace tools, increased interaction with coworkers, and experiential learning. Employees working in operational, technical, healthcare, and academic fields mentioned becoming more independent once they became accustomed to the local work methods and the organization's expectations. In many instances, lost productivity was more strongly correlated to the acquisition of new hard skills, enhanced soft skills, and a better understanding of the daily work routine.

Participants seemed to agree that a productive international career meant going beyond one's immediate work performance toward adaptability and continuous professional improvement. Participants defined productivity as the capacity to remain employable, gain skills that are adaptable to new environments, and make progress in unstable career situations. Numerous participants mentioned that working in a range of professional environments over time made them more adaptable and increased their professional skills. This suggests that productivity in sustainable international careers is more about continuous improvement, adaptability, and career development beyond short-term goals, as opposed to the short-term performance of a particular organization.

## **4.2 IMPACT OF CAREER ADAPTABILITY ON CAREER SUSTAINABILITY**

Career adaptability emerged as a central factor contributing to the sustainability of SIEs' career trajectories. Participants demonstrate their adaptability across all four dimensions: concern, control, curiosity, and confidence.

#### **4.2.1 Concern**

Concern was especially noticed when participants made future career pathway decisions and plans prior to undertaking international relocation. Also, it was explained how participants planned their long-term career goals and made preliminary steps, such as researching different educational systems, employment opportunities, and socio-economic conditions in the target relocation country. All these actions described, showed some of the ways they made the orientational anxiety of moving internationally, less intense.

For example, P2 stated, *“Yes, my plan was, and still is, to obtain a degree in a country in Europe, gain registration, improve my language, and have a solid nursing career in Finland.”* Relocation to Finland was a planned undertaking, as compared to making a career move in the other direction. Similarly, P3 noted, *“I checked out the university, the research group, and the type of work they did as well as the responsibilities and the expected outcomes from the PhD students.”* It is evident that P3 engaged in seeking to acquire deliberate, future-oriented information.

Concern, manifested in the participants' proactive planning to align their current works with long term career objectives, resulted in greater psychological stability and less uncertainty. For instance, P2 stated, *“Yes, my plan was, and still is, to obtain a degree in a country in Europe, gain registration, improve my language, and have a solid nursing career in Finland.”* This example shows how participants' well-being was impacted positively by being to remain on course and minimize stress during transitions due to the benefits of advance planning.

#### **Control**

Participants equated control with the freedom to choose where to take their careers and when to execute such changes without the help of an organization. This self-directed control extended to self-initiated expatriation, where participants managed relocation, career, and administrative changes on their own behalf. For instance, P2 explained, *“Moving from India to Finland was completely my own decision, and it was not a sponsored relocation by an employer.”* This provides evidence of high career

decision accountability. Similarly, P6 stated, *“One of the biggest examples is when I made the decision to give up an industry job that was stable and decide to do a PhD.”* This illustrates the choice of a high-risk industry job related to long-term career development.

Participants that had a high level of control showed a high level of self-initiative by overcoming obstacles and fast-tracking challenges. For example, obstacles in the relocation process including managing an application process, developing a financing plan, and structuring a plan for relocation were easily overcome. This increased the control participants had in their careers to meet self-directed goals.

Control that participants self-directed in their careers under uncertain and changing conditions increased the ability to maintain direction and continuity. Participants maintained their ability to manage changes in their careers. Specifically, changes that were self-initiated controlled adjustments to their career paths.

The sense of control through decision making enables SIEs to manage conflicting demands and contributes to their career sustainability. P1 explained, *“I had to figure out how to keep my job and my studies on an even keel,”* showing how personal agency contributed to ongoing productivity and balance between work and life. They illustrated how the capacity to actively respond to challenges allowed participants to sustain performance in tough circumstances.

#### **4.2.2 Curiosity**

Curiosity stemmed from participants traveling internationally for work purposes and engaging in work that may have been outside of their immediate job role (i.e., learning new skills and engaging in new types of work). Rather than limiting roles to those within the immediate stretch of their skills and experience, participants showed greater sign potential for learning and adapting to multiple contexts.

For example, P1 was a Business Administration student at an international university, and worked multiple operational and service-sector jobs after moving to Finland. Coming from a background focused on theory, he made conscious decisions to accept

different jobs as warehouse staff, hotel cleaners, and even in night hawking. This was his way of gaining exposed to different cultures, dealing with different people, and sharpening his work skills. This flexibility is apparent from the way he adapted to different work environments, and P1 stated, *“My roles have been in a warehouse, housekeeping, and at a nightclub. Now, I am an order picker in warehouse operations.”*

None of these roles were even related to his academic training, which meant that they were also outside of his unnecessary skills and training. Even at these work environments, he was able to gain work experience. All of these roles that participants attended to reflect an actual practice of utilizing the roles to learn new work skills and to gather an understanding of the work that is involved in those work environments.

