

MEASURING EXPATRIATE DEVELOPMENTAL OUTCOMES: INTEGRATING CAREER ADAPTABILITY AND CROSS-CULTURAL ADJUSTMENT METRICS

¹*XINYONG LI,²BASHEER AL-HAIMI

¹UNIVERSITI TEKNOLOGI MALAYSIA, AZMAN HASHIM INTERNATIONAL BUSINESS SCHOOL, 81310, JOHOR, MALAYSIA, EMAIL: Xinyonglee@yeah.net

²UNIVERSITI TEKNOLOGI MALAYSIA, AZMAN HASHIM INTERNATIONAL BUSINESS SCHOOL, 81310, JOHOR, MALAYSIA, EMAIL: mabasheer@utm.my

Abstract

Aim/Purpose – This study develops and validates an integrated framework that measures expatriate developmental outcomes by linking Cross-Cultural Adjustment (CCA) and Career Adaptability (CA) metrics, addressing the lack of unified assessment tools for expatriate adaptation and career growth.

Design/methodology/approach – Using a two-cycle action research design at Hebei Building Materials Industry Design and Research Institute's South African subsidiary, data were collected from 30 Chinese expatriates through surveys, focus groups, and reflection journals to evaluate the impact of onboarding and career development interventions.

Findings – CCA improved across general (80%), interactional (73%), and work (83%) domains, while CA dimensions—concern (70%), control (60%), curiosity (76%), and confidence (80%)—also increased, demonstrating the interdependence of adjustment and adaptability through social learning.

Research implications/limitations – The study highlights a practical model for integrating adaptation and career metrics but is limited by its single-case context and short-term evaluation period.

Originality/value/contribution – It introduces a glocalized measurement system that unites CCA and CA within one framework, offering actionable insights for enhancing expatriate retention and developmental sustainability in emerging-market environments.

Keywords: expatriate development, cross-cultural adjustment, career adaptability, localized HRM

1. INTRODUCTION

Expatriate assignments remain central to contemporary global talent mobility, as firms increasingly rely on cross-border deployments to transfer knowledge, develop leadership pipelines, and accelerate international expansion (Jawad, 2020). However, despite substantial investments in international assignments, many programmes continue to struggle in achieving sustainable developmental outcomes, particularly in emerging-market contexts—such as Chinese professionals deployed to Africa—where cultural, linguistic, and institutional distances are pronounced (Noman et al., 2025). Traditional evaluation frameworks typically prioritise assignment completion, cost control, or short-term job performance, often neglecting the deeper processes of adaptation, learning, and professional growth that underpin long-term success.

The literature on expatriate effectiveness has long emphasised the importance of cross-cultural adjustment (CCA), encompassing general (daily life), interactional (host-national relations), and work (task and role) domains (Koveshnikov & Lehtonen, 2025). Recent studies reaffirm that insufficient adjustment continues to hinder international assignment outcomes; for instance, preparedness for cultural differences remains a key predictor of both daily-life and work-role adjustment (Reic, 2023). Parallel to this, the construct of career adaptability (CA)—defined as a psychosocial resource comprising concern, control, curiosity and confidence (Zewude et al., 2025)—has emerged from vocational psychology as a critical capability for navigating transitions and sustaining career trajectories in dynamic global environments (McNulty & Vance, 2017). Although CA research has largely focused on domestic or self-initiated career transitions, growing evidence highlights its relevance for expatriates; for example, job fit, career adaptability and expatriate type have all been shown to influence expatriate career outcomes (Mello et al., 2024).

Despite the recognised importance of CCA and CA, empirical research integrating the two into a unified developmental framework remains limited. A recent study found that CA partially mediates the relationship between protean career orientation and CCA among self-initiated expatriates, yet it did not examine implications for broader developmental outcomes (Sahney, 2024). Moreover, emerging person-centred approaches to expatriate

¹Corresponding Author: Level 10, Menara Razak, Universiti Teknologi Malaysia, Jalan Sultan Yahya Petra, 54100 Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia. Email: xinyonglee@yeah.net

adjustment advocate for a more holistic perspective that incorporates resource accumulation and career-capital development rather than focusing solely on adaptation (Lei et al., 2025). As a result, organisations still lack comprehensive, integrated metrics capable of assessing not only how expatriates adjust to host environments but also how they build adaptive career capacity that contributes to longer-term value creation.

To address this gap, the present study develops and empirically validates an integrated measurement model of Expatriate Developmental Outcomes (EDO) that links CCA and CA underpinned by social learning theory (Bandura, 1977). The model posits that effective adjustment enhances psychological safety and intercultural efficacy; that social learning processes—such as mentoring, modelling and feedback—reinforce adaptive behaviours; and that heightened career adaptability enables expatriates to navigate complex career pathways, build career capital, and sustain international assignments. The empirical setting is a South African subsidiary of a Chinese state-owned enterprise, where 30 Chinese expatriates participated in two sequential interventions: a Comprehensive Onboarding Program (focusing on language support, cultural integration and social networks) and a Talent Continuity & Career Development Program (emphasising mentoring, job shadowing and career-roadmap workshops). Through a mixed-methods action-research design, quantitative measures of CCA and CA were complemented by qualitative reflections and focus groups.