Engaging with new environments and improving their individual skills became important goals for participants, whether through learning a new language, improving another language, adapting to unfamiliar work systems, practicing flexible work roles, or extending their professional capabilities. Engaging those roles literally and potentially enabled participants to move to new and diverse work environments, and inspire participants to new work environments.

Similarly, P2 noted, *“I did not shy away from them. I asked my colleagues for language handouts, correction of my documents, and language practice.”* This demonstrates the initiation of learning and the practice of skills in the new environment.

The willingness for role exploration is a marked advantage for managing the multiple employment environments participants are able to seamlessly juggle, as it allows them to make the most of the roles within unfamiliar systems and quickly acquire the skills needed to be effective. The participants displayed an ability to close the gap of informally acquired skills, enabling them to settle within the new environments more comfortably.

The impact curiosity and a willingness to learn and take on unfamiliar new roles had on participants was visible in the way they were able to close the skills gaps in the new environments. This level of adaptability not only enhanced their career prospects, but also helped them remain competent in a highly dynamic international context. P1 noted

how this creativity (exploration) spurred curiosity and leave of absence opportunities to unfamiliar roles and settings, build skills and increase employability.

As P1 stated, *“My roles have been in a warehouse, housekeeping, and at a nightclub,”* indicates a readiness to delve into varied opportunities. This readiness allowed participants to develop new skills, adjust to various work environments, and improve prospects for their careers in the long run, consequently helping to sustain productivity.

This study identified an enticing pathway for self-initiating expatriates. Curiosity helped self-initiated expatriates adjust to unfamiliar international careers. Taking on different work roles did require some degree of curiosity. Participants had to be willing to interact with unfamiliar systems, practice, and learn new professional and cultural work habits. Many self-initiated expatriates took on new and unfamiliar tasks and work roles beyond their previous qualifications and work experiences. Self-initiated expatriates learned that by being willing to take on new challenges, they were better able to manage the uncertainties and the dynamic nature of the opportunities that the labor market offered within their host country.

Flexibility and adjustment of work skills was, according to the participants of the study, greatly influenced by curiosity. It was reported by some participants that unfamiliar work systems and the willingness to work within those systems improved their work place skills and their ability to handle varying work roles and responsibilities. The willingness of some participants to occupy roles that they considered to be outside their core work choice was also indicative of the practical experience that was sought and the resultant improvement in their access to subsequent opportunities. Curious behavior was an interest in and a willingness to explore the uncertain work environment and ultimately served to improve and sustain employment opportunities in international careers.

The findings show that curiosity greatly enhanced long-term career sustainability, especially through the continuous learning it inspired. Those who routinely explored the unknown were better able to adjust to the changes expected by the organization and the challenges associated with moving. Curiosity reduced the fear of the unknown,

which resulted in an openness to change and the ability to deal with the challenges of transition. This shows that curiosity in career sustainability allows the individual to develop the ability to adapt and be employable in various international career opportunities.

#### **4.2.3 Confidence**

In time, experiences, accomplishments, and outside reinforcement in participants' new work environments fostered their confidence. In the beginning, participants experienced low confidence due to certain factors, including using unfamiliar systems, language, and in/exposure to international work places.

For instance, P1 stated, *"My confidence was low at the start because everything around me was new."* Initially, participants described low confidence as uncertainty about new work and new cultures. While supervisors, colleagues, and customers validated participants' roles, confidence increased as participants learned their roles. Over time, however, P5 explained, *"I started getting positive feedback, and my confidence started to build."* This positive feedback from work and subsequently successful task completion helped aid the development of self-confidence. This feedback often centred around participants' effectiveness, efficiency, and tasks' ability to fulfil or meet expectations, subsequently augmenting their confidence.

The ability to accomplish tasks, coupled with the comfort to do so with further independence, of participants, showed that their confidence was not instinct, but an accumulation of many iterations. That augmented feeling of confidence was also initial self-efficacy that was further fostered by consistent positive feedback and appropriate responses.

Such self-efficacy developed through both prior experience and positive feedback, strengthening participants' confidence in their ability to complete tasks successfully. P5 elaborated, *"I started getting positive feedback, and my confidence started to build,"* supervisors and peers reinforced and strengthened their belief in their capabilities and

positively impacted their confidence. This resulted in even better performance, less anxiety, and better emotional steadiness.

All in all, it is clear that career adaptability involves a continuous cycle of skills formation made possible by the ability to respond to disruption while ensuring positive career results. The participants learned that health, happiness, and productivity can be preserved and even improved through a combination of confidence-building, planning, exploration, and decision-making, regardless of the phase of their cross-national careers. The findings indicate that career adaptability is closely associated with career sustainability. Specifically, the adaptability dimensions of concern, control, curiosity, and confidence impacted the participants' health, happiness, and productivity. These dimensions did not operate separately, rather, they worked collaboratively to help participants cope with the difficulties of international career sustainability.

The data indicates that self-initiated expatriates gradually developed confidence after exposure to different professional and cultural situations. They did not consider confidence a trait that existed prior to self-initiating expatriation. Confidence developed as participants gained knowledge of workplace systems and communication and task routines. Most participants described self-doubt about both their professional and personal skills during the initial relocations caused by insufficient knowledge of the social and work environments of the hosting country. Self-doubt and apprehension about undertaking tasks without supervision was increased by this uncertainty.

The most pronounced changes happened post adjustment to the work environment and after the completion of tasks and receipt of positive evaluative feedback. Many participants said confidence to work in an international environment was the result of supervisory and peer recognition. There was a noticeable decrease in the apprehension about making mistakes and the uncertainty of the unknown as confidence improved. Participants self-initiated international work roles with improved personal control and the ability to operate independently in the face of difficult work challenges.

The findings show that self-assurance had a direct positive impact on the participants' ability to sustain a career. Self-assurance helped participants manage transitions and

maintain productivity in unpredictable situations. It was evident that the participants who were confident were better able to cope with changing job responsibilities, resolve issues in the workplace, and react constructively to disruptions and changes in their career pathway. Confidence played a part in the participants' willingness to be more involved in new learning opportunities and mental pathways, thus it was part of their long-term ability to be employed. Regarding international careers, confidence should be seen as an evolving adaptable resilience resource as a result of experience, successful coping, and continued engagement with diverse professional contexts and environments. Rather, it should not be seen as a personal trait of an individual that is stagnant.

#### **4.3 SUMMARY OF KEY FINDINGS**

This research studied self-initiated expatriates' career sustainability through international mobility, specifically focusing on their health, happiness, and productivity. The research showed that these outcomes were not consistently positive, but evolving as time progressed and were associated with changes to the workplace and the environment.

With regards to health, for most participants, physical health mostly remains stable and, in fact, was often supported by maintaining a daily routine. The early stages of relocation, however, did result in participants experiencing physical strain and part of that was due to their demanding work and lack of daily routine. Mental health was affected more, and participants reported that in the early stages of relocation the factors of stress, and the lack of predictability, and adjustment were the biggest cause of decline to their mental health.

In terms of happiness, at the beginning when moved abroad, many people were dissatisfied, especially when they did not hold positions commensurate with their training or aspirations. Over time the respondents were able to stabilize their environments so satisfaction with the positions improved along with the alignment to their goals. This suggested that context of role and satisfactory adjustment was more important than the concern of physical presence or sickness to the people.

Finally, the most important and active real metric was productivity. An initial productivity decline also was noted due to a new organizational context, tools, and role specification. Over time, respondents were able to integrate into the new work system, harness the new work tools, and master their job. This new context and acquirement and the new context were characterized by partial recovery and ultimately enhanced productivity.

These results are impacted the degrees of career adaptability. Concern helped to situate and align the long-term goals participants set, decreasing the feeling of uncertainty. Control acted as a guiding tool, functioning to make and manage transitions. Curiosity facilitated the acquisition of skills and employs the range of possibilities, thus, increasing the chances of employability. Confidence was developed through the experiences and feedback given, thus, improving participants' ability to perform.

In the end, career adaptability acted as a functioning guide to deal with each of the challenges faced, to overcome the initial disruptions, and to achieve and/or maintain the outcomes of their careers in a more secure and sustainable manner over the given span of time.

*Table 5 Summary of Observed Findings from Interview Data*

<b>Result Theme</b>	<b>Observed Findings</b>
<b>Career Sustainability – Health</b>	<p>Home country contexts resulted in physical health stability because of the structured routine and familiarity.</p> <p>Health imbalances were seen due to mental strain despite physical stability.</p> <p>Relocation resulted in disruption of sleep, pressure of workload, and environmental adjustments.</p>
<b>Career Sustainability – Happiness</b>	<p>In the home country, participants felt partially satisfied but often because of the lack of growth or unclear career pathway.</p> <p>When roles are aligned to the long-term career aspirations, happiness is increased.</p>

	<p>Happiness was low initially due to adjustment challenges and unfamiliar environments.</p> <p>Satisfaction improved as participants adapted to roles and surroundings.</p>
<p><b>Career Sustainability – Productivity</b></p>	<p>Prior to relocation, productivity in an academic or professional environment was familiar, and hence, predictable.</p> <p>After relocation, productivity declined initially because the systems are unfamiliar.</p> <p>Over time, productivity improved due to adaptation, independence, and the development of skills.</p>
<p><b>Career Adaptability – Concern</b></p>	<p>Proactive planning, such as researching job markets, educational systems, and living conditions, was described by participants.</p> <p>Transitioning planning was directed toward the future and reduced the uncertainty.</p>
<p><b>Career Adaptability – Control</b></p>	<p>Relocation and role changes were described as taking charge of career pathways by participants.</p> <p>Having control over career decisions resulted in less dependency.</p>
<p><b>Career Adaptability – Curiosity</b></p>	<p>Participants described learning and adapting to new environments.</p> <p>Different roles were perceived as opportunities to learn and adapt, which are not limited to their initial qualifications.</p>
<p><b>Career Adaptability – Confidence</b></p>	<p>Confidence improved as participants learned to manage new tasks and systems.</p> <p>Higher confidence helped them solve problems and handle challenges effectively.</p>