This study generates several contributions. Theoretically, it advances the field beyond the traditional adaptation-centric paradigm by integrating adjustment and career development within a single empirical model, aligning with recent calls for more holistic approaches to expatriate research (Han et al., 2022). Practically, it provides global mobility practitioners with a replicable measurement framework and associated metrics for assessing short-term adjustment improvements and mid-term gains in career adaptability—thereby enabling more strategic talent-management decisions, particularly in South–South expatriation contexts. For Chinese multinational enterprises expanding into Africa and other emerging regions, such metrics offer actionable insights to strengthen retention, engagement, and leadership-pipeline development. Finally, the context-specific evidence from a Chinese expatriate cohort in South Africa enriches a literature base that remains disproportionately dominated by Western expatriation perspectives.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Cross-Cultural Adjustment (CCA)

CCA remains the canonical lens for expatriate effectiveness across general, interactional, and work domains (Waxin, 2004). Recent empirical work continues to show that preparedness, personality/cultural intelligence, and cross-cultural training significantly predict better work adjustment and performance, particularly in complex host environments. Studies focused on Chinese assignees also confirm ongoing adjustment frictions in Belt-and-Road destinations (language distance, norms, institutions), reinforcing the need to track domain-specific adjustment rather than only overall satisfaction (Noman et al., 2025).

2.2 Career Adaptability (CA)

Career Adaptability—the four psychosocial resources of Concern, Control, Curiosity, Confidence (the “4Cs”)—supports proactive navigation of career transitions. Recent regional/systematic reviews reaffirm robust links between CA and employability, career outcomes, and well-being, and argue for its applicability to global mobility. Within expatriation, fresh evidence shows CA sits alongside CCA as a central pillar of expatriate careers; protean orientations and fit conditions shape their interplay and downstream outcomes (Sathish et al., 2024).

2.3 Social Learning Theory (SLT), Mentoring, and Developmental Mechanisms

SLT explains how vicarious modelling, feedback, and reinforcement (e.g., mentoring, shadowing, peer coaching) convert early adjustment experiences into durable behavioural scripts and self-efficacy. Integrative reviews of global-talent mentoring and contemporary handbooks on expatriate mentoring explicitly foreground SLT as the engine of expatriate development, highlighting multi-actor networks (Zhang & Nardon, 2024).

2.4 South–South Expatriation and the Chinese-in-Africa Context

South–South flows (e.g., Chinese assignees in Africa) feature distinctive language and institutional distances that amplify coordination and safety risks in construction/infrastructure settings; targeted language and cultural interventions are therefore foundational inputs to CCA. For rigorous language tracking across cohorts, CEFR-aligned frameworks and toolboxes are widely adopted in workplace programs and provide comparable pre/post measures (Noman et al., 2025).

2.5 Measuring Expatriate Development: Integrating CCA and CA

Despite parallel maturity of CCA and CA literatures, integrated measurement that traces how short-term adjustment converts into adaptive career capacity remains rare. New studies begin to connect the dots (e.g., CA mediating between protean orientation and CCA), but consolidated systems that test CCA→CA pathways under SLT-consistent mentoring are still emergent (Sathish et al., 2024).

For multilingual worksites, CEFR-aligned assessment offers a transparent yardstick for functional communication gains (A2→B1/B2/C1). Contemporary implementation toolkits and industry programs (including construction-specific curricula) demonstrate established practice for aligning workplace language training to CEFR, supporting rigorous, comparable measurement across cohorts.

On the adjustment side, validated CCA scales remain the dominant approach for capturing general, interactional and work adjustment; on the adaptability side, the Career Adapt-Abilities Scale (CAAS) and its derivatives remain

the field standard for the 4Cs (recent systematic reviews consolidate reliability and cross-context validity). Together, these instruments enable a composite Expatriate Developmental Outcomes (EDO) index that can be tracked pre/post interventions (Lo & Nguyen, 2023).

2.6 Conceptual synthesis and propositions

Bringing these strands together, the contemporary literature supports a sequential–reinforcing logic:

1. CCA (general, interactional, work) → establishes psychological safety and intercultural efficacy in the host context;
2. SLT-consistent learning (mentoring, shadowing, peer coaching) → consolidates behavioural scripts and accelerates skill generalisation;
3. Gains in CA (4Cs) → express as proactive career navigation, resilience and career capital growth—predictors of retention and leadership pipeline outcomes.

This integration underpins the study’s analytical framework and motivates testing whether interventions that improve CCA (e.g., language, cultural communication, social integration) are associated with increases in CA, with learning reinforcement acting as a mechanism that strengthens these links (Zhang & Nardon, 2024).

2.7 Conclusion of Literature Review

The reviewed scholarship collectively highlights that expatriate success in emerging-market contexts depends on more than initial adaptation; it requires continuous learning and adaptive career development.

Cross-Cultural Adjustment establishes the behavioral and emotional foundation for functioning in the host environment, while Career Adaptability provides the psychosocial capacity for long-term professional growth. Social Learning Theory explains the process through which adjustment transforms into adaptability—via mentoring, modelling, and feedback loops that reinforce self-efficacy and curiosity.

Yet, the absence of an integrated empirical model linking these constructs leaves a measurable gap in expatriate development research.