## 5 DISCUSSION

This chapter aims at interpreting findings in relation to how career adaptability impacts the sustainability of international career journeys of self-initiated expatriates (De Vos et al. 2020). Going beyond descriptive findings, the author attempts to critically analyse the way participants traversed different contexts and their transitions, and how those transitions make sense within the wider frameworks of sustainable careers and career construction (Savickas & Porfeli, 2012).

Focusing three indicators of career sustainability, which are health, happiness, and productivity, the analysis aims at assessing the evolution of each indicator during the initial, adjustment and stabilisation phases of international transition (De Vos & Van der Heijden, 2015). As sustainable career theory emphasizes individuals as active agents and owners of their careers, this study focuses on career adaptability as a core mechanism underlying the development of sustainable career trajectories among SIEs. Career adaptability is examined through its four dimensions: concern, control, curiosity, and confidence. These dimensions provide a useful lens for explaining how individuals perceive, respond to, and navigate uncertainty and complexity within international career settings. (Rudolph et al. 2017).

The findings of this study are consistent with sustainable career theory, which conceptualizes career sustainability as a dynamic and context-specific phenomenon shaped by the interaction between individual agency and contextual conditions. In the SIE context, this interaction is especially pronounced, as self-initiated expatriates often undertake international career moves independently and without the formal organizational support commonly available to assigned expatriates. Consequently, their ability to sustain their careers depends strongly on the extent to which they can mobilize career adaptability resources to respond to uncertainty, navigate unfamiliar institutional and labour market environments, and maintain health, productivity, and happiness across international transitions.

## **5.1 CAREER SUSTAINABILITY OF SIES**

### **5.1.1 Health Discussion**

Health within sustainable careers contains both physical and psychological aspects of health. (De Vos et al., 2020). Participants in the study reported stable physical health while in their home countries. Mental strain from performance expectations and, psychological burden and the strain from the psychological demands of modern day work relate to the hidden burden of psychological demands in contemporary careers (Pak et al., 2021; Kong et al., 2023). Although most participants reported relatively stable physical health, this should not be interpreted as evidence that their careers were fully sustainable from a health perspective. Career sustainability should not be assessed solely through observable or short-term physical stability, as emotional strain, stress, and cognitive pressure may remain less visible while still affecting individuals' long-term well-being and work capacity. Therefore, the findings suggest that SIEs' health-related career sustainability needs to be understood more holistically, taking into account both physical health and the psychological demands associated with international relocation and career development.

When international transitions occur, the degree of imbalance tends to intensify, which is consistent with existing literature. Relocation combines stressors that goes outside the demands of the workplace (Shaffer et al., 2012). The findings show that health disruptions occur in multiple dimensions. In the early periods of international mobility, psychological and physical health are subjected to strains. This is interesting because it challenges the view in current literature that expatriates adjust to alter their mental and physical states in a sequential manner (Wehrle et al., 2019).

Challenges with mental health during international relocation were illustrated by the reported stress and uncertainty. Participants indicated that sleep was disrupted due to the emotional and mental exhaustion brought on by relocation and settling in. Many participants indicated that during the early stages of relocation, mental pressure was caused by the new systems of work, financial pressure, language barriers, school demands, and cultural adjustment. For example, participant 3 stated that there was

pressure due to the requirements of doctoral research which meant self-management and the balancing of deadlines in the new environment. Participant 1 said that trying to balance work with studies in Finland meant cultural adjustment to the new environment and systems, and it was *“very stressful in the beginning.”* The results seem to suggest the mental health of an individual in the context of the demands of their career and relocation, and the capacity of that individual to cope, defines the balance as opposed to the fixed state of equilibrium in the disposition of the individual.

### **5.1.2 Happiness Discussion**

Career-related happiness stems from the job's alignment with the individual's aspirations and long-term career goals (De Vos et al., 2020). Participants stated that their level of satisfaction was not met in the home country, and this scenario depicts a situation where fundamental needs have been met, but a lack of step forward and lack of growth resulted in a lack of overall satisfaction. This condition supported the distinction made by prior studies on satisfaction, as the distinction made by prior studies on the difference between surface satisfaction and the lack of overall career meaning (Steger et al, 2012). Sustainable career happiness can be derived from having a job, but true fulfilment comes from having a job with a purpose and meaningful career.

Participants noted that their decision to relocate was partly because of professional factors pertaining to skill acquisition, enhanced prospects, and rationale to pursue their long-term objectives. As much as international mobility gave new experiences and exposure, the extent of satisfaction achieved was not as high as expected. In many instances, the satisfaction gap between anticipated and actual work experience was particularly pronounced at the early stages of the transition. Although relocation resulted in progression and exposure, the extent of satisfaction was determined by the level of role congruence and adjustment to situation. In contrast to other studies on international careers, Participants stated that happiness was a result of the uncertainty of aspiration, opportunity, and context. Participants stated that meaningful work was not an end result, but was a process that they had to continually go through in their career.

The evidence reveals that happiness in sustainable careers largely depends on the degree of correspondence among one's drives, job desires, and work. As suggested in the sustainable career theory, happiness is more than merely enjoying a job. It encompasses an extended reconciliation of one's personal and professional career objectives with lasting fulfilment and meaning (De Vos & Van der Heijden, 2015). Those who adjusted to their environment and managed to better integrate their professional and personal long-term goals reported better emotional and career satisfaction.

The study also noted that the happiness of the participants was vulnerable during periods of transition, uncertainty, and change. When the participants were internationally moved from one country to the other, they often experienced a loss of emotional comfort. This was because of an alien social system, a change in the weather/temperature, an increased workload, and a decrease in the level of social support. Similar things were observed in Wehrle et al. (2019), when they articulated that career adaptability was a precursor to emotional adjustment in a novel work environment. Because of this, deriving happiness from international careers is more context dependent and dynamic than being stable or being automatically gained from relocation.

### **5.1.3 Productivity Discussion**

Results show that SIEs productivity decline after relocation. This is consistent with the adaptation theory, which posits that, after a transition, employees are expected to temporarily underperform due to the existing system in which they are unfamiliar with the components, roles, and expectations (Shaffer et al., 2012). The observed decline in productivity is an outcome of the cognitive and operational challenges of the employees and, to the greatest extent, depicts the extent to which productivity is an outcome of the environmental surroundings, and the extent to which the productivity is sustained as a factor of the individual.

The findings reflected a trend of disruption in productivity, with a modest recovery trend in the period that followed. In the early days of the international moves, the disruption in productivity was attributed to the presence of new and unpredictable systems, roles,

and environments of work. Subsequently, the new systems, roles, and environments of work became clear to the participants, and they managed to work with additional agility and flexibility in meeting their performance targets. Their growing familiarity with the tasks enabled them to work more independently and consistently.

The findings also suggest that productivity in global careers is dynamic, and the disruptions reflect the trajectory of adjustment to new environments. The results also showed that despite the disruption, participants managed to regain their productivity targets in the new environments. This ability to reign in productivity highlights the importance of the ability to adjust to new environments and mitigates the productivity disruption in the new work environments of the participants.

The increased efficiency and autonomy of participants demonstrate that, as a result of continual exposure to a particular set of duties, subsystems, and/or organizational structures, individuals are able to learn, which, ultimately, enabled them to achieve performance greater than before. This observation emphasizes the conception that, through adaptation, productivity is not only restored but in most cases enhanced, and that international mobility, despite the short-term disruptions that may occur, can be a significant contributor to long-term capability development. For example, P1 noted that unfamiliar work systems initially hindered his efficiency, leading to a lack of confidence. After adjusting, P1 stated, *"I am now better. I can do the tasks in the shortest time and with a high level of efficiency."* Like P1, P6 stated that the introduction of new, more complex testing systems at Nokia was a key factor in helping him *"develop new productive routines."* P6 also mentioned other positive adjustments toward better management of work within international R&D.

The findings suggest that productivity within international careers operates within a dynamic framework where an initial decline is followed by a recovery, with the adaptation and learning processes being instrumental in reinstating productivity and achieving sustained career outcomes.

## **5.2 IMPACT OF CAREER ADAPTABILITY ON CAREER SUSTAINABILITY**

### **5.2.1 Concern**

The results corroborate the notion of concern as a future-oriented facet of career adaptability, where individuals engage in advanced planning and information-seeking activities to prepare for impending career transitions (Savickas & Porfeli, 2012). The participants researched educational systems, labour markets, and living conditions before moving, which illustrates their concern of potential obstacles in the future moves. This supports the idea that future orientation is a resource that helps manage uncertain career situations, especially in self-initiated international mobility.

The results also show that planning brings about a sense of certainty, guiding individuals and helping them feel more prepared for the transition. Participants' self-directed goal setting and decision making resulted in them minimizing the ambiguity of relocation and more effectively dealing with the challenges of adjusting to a new set of systems and environments. This is consistent with the existing body of literature that suggests anticipatory behaviours transform uncertainty into structured challenges, thereby enhancing one's ability to cope (Talluri et al., 2022).