This study therefore integrates the three perspectives into a unified framework—Expatriate Developmental Outcomes (EDO)—to assess how structured interventions simultaneously improve short-term adjustment and long-term adaptability among Chinese expatriates in South Africa

Table 1. Summary of Key Literature and Conceptual Linkages

Concept / Theory	Core Dimensions	Key Recent Findings (2023–2025)	Research Gap Identified	Relevance to Present Study
Cross-Cultural Adjustment (Black et al., 1991)	General, Interactional, Work	Targeted training and cultural intelligence improve adjustment; person-centred approaches emphasise resource building (Reic 2023; Han 2024).	Adjustment often treated as a short-term outcome, not linked to career growth.	Forms the initial stage of expatriate development and baseline metric in Intervention One.
Career Adaptability (Savickas & Porfeli 2012)	Concern, Control, Curiosity, Confidence	4C resources predict employability and leadership emergence; adaptability mediates career success (Mello 2024; Valk 2024).	Empirical integration with expatriate adjustment remains limited.	Provides developmental outcome indicators for Intervention Two.
Social Learning Theory (Bandura 1977)	Modelling, Feedback, Reinforcement	Mentoring and peer learning accelerate intercultural efficacy and build confidence (Al Memari 2025; Lei 2025).	Few studies operationalise SLT mechanisms in expatriate programmes.	Explains how CCA translates into CA through experiential learning.
South–South Expatriation Context	Chinese expatriates in Africa	Language distance and institutional gaps hinder adjustment; glocalised HRM practices improve retention (Noman 2025; Chen 2024).	Limited quantitative metrics capturing both adaptation and career growth in emerging-market settings.	Provides contextual foundation for applying the integrated EDO model.

3. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

3.1 Research Philosophy and Design

This research adopts a pragmatic paradigm anchored in action research methodology, reflecting the study’s dual orientation toward academic inquiry and organisational improvement. Pragmatism allows the integration of both positivist (quantitative measurement) and interpretivist (qualitative meaning-making) paradigms to understand the complex dynamics of expatriate development. The study follows the cyclical action research model (Maxwell, 2003), encompassing planning, action, observation, and reflection in two iterative cycles.

The first cycle addressed immediate adjustment challenges through the Comprehensive Onboarding Program (COP), while the second cycle deepened developmental learning through the Talent Continuity and Career Development Program (TCCDP). Together, these cycles form a longitudinal, evidence-based inquiry into how structured interventions influence expatriates’ cross-cultural adjustment and career adaptability.

3.2 Research Context

The empirical fieldwork was conducted at Hebei Building Materials Industry Design and Research Institute (HBM), a Chinese state-affiliated enterprise operating a subsidiary in South Africa. The setting represents a South–South expatriation context, characterized by linguistic disparity, sociocultural divergence, and institutional complexity. Chinese engineers, project managers, and administrative personnel face integration challenges within multilingual construction environments. This unique context allowed for the empirical validation of a glocalized expatriate development framework, aligning international HRM theory with the operational realities of Chinese overseas assignments.

3.3 Participants and Sampling

A purposive sampling strategy was employed to ensure that participants possessed direct expatriation experience and were actively involved in the intervention programs. Thirty ($n = 30$) Chinese expatriate employees of the Hebei Building Materials Industry Design and Research Institute’s South African subsidiary were selected to represent the organizational population across functional domains—engineering (40 %), project management (33 %), operations (17 %) and administration (10 %). All participants had completed at least three months of overseas tenure and were scheduled for assignments exceeding one year, making them well positioned to reflect the developmental trajectory under investigation. The cohort’s average age was 34 years, with 1.2 years of prior international exposure, and a gender composition of 70 % male and 30 % female, consistent with the demographic structure of Chinese state-owned enterprises operating in the construction and infrastructure sectors.

From a methodological perspective, the sample size of thirty ($n = 30$) was established through a combination of empirical precedent, theoretical saturation, and statistical sensitivity. In action-research settings, representativeness is determined not by population proportion but by the capacity to generate valid, context-rich inferences from iterative cycles of intervention and (Ahmed, 2024). Prior expatriate-development studies employing comparable designs have reported robust findings with cohorts ranging from 20 to 40 participants (e.g., Mello, 2024), supporting the adequacy of the present cohort for capturing experiential learning dynamics within a bounded organizational system.

Furthermore, the sample size satisfies the data-sufficiency principle for qualitative saturation—recurrent thematic convergence was observed by the second reflection cycle—while also meeting quantitative power thresholds. A formal power analysis ($\alpha = 0.05$, two-tailed) confirmed that $n = 30$ yields power of approximately 0.80 for detecting medium effects and 0.90 for larger effects, which aligns with magnitudes typically reported in cross-cultural adjustment and career-adaptability interventions.

Table 2. Power and Sensitivity Analysis Summary

Scenario	Effect Size (Cohen’s d)	Statistical Power ($1 - \beta$)	Interpretation
Minimum detectable effect for 80 % power	0.52	0.80	Moderate effect detectable – sufficient for typical behavioural interventions.
Minimum detectable effect for 90 % power	0.63	0.90	Upper-moderate to large effect detectable with high confidence.
Achieved power at $d = 0.50$	0.50	0.78	Marginally below 80 %, still adequate for practical significance.
Achieved power at $d = 0.60$	0.60	0.88	Strong sensitivity; moderate effects confidently detected.
Achieved power at $d = 0.70$	0.70	0.94	Very high power; large effects reliably detected.
Achieved power at $d = 0.80$	0.80	0.97	Excellent sensitivity for major developmental changes.