The results indicate that the concern function of career adaptability, in relation to international transitions, acts as a stabilizing mechanism by providing the ability to reduce uncertainty and improving the ease of career transitions.

### **5.2.2 Control**

The results are consistent with career construction theory, which describes control as the ability of the individual to assume, and active, construct, and shape the course of their career (Savickas & Porfeli, 2012). The participants' descriptions of relocation, choosing career directions, and managing transitions demonstrate that control is the result of active and self-directed decisions, as opposed to organizational dependence (Rudolph et al., 2017). These results imply that in self-initiated expatriation situations with limited institutional and organizational support, individual agency is the most important factor in determining and shaping one's career.

Furthermore, the results demonstrate that control not only functions in the initial decision of relocation, but also an ongoing process through which SIEs regulate and sustain their career development. Participants constantly assessed their situations, realigned their goals, and evolved strategies to transition from temporary roles to better-suited ones, which reflects that control is dynamic and adaptive to the context. This is in line with Talluri et al. (2022) that individuals traverse constraints as opportunities to reinforce principle continuity in their career trajectories.

Overall, the results suggest that control enhances the directional aspect of one's career by allowing individuals to utilize agency in situations with high ambiguity. This results in the consolidation of career trajectories as individuals make deliberate, sustained decisions in the international arena.

### **5.2.3 Curiosity**

Career construction theory posits that involvement, including in new roles, environments, and learning opportunities, relates to one's propensity to engage in curiosity-led exploration (Savickas & Porfeli, 2012). This study has confirmed that, in the absence of predetermined career paths, curiosity leads to multiple exposure opportunities that are essential in international contexts.

The absence of predetermined paths provides ample room for exploration where exposure directly leads to learning, and, ultimately, improvement in one's ability to navigate the new setting (Wang & Li, 2024). As participants' roles and systems in the organization changed, their ability to meet the expectations of the host country also increased. The learning-driven and gradual adjustment process encourages active involvement, as opposed to reliance on external factors and fully predetermined paths. This approach minimizes uncertainties to foster continued participation in adaptable systems of career planning (Talluri et al., 2022). The removal of initial uncertainties adds to the practical lesson that curiosity serves to unlock the learner's potential for adjustment, system navigation, and, ultimately, prolonged career viability in unpredictable settings.

#### **5.2.4 Confidence**

The findings align with the current literature that describes confidence as an integral dimension of career adaptability, depicting people's conviction regarding their capacity to handle career-related obstacles and changes (Savickas & Porfeli, 2012). Participants elaborated on the enhanced performance and greater autonomy they experienced, which testimonials corroborated confidence as a product of active participation in unfamiliar tasks and environments, leading to a greater sense of self-efficacy in international career contexts (Rudolph et al., 2017). This supports the concept of confidence as a by-product of experiences, and not as a trait one possesses.

The findings also suggest that self-efficacy plays a critical role in the healing process after the initial disruptions caused by relocation (Wang & Li, 2024). Participants' enhanced ability to execute tasks, coupled with their competence and familiarity with the systems, improved job satisfaction, and productivity. Confidence in the continuity of the process reflects the recovery mechanism at work, where confidence counteracts uncertainty and the associated decline in performance, which supports adaptation models of career development (Talluri et al., 2022).

The results indicated that confidence plays a critical role in career sustainability by helping people deal with transitional hurdles, restoring their performance, and keeping their active participation over time. Because of this, self-efficacy is closely associated with positive career results.

### **5.3 THEORETICAL IMPLICATIONS**

The findings contribute to sustainable career theory by providing empirical support for its conceptualisation of careers as processes in motion as a result of the interplay of individual agency and contextual factors (De Vos et al., 2020). By showing how health, happiness, and productivity are not constant across career changes, the study contributes to the literature and demonstrates the importance of acknowledging the non-linear and interdependent relationship of these factors, especially in the case of internationally mobile careers (De Vos & Van der Heijden, 2015).

The findings show that adaptability is enacted continually over the course of a career and support the perspective that adaptability is a process-oriented resource that helps people manage uncertainty and achieve sustained career outcomes over time (Rudolph et al., 2017). This enhances the understanding of adaptability as a construct that links individual's agency to the long-term sustainability of one's career.

This research provides an original theoretical contribution to the sustainable career literature by applying sustainable career theory to the context of self-initiated expatriation. The bulk of the sustainable career research has examined the context of domestic careers and/or organisational careers. This study, on the other hand, illustrates that sustainable career outcomes in the international and self-guided career domains can be achieved by an expatriate's ability to adapt to varying professional, cultural, and labour market conditions. Hence, the findings of this research provide evidence to support the assertion that sustainable careers are dynamic and context-specific, rather than being fixed outcomes.