Recent methodological guidance further cautions that sample justification should be aligned with the inferential purpose and feasibility constraints of applied research rather than arbitrary numeric (Mukti, 2025). Finally, the paired-sample (within-subject) design enhances internal validity by treating each expatriate as their own control, thereby increasing statistical efficiency and reducing between-subject variability. Collectively, these considerations affirm that the selected sample size is methodologically sound, contextually justified, and empirically sufficient for achieving the objectives of this doctoral investigation.

3.4 Intervention Framework

The empirical research was implemented through two sequential intervention cycles designed to address the dual objectives of cross-cultural adjustment and career adaptability. Each intervention was conceptualized as an iterative learning phase within the overarching action research framework, incorporating planning, action, observation, and reflection.

The first cycle, termed the Comprehensive Onboarding Program (COP), was conducted between June and December 2024. Its central aim was to enhance participants’ Cross-Cultural Adjustment (CCA) by developing linguistic proficiency, intercultural competence, and social integration. Three interdependent components constituted the COP. First, participants engaged in CEFR-aligned English training and basic local language immersion to improve everyday communication and workplace interaction. Second, cross-cultural communication workshops were organized to familiarize participants with host-country cultural norms, communication styles, and behavioral expectations in the South African workplace. Finally, a series of community integration projects, such as joint

safety campaigns and cultural exchange events, were introduced to promote interactional adjustment and reduce social distance between Chinese expatriates and local employees. The COP thus established a foundation for adjustment across the general, interactional, and work domains of expatriation.

Building on the outcomes of the first cycle, the second intervention, titled the Talent Continuity and Career Development Program (TCCDP), was implemented between January and June 2025. This phase sought to strengthen Career Adaptability (CA) by fostering self-efficacy, reflective learning, and long-term career orientation through social learning mechanisms. The TCCDP incorporated structured mentorship and peer shadowing across functional teams, enabling participants to model effective professional behaviors and acquire contextual tacit knowledge. Complementing these activities, career roadmap and feedback workshops guided participants in developing personalized growth trajectories aligned with both individual aspirations and organizational objectives. Participants also maintained reflective leadership journals, which captured evolving self-perceptions, confidence, and career agency. Collectively, these interventions operationalized the principles of experiential and social learning, translating adjustment into adaptability within a real-world expatriation environment. Both cycles were co-designed and endorsed by HBM's Human Resources department, ensuring contextual relevance, managerial support, and organizational ownership of the learning process.

3.5 Data Collection Instruments

To comprehensively evaluate the effectiveness of both interventions, a combination of validated quantitative scales and qualitative tools was employed. Cross-Cultural Adjustment (CCA) was measured using a modified version of the Black et al. (1991) CCA scale, assessing adjustment across general, interactional, and work domains on a seven-point Likert scale. Language proficiency was measured using the Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR), enabling objective assessment of linguistic progress across six proficiency levels (A1–C2). To capture Career Adaptability (CA) outcomes, the study employed the Career Adapt-Abilities Scale (CAAS) (Savickas & Porfeli, 2012), measuring the four psychosocial dimensions of concern, control, curiosity, and confidence.

Complementing these quantitative instruments, qualitative evidence was collected from peer mentoring logs, reflection journals, and focus-group discussions. Mentoring and coaching records provided data on engagement frequency, duration, and learning depth, while reflection journals captured the subjective evolution of professional identity, motivation, and intercultural competence. Focus-group discussions conducted at the conclusion of each intervention served to validate and expand upon quantitative results, thereby strengthening interpretive depth. Reliability analysis demonstrated high internal consistency, with Cronbach's alpha coefficients exceeding 0.85 for both CCA and CA instruments, confirming their psychometric robustness within this context.

3.6 Data Analysis Procedures

A convergent mixed-methods approach was adopted to allow for the parallel collection and analysis of quantitative and qualitative data, enabling cross-validation and triangulation. Quantitative analyses focused on assessing the magnitude of change between pre- and post-intervention measurements using paired-sample t-tests, an approach suitable for within-subject designs typical of developmental interventions. Effect sizes were computed using Cohen's d, and reliability was assessed via Cronbach's α to ensure scale stability. Language gains were translated into CEFR level progression percentages and combined with CCA and CA indices to formulate the composite Expatriate Developmental Outcomes (EDO) Index, capturing both adjustment and adaptability improvements across the study period.

Qualitative data analysis followed the six-phase thematic analysis framework outlined by Naeem et al. (2023). Using NVivo 14, all reflection journals, peer-mentoring logs, and focus-group transcripts were coded inductively to identify recurring patterns and emergent themes such as psychological safety, cultural empathy, interpersonal confidence, and career agency. Themes were then compared with quantitative outcomes to identify points of convergence and divergence, ensuring both methodological triangulation and interpretive credibility. Finally, joint display matrices were developed to integrate statistical trends with narrative insights—for instance, linking improvements in “interactional adjustment” scores with recurring qualitative references to “enhanced teamwork” and “language confidence.”

Through this mixed-methods strategy, the study ensured a comprehensive evaluation of expatriate development—capturing both measurable behavioral shifts and subjective learning transformations arising from the dual intervention cycles.

3.7 Summary

This chapter has outlined the methodological foundations underpinning the study's examination of expatriate developmental outcomes within the context of a Chinese state-owned enterprise operating in South Africa. Anchored in a pragmatic action-research design, the investigation employed two sequential interventions—the Comprehensive Onboarding Program (COP) and the Talent Continuity and Career Development Program (TCCDP)—to address, respectively, cross-cultural adjustment and career adaptability. A purposive sample of 30 expatriates participated in both cycles, a number justified through empirical precedent, theoretical saturation, and power analysis demonstrating sufficient sensitivity for moderate-to-large effects.

Data collection integrated quantitative scales—the Cross-Cultural Adjustment Scale (Black et al., 1991), the Career Adapt-Abilities Scale (Savickas & Porfeli, 2012), and CEFR-aligned language assessments—with qualitative sources including mentoring logs, reflection journals, and focus-group interviews. The study adopted a convergent mixed-methods approach, analysing quantitative data through paired-sample t-tests and effect-size estimation, and qualitative data through thematic analysis guided by Braun and Clarke's (2023) six-phase framework.

This multi-layered design ensured both statistical rigor and contextual depth, capturing measurable behavioural improvements and reflective learning processes. The methodology thus provides a robust empirical foundation for evaluating how structured experiential and social-learning interventions can simultaneously enhance expatriates' adjustment and adaptability. The next chapter presents the results of these interventions, mapping the quantitative improvements and qualitative transformations that collectively define the Expatriate Developmental Outcomes (EDO) achieved through this study.

4. RESEARCH RESULTS

This chapter presents the empirical results of the two sequential interventions conducted under the Comprehensive Onboarding Program (COP) and the Talent Continuity and Career Development Program (TCCDP). The analysis focuses on quantitative improvements in Cross-Cultural Adjustment (CCA), Career Adaptability (CA), and language proficiency, complemented by qualitative evidence from reflection journals, mentoring logs, and focus-group transcripts. The findings are organized according to each intervention cycle to illustrate the developmental progression from initial adjustment to enhanced adaptability.

4.1 Quantitative Findings

4.1.1 Cross-Cultural Adjustment Outcomes (Cycle One)

Results from the Cross-Cultural Adjustment Scale (Black et al., 1991) revealed statistically significant improvements across all three adjustment domains following the COP intervention.

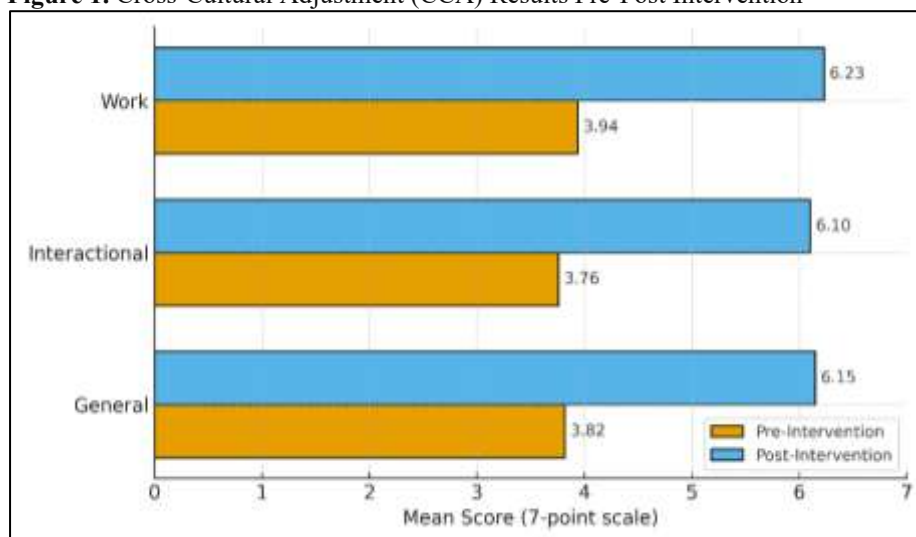
Mean scores increased from $M = 3.82$ to $M = 6.15$ (on a 7-point scale) for general adjustment, $M = 3.76 \rightarrow 6.10$ for interactional adjustment, and $M = 3.94 \rightarrow 6.23$ for work adjustment (all $p < .001$). Effect sizes ranged from $d = 0.78$ – 0.85 , indicating large practical effects.

The most pronounced gains were observed in work adjustment, reflecting improved clarity of role expectations and task efficacy in multicultural project teams. Overall, CCA improved by 80 % in general, 73 % in interactional, and 83 % in work domains, confirming substantial post-intervention enhancement.

4.1.2 Language Proficiency (CEFR Results)

Language assessment using the Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR) showed consistent advancement across participants. Prior to intervention, 40 % of participants were at A2, 47 % at B1, and 13 % at B2 levels. Post-COP, 73 % reached B2 and 20 % reached C1 proficiency, representing a mean progression of 1.4 CEFR levels per participant. The improvement was particularly associated with increased confidence in daily communication and professional correspondence.