This research also builds on career construction theory by illustrating how, over the duration of uncertain international careers, the resources of adaptability work in the dimensions of concern, control, curiosity, and confidence as interrelated mechanisms. These mechanisms supported participants' adjustment, employability, emotional stability, and productivity during relocation and career transitions. The findings of this study, therefore, reinforce the assertion that adaptability is not a fixed personality trait, but rather a progressive and dynamic capability developed over time by exposure to various career challenges and environmental conditions, as well as adjustment experiences.

Moreover, the study reinforces the link between career adaptability and career sustainability by showing how adaptability resources aid in sustaining health, happiness, productivity, and employability in internationally mobile careers. It offers a deeper understanding of the ways in which a person can sustain their career in the absence of support from their organization and in an environment of high unpredictability. The

results of the study are thus a valuable contribution to the literature about the sustainability of self-directed international careers.

The results also indicate that sustainable international careers stem from both structural frameworks and individual resource adaptation. Many participants experienced barriers linked to the uncertainty of the labor market, unknown organizational frameworks, cultural gaps, and the alteration of professional expectations once moved. These barriers imposed temporary conditions of instability on emotional wellbeing, productivity, and the continuity of a career. However, participants who cultivated adaptation resources seemed better able to manage disruption and promote career sustainability in the face of challenging conditions. This underscores the need to view career sustainability as a process of frequent adaptation, rather than a 'static' career endpoint.

The study also noted that self-initiated expatriates experience international careers differently than organisation-assigned expatriates, due to the former's reliance on self-resourcefulness and self-responsibility. Participants managed job changes, relocation, planning, financial uncertainty, and career progression over the long term, without an organised career system. Therefore, in order to achieve career security and employability in different international settings, individual adaptability was critical. The results strengthen the notion that self-initiated expatriation is a unique career phenomenon and calls for more in-depth theoretical and practical work in the field of international career studies.

The study surveyed career sustainment and noted that participants could not solely rely on objective measurements, such as income, job level, or rank within the organization. Participants noted that career sustainment is intertwined with emotional sustainment, fulfillment, long-term employability, opportunities to learn, and sustain personal wellbeing. This increase in complexity of modern international careers, combined with self-management and self-responsibility, creates a new paradigm in international career management.

## 5.4 PRACTICAL IMPLICATIONS

The findings practical implications for self-initiated expatriates by outlining the value of proactive adaptability in the context of international career changes (Wang & Li, 2024). To deal with uncertainty and ensure that their career aspirations remain in sync with the prevailing circumstances, individuals are encouraged to engage in prospective thinking, continuous learning, and active decision-making. Adaptability resources are not only meant to help individuals cope with changes but are also essential for fostering sustained career viability.

The findings provide detail on challenges, for managers, on the needing losing sight of the challenges faced by internationally mobile practitioners, more so in the initial adjustment period (Shaffer et al. 2012). Consideration of adjustment and employee wellbeing and productivity can be enhanced by the provision of structured onboarding, skill development and positive, inclusive work environments. This is especially the case for organizations that employ self-initiated expatriates, who often work in the absence of formal organizational supports.

From a policy perspective, the findings highlight the need for more enabling policies to support the integration of foreign workers into local labour markets (Jayawardhana, 2024). The recognition of qualified, gainfully employable, culturally able to integrate foreign workers is critical to promoting the sustainable and optimal use of global talent.

This study contributes useful knowledge to organisations, universities, career counsellors, and the self-initiated expatriate. Organisations that employ professional expatriates should understand that self-initiated expatriates experience relocation and within-organisation transitional adjustment pressures. To help self-initiated expatriate employees, organisations should construct supportive onboarding systems. Additional productive measures would include the provision of mentoring, language, and flexible adjustment support. This would allow self-initiated employees to adapt and maintain productivity.

Findings underscore the need to develop career adaptability and the associated importance within higher education and career guidance. Universities and career

support services should aid future self-initiated expatriates by promoting adaptability, including future career planning and development of self-confidence, cross-cultural communication, flexibility, and proactive career management. Since many self-initiated expatriates experienced uncertainty in the early staging of relocation, having structured preparation and realistic expectations of international careers could be longer-term viable solutions.

Based on the findings, self-initiated expatriates should sustain their international career by focusing on self-initiated continuous professional work, remaining open to the unfamiliar, and managing their careers in a proactive manner. In general, the self-initiated expatriates who exhibited most of the attributes of adaptability were able to successfully manage uncertainty, maintain employability, and achieve a higher degree of career satisfaction and stability. The flexibility and self-initiated career focus of the modern flexible work market indicate that adaptability is critical.