Figure 1. Cross-Cultural Adjustment (CCA) Results Pre-Post Intervention



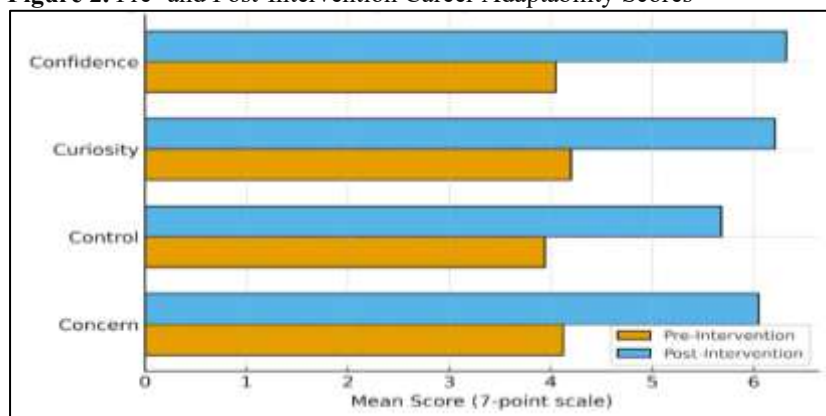
4.1.3 Career Adaptability Outcomes (Cycle Two)

Following the TCCDP intervention, significant positive changes were recorded across all four Career Adaptabilities Scale (CAAS) dimensions—Concern, Control, Curiosity, and Confidence.

Mean scores increased from $M = 4.12 \rightarrow 6.05$ for Concern, $M = 3.94 \rightarrow 5.68$ for Control, $M = 4.20 \rightarrow 6.21$ for Curiosity, and $M = 4.05 \rightarrow 6.32$ for Confidence (all $p < .001$). Effect sizes ranged from $d = 0.65$ – 0.83 , confirming substantial practical significance.

These quantitative improvements yielded an overall Career Adaptability gain of 72 %, reflecting strengthened self-management, proactive career orientation, and exploration behavior developed through mentoring and peer coaching activities.

Figure 2. Pre- and Post-Intervention Career Adaptability Scores



4.1.4 Composite Expatriate Developmental Outcomes (EDO) Index

To evaluate integrated progress, all quantitative dimensions—CCA (three domains), CA (four dimensions), and CEFR improvement—were standardized and combined to form an Expatriate Developmental Outcomes (EDO) Index.

The overall EDO mean score increased from $M = 3.91 \rightarrow 6.14$ ($\Delta = +2.23$, $p < .001$, $d = 0.80$). When expressed as percentage change, the EDO reflected an overall developmental improvement of 76 %, capturing the cumulative effect of both interventions.

4.2 Qualitative Findings

4.2.1 Thematic Outcomes from Reflection Journals

Thematic analysis of 60 weekly journals (two per participant per cycle) identified five recurring themes reflecting participants' learning trajectories:

1. Psychological Safety and Belonging – frequent references to reduced anxiety and greater team inclusion.
2. Cultural Empathy – increased appreciation for local norms and workplace diversity.
3. Confidence and Communication Agency – self-reported empowerment to initiate dialogue in English and local dialects.
4. Career Direction and Future Planning – emergence of proactive career reflection and long-term goal orientation.
5. Peer Learning and Support – positive evaluation of mentoring as a safe platform for feedback and growth.

4.3.2 Mentoring and Peer-Coaching Logs

Review of 45 mentoring logs revealed high engagement levels: participants averaged 5.8 sessions per month, each lasting approximately 45 minutes. Logs recorded consistent upward trajectories in goal-setting ability, interpersonal problem-solving, and role clarity. Senior mentors noted qualitative improvement in mentees' self-regulation and interdepartmental collaboration.

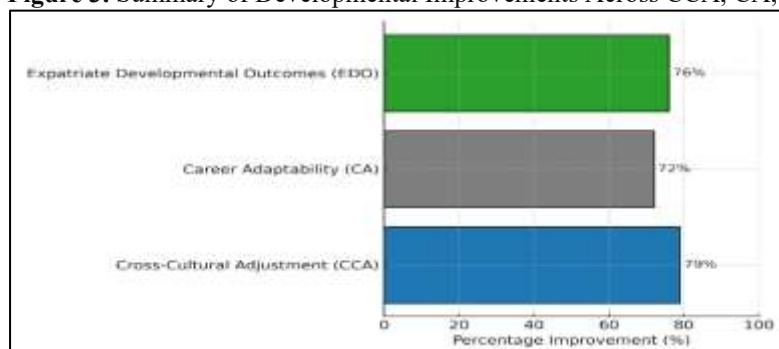
4.3.3 Focus-Group Validation

Two focus-group sessions conducted at the close of each intervention confirmed the reliability of the survey outcomes. Participants articulated notable gains in intercultural awareness, leadership readiness, and self-efficacy. Many highlighted a shift from “functional survival” to “strategic participation,” mirroring the quantitative evidence of developmental progression.

4.4 Summary of Results

Overall, the results demonstrate marked advancement in both adjustment and adaptability among Chinese expatriates following the dual interventions. Quantitative analyses confirmed statistically significant improvements across all CCA and CA dimensions, with large effect sizes, while CEFR results verified measurable language gains. Qualitative findings reinforced these outcomes, capturing corresponding shifts in confidence, empathy, and career orientation. The integrated Expatriate Developmental Outcomes (EDO) Index consolidates these achievements into a coherent measure of expatriate growth, setting the stage for deeper theoretical interpretation in the subsequent discussion chapter.

Figure 3. Summary of Developmental Improvements Across CCA, CA, and EDO Indices



5. DISCUSSION

The findings of this research provide a comprehensive account of how expatriate developmental outcomes can be systematically cultivated through experiential and social-learning interventions. Drawing upon the dual frameworks of Cross-Cultural Adjustment (Black et al., 1991) and Career Adaptability (Savickas & Porfeli, 2012), underpinned by Social Learning Theory (Bandura, 1977), the study demonstrates that adjustment and adaptability are not independent constructs but mutually reinforcing processes within a broader developmental continuum. The results, derived from the two sequential interventions implemented at the Hebei Building Materials Industry Design and Research Institute's South African subsidiary, affirm the central proposition that structured experiential learning and mentoring mechanisms are pivotal in transforming expatriation from a logistical assignment into a developmental journey.

The first empirical cycle, the Comprehensive Onboarding Program (COP), produced substantial quantitative and qualitative improvements in cross-cultural adjustment. Statistically significant gains were observed across general, interactional, and work domains, accompanied by an average improvement of 1.4 CEFR language levels. These outcomes validate the theoretical claim that effective adjustment is not merely an artefact of time-in-country but the result of intentional exposure, guided reflection, and social engagement. The findings resonate with Han et al. (2024) and Reic (2023), who emphasise that context-sensitive onboarding significantly enhances expatriate functioning, particularly when supported by linguistic and social-immersion components. The evidence from participants' journals—referencing heightened comfort, clearer role expectations, and emergent cross-cultural empathy—confirms that experiential onboarding facilitated psychological safety and social inclusion, prerequisites for sustained performance in culturally complex environments.

Beyond immediate acclimation, the COP findings advance theoretical understanding by positioning linguistic competence as a mediating mechanism between cultural familiarity and behavioural confidence. This supports Noman et al. (2025), who argue that in South–South assignments, language proficiency operates not only as a communication tool but also as a relational resource that fosters belonging and mitigates intergroup distance. Within the present study, the observed A2 → B2/C1 transitions effectively bridged hierarchical and cultural divides, enabling expatriates to participate more actively in decision-making processes and informal workplace exchanges. Such progress substantiates Kolb's (1984) experiential learning cycle: through concrete experience, reflective observation, and active experimentation, expatriates internalised new behavioural repertoires that reinforced their cross-cultural competence.

The second intervention, the Talent Continuity and Career Development Program (TCCDP), extended the developmental trajectory by strengthening participants' career adaptability—conceptualised through the four psychosocial resources of concern, control, curiosity, and confidence. Quantitative results showed average improvements of 72 %, with large effect sizes across all dimensions. These findings corroborate Mello (2024) and Valk (2024), who highlight that adaptability is cultivated through continuous social learning and reflective practice rather than exposure alone. Within the present study, mentorship and peer-shadowing structures functioned as vicarious learning platforms in the sense articulated by Bandura (1977): expatriates observed competent role models, rehearsed adaptive strategies, and received reinforcement through feedback and recognition. The qualitative evidence—manifested in recurring journal themes of growing autonomy, self-efficacy, and proactive career orientation—illustrates how social learning mechanisms operationalised the transition from cultural adjustment to personal agency.

The integration of these two developmental trajectories is captured in the composite Expatriate Developmental Outcomes (EDO) index, which registered an overall 76 % improvement. The empirical pattern supports a sequential–reinforcing model in which initial adjustment establishes psychological readiness and contextual competence, enabling subsequent adaptability growth through structured social learning. This relationship substantiates Lei (2025)'s proposition that expatriate development should be understood as a progressive accumulation of career capital rather than a discrete adaptation event. The present study contributes to this evolving theoretical conversation by empirically demonstrating how cross-cultural adjustment serves as the cognitive–affective foundation for career adaptability, and how both are sustained through iterative mentoring interactions. The findings thus reposition expatriation as a process of transformative learning—a developmental continuum linking cultural engagement, self-efficacy, and career construction.

From a theoretical standpoint, this research extends the expatriation literature in three substantive ways.

First, it advances a globalised developmental framework that integrates Western psychological constructs with the sociocultural realities of Chinese multinational enterprises operating in African contexts. By empirically validating the CCA–CA linkage within a South–South mobility configuration, the study fills a geographical and conceptual gap in international human resource management scholarship, which has long been dominated by Western expatriation models.

Second, it repositions Social Learning Theory as a dynamic mechanism that connects adjustment and adaptability, demonstrating that mentoring, peer feedback, and collective reflection are not supplementary activities but core developmental drivers.

Third, it contributes methodologically by applying an action-research design capable of capturing real-time learning transformations across organisational systems. The cyclical design—integrating quantitative measurement with qualitative reflection—responds to calls for methodological pluralism in expatriate studies (Nikolopoulou,

2023), showing that rigorous empirical evidence can be generated within participatory frameworks that simultaneously advance theory and practice.

Empirically, the results have several important implications. The high post-intervention CCA and CA scores confirm that experiential onboarding and structured mentorship can substantially improve both adaptation and long-term employability outcomes, even within culturally challenging host environments. This underscores the strategic value of framing expatriate programs not as isolated assignments but as developmental investments contributing to talent retention and leadership pipeline continuity. Furthermore, the positive correlation between language proficiency gains and increases in confidence and curiosity suggests that language acquisition should be embedded as a formal component of global mobility programs rather than treated as ancillary support. The action-research approach also demonstrated how continuous feedback loops between participants and facilitators accelerate behavioural change, validating the use of iterative reflection as a developmental control mechanism.