These findings further contribute to the international labour market integration and workforce sustainability discourse. Smith (2012) maintains that self-initiated expatriates encounter integration challenges during relocation. Therefore, policymakers and skilled migration programme administrators are urged to enhance support mechanisms for the integration of migrants into host labour markets. Career sustainability of internationally mobile professionals can be supported by the provision of language assistance, employment advisory services, cross-cultural orientation, and adjustment-related professional development opportunities.

The study advocates that policymakers should consider adaptability as a career management strategy within the context of an increasingly volatile labour market. In the case where global careers may lack the organisational structure as in the past, employees will need to develop better self-management skills to be able to sustain their employability, thus continue with their career as they desire. Accordingly, the priority of organisations and educational institutions should be to develop adaptability skills with flexibility, resilience, career planning, proactive learning, and confidence to manage

career changes. These skills will probably become a mainstay of productivity and wellbeing in mobile labour markets.

The findings suggest that organisations with internationally mobile employees should be mindful of the fact that there will be a need for time and context to promote adjustment and enable productivity. The participants also reported a loss of confidence and diminished productivity because of unfamiliar systems and disrupted workplace expectations. From this perspective, mentoring schemes, supportive onboarding, communicative clarity, and setting realistic adjustment goals, are predicted to positively impact employee wellbeing and enhance productivity. Strengthening adaptability of employees will be a career sustainability strategy for individuals and assist employee retention, workforce stability, and the overall performance of organisations in an international labour market.

## 6 CONCLUSION

The collectively of the findings illustrates that self-initiated expatriate career sustainability is shaped by the interplay between individual adaptability resources and contextual demands (De Vos et al., 2020). Health, happiness, and productivity were triggered by and interdependently influenced by transitional challenges, where physical stability, fatigue, aligned happiness, and a declining then recovering productivity. This illustrates that a career's sustainability is not a fixed endpoint, but an ongoing process that individuals continuously adapting to their new environment.

Self-initiated expatriates' ability to adapt and thrive in changing work environments is encapsulated in career adaptability (Savickas & Porfeli, 2012). Concern, control, curiosity, and confidence influenced adaptive resource systems in a way whereby control enabled the individual to remain on a self-directed path and confidence resulted in stability and recovery post disruption (Rudolph et al., 2017). Concern opened the way to preparation, control directed the individual down predetermined career pathways, curiosity inspired exploration and learning, and confidence provided stability after recovery from disruption, producing a system that allowed the participants to respond to changing environments and maintaining the system's coherence and alignment with individual career contexts.

The relationship between career adaptability and career sustainability demonstrates that positive career outcomes are a result of prolonged adaptation as opposed to immediate outcomes (Wang & Li, 2024). Participants experienced an initial imbalance across health, happiness, and productivity. However, when adaptive resources were triggered, imbalances across the aforementioned dimensions were gradually stabilized and improved. The result demonstrates the importance of adaptability and, as a process-based mechanism, adaptability supported ongoing career sustainability by transforming uncertainty into manageable experiences.

This study defined career adaptability among self-initiated expatriates within international environments and career sustainability. The study explored how participants' mental, physical, and emotional health were impacted by international

career disruptions and opportunities, including productivity and employability. Participants did not describe career sustainability as a linear, stable condition; instead, they viewed career sustainability as the ability to adapt to continually shifting organizational, contextual, cultural, and labor market elements. This, therefore, indicates a dynamic career process. The findings provide support to interpret sustainable careers as the result of the interplay of context and career domain environment.

The results also indicated that international relocation created stress and emotional pressure, systems and professional expectations alignment challenges, challenges due to language, and adjustment demands, all of which negatively impacted productivity. However, participants built resources that extended the horizon of their career. Concern, control, curiosity, and confidence became the primary sources of employability and career sustainability over time despite disruptions caused by international mobility. These adaptability resources did not function independently, but interacted continuously to create lasting positive career outcomes for the participants.

The research suggested that goals and aspirations with positive emotional regulation, productive career progress, and employability were defining factors of self-initiated expatriate's career sustainability. Career sustainability was also enhanced by improved alignment between professional roles and personal goals. This shows that career sustainability not only relies on external factors, but also the ability to adjust to Career sustainability was improved by better alignment of career goals.

The research also provides a new perspective on self-initiated expatriation. It shows that compared to other forms of internationally-assigned expatriation, self-initiated expatriation relies much more on self-management. Self-initiated expatriation is not as structured as other forms of expatriation. Self-initiated expatriates are required to make their own decisions about relocation, employment, and skill development. They are also required to develop strategies for managing their careers over the long term. Career sustainability was enhanced by self-initiated expatriates' ability to maintain healthy lifestyles, happiness, productivity, and employability.

The research provides evidence that self-initiated career sustainability relies on career management strategies in globally mobile employment environments. An important contribution of this research is that sustainable careers are systems of self-initiated career management. These systems rely on self-initiated career management and external career conditions. Career self-management will sustain mobile careers in the present and future.

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