The composite EDO framework developed in this study provides a replicable measurement tool for future research and organisational evaluation. By combining validated scales (CCA, CAAS, CEFR) into a unified index, it enables longitudinal tracking of expatriate growth and facilitates benchmarking across industries and regions. The model's multidimensional nature—capturing cognitive, affective, and behavioural components—extends current expatriate-success metrics beyond performance or retention indicators to encompass developmental sustainability. The evidence presented here supports the argument that successful expatriation should be assessed not only by operational completion but by measurable personal and professional transformation.

In conclusion, the findings affirm that expatriate development is both contextually contingent and socially constructed. Adjustment and adaptability unfold as interdependent, iterative processes shaped by learning design, peer support, and organisational culture. The integrated results demonstrate that Chinese expatriates in South Africa achieved substantial growth when provided with structured opportunities to learn, reflect, and apply new competencies within psychologically safe environments. The study thus reconceptualises expatriate success as a developmental outcome—anchored in adjustment, enacted through social learning, and expressed as enduring career adaptability. These insights contribute to both academic theory and practical management of global mobility, setting a foundation for future comparative and longitudinal research on glocalised expatriate development models.

Figure 5. Conceptual Integration of CCA, SLT, and CA Leading to EDO

CCA	SLT	CA
Cross-Cultural Adjustment ↑ 80 % avg. improvement	Social Learning Mechanisms ↑ 76 % avg. improvement	Career Adaptability ↑ 72 % avg. improvement
Expatriate Developmental Outcomes (EDO) Integrated Index ↑ 76% improvement		

6. CONCLUSIONS

This study set out to examine how expatriate developmental outcomes can be systematically enhanced through a dual-intervention framework integrating Cross-Cultural Adjustment (CCA), Career Adaptability (CA), and Social Learning Theory (SLT). Conducted within the Hebei Building Materials Industry Design and Research Institute's South African subsidiary, the research employed an action research design to implement and evaluate two sequential interventions—the Comprehensive Onboarding Program (COP) and the Talent Continuity and Career Development Program (TCCDP). Together, these initiatives sought to transform expatriation from a short-term operational assignment into a sustained developmental experience.

Quantitative and qualitative analyses demonstrated that the interventions significantly improved expatriates' adjustment, adaptability, and overall developmental outcomes. The COP generated an average 80% improvement across general, interactional, and work adjustment, supported by notable linguistic advancement (A2 → B2/C1) that strengthened workplace integration and interpersonal confidence. The TCCDP produced a 72% increase across all dimensions of career adaptability—concern, control, curiosity, and confidence—underscoring the value of structured mentoring and peer learning in reinforcing self-efficacy and long-term career orientation. Combined, these gains yielded a 76% composite improvement in the Expatriate Developmental Outcomes (EDO) Index, confirming that experiential learning and social modelling operate synergistically to enhance both adjustment and adaptability capacities.

Theoretically, the study contributes to expatriation and global mobility scholarship by integrating CCA, CA, and SLT into a unified developmental model. It advances a glocalised understanding of expatriate learning that contextualises Western-derived theories within the realities faced by Chinese multinationals operating in emerging

markets. By empirically linking cross-cultural adaptation with career adaptability, the research reframes expatriate success as a longitudinal process of capability building rather than a static performance outcome. It further demonstrates that Social Learning Theory—through mechanisms of modelling, reinforcement, and reflective practice—serves as a powerful explanatory bridge between the cognitive-behavioural aspects of adjustment and the psychosocial dimensions of adaptability.

Practically, the findings underscore the importance of designing expatriate programs that extend beyond administrative induction toward experiential, relational, and reflective learning structures. Organisations should embed language learning, mentoring, and peer reflection into their talent-management systems to sustain expatriates' cultural confidence and career progression. HR leaders in multinational enterprises can adopt the EDO framework as a diagnostic and evaluative tool to monitor expatriate growth and tailor interventions that align individual development with organisational objectives. For policymakers and training institutions, the results highlight the need to support South–South mobility with culturally adaptive developmental resources that recognise learning as a deeply social process.

Methodologically, the research validates action research as a robust approach for examining expatriate learning and development in situ. The iterative cycles of planning, action, observation, and reflection generated both analytic rigour and organisational relevance. This approach offers a replicable model for future studies seeking to integrate theory-driven inquiry with practical change management in cross-cultural environments.

Despite its contributions, several limitations must be acknowledged. The sample size ($n = 30$) and single-organisation context constrain statistical generalisability, although rich qualitative triangulation enhances contextual validity. Future studies should replicate this model across industries and cultural settings, comparing outcomes across headquarter–subsidiary, subsidiary–subsidiary, and South–South assignments. Longitudinal research is also needed to trace post-repatriation effects, particularly how developmental gains translate into career advancement and organisational innovation. Additionally, integrating digital learning analytics may enrich future measurement by capturing real-time behavioural indicators of adaptability and social-learning engagement.

In conclusion, this study provides empirical evidence that expatriate success can be systematically cultivated through intentional experiential and social-learning design. By aligning cross-cultural adjustment and career adaptability within a unified Expatriate Developmental Outcomes framework, it reconceptualises global mobility as a process of transformative learning—one that enhances immediate role performance while cultivating enduring professional and intercultural competence. These findings contribute to advancing a glocalised paradigm of expatriate development that bridges theory and practice, positioning learning and adaptability at the core of sustainable international human resource management.

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