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Exploring Career Development Through Situated Learning Experiences of Highly Skilled Business Postgraduate Migrants.

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A thesis submitted in fulfilment of the requirements for the Award of Doctor of Philosophy

Graduate Business School, TU Dublin, City Campus, Aungier Street

November 2025

Abstract

This study investigates the career development journey of highly skilled Nigerian, Ghanaian, Kenyan and Tanzanian business postgraduate migrants in Ireland, focusing on the interplay among learning experiences, systemic barriers, and career shocks. Drawing on Social Cognitive Career Theory (SCCT), Situated Learning Theory (SLT), and Career Shock (CS), the study examines how self-efficacy develops through participation in Communities of Practice (CoPs) and how resilience enables skilled migrants to overcome shocks as they progress from education to employment in a Global South to Global North context. It further explores the transfer of knowledge acquired in Ireland to the migrants' home countries. The study integrates a gender-informed perspective, addressing the overlooked intersection of skilled migration, learning processes, and career integration. Adopting a qualitative phenomenological approach, the study explores the career narratives of thirty-five postgraduate business migrants from four Sub-Saharan African countries where English is an official or co-official language who are now in full-time permanent employment in Ireland, using semi-structured, in-depth interviews. Data were analysed thematically to identify learning mechanisms, the role of CoPs in career development, and strategies for navigating career shocks. The findings indicate that CoPs function as adaptive spaces that help migrants overcome systemic barriers, rebuild self-efficacy, and transition successfully into the Irish professional business domain. This research contributes to the scholarship on skilled migration by uncovering the significant role of informal, migrant-led learning communities in career transitions from the Global South in the Global North. It also extends the growing literature on career shocks by showing how self-efficacy facilitates career resilience (CR) to overcome such shocks. The study also identifies systemic barriers, pointing to the need for policy interventions that support the career transition of highly skilled migrants.

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I am deeply appreciative of my family, whose love, patience, and faith in me sustained me through the highs and lows of this PhD journey. To my children, parents, and siblings, your encouragement has been a constant source of strength.

Finally, I acknowledge the financial and institutional support provided by Research Ireland and Technological University Dublin, which enabled me to pursue this research.

This journey has been both challenging and rewarding, and I am grateful to everyone who contributed to its successful completion.

Dedication

This thesis is dedicated to my family, whose love, patience, and belief in me have been a constant source of strength throughout this journey. To my children, whose curiosity and resilience inspire me each day; to my parents, for instilling in me the values of perseverance and learning; and to my siblings, for their encouragement and support. This work reflects your enduring faith in me.

I also dedicate this research to the highly skilled migrants from Africa and elsewhere who navigate the challenges of education-to-career transitions in new countries. Your experiences, determination, and contributions continue to inspire the pursuit of knowledge, understanding, and social impact.

Awards and Conference Papers

Irish Research Council (now Research Ireland) Scholarship, awarded from October 2021 to March 2026. This is a fully funded PhD scholarship.

Conference Papers

1. Adeniji Oseni, A. & O'Brien, D. (2025). Exploring Career Development through Situated Learning Experiences: A Gendered-Informed Analysis of Home-to-Host Country Transition and Knowledge Transfer among Highly Skilled Nigerian, Ghanian, Kenyan & Tanzanian Business Postgraduates in Ireland. ***Academy of Management*** Doctoral Student Consortium- International Management Division 2025, Copenhagen Business School, Denmark.

2. Adeniji Oseni, A. & O'Brien, D. (2025). Career Development Transitions of Business Postgraduates from Nigeria, Ghana, Kenya, and Tanzania in Ireland: A Gender Comparative Analysis**,** ***Academy of International Business Conference UK & Ireland***, University of Surrey, UK.

3. Adeniji Oseni, A. & O'Brien, D. (2024). A Gendered Exploration of Situated Learning Experiences and Career Trajectories among Highly Skilled African Business Postgraduates in Ireland. ***British Academy of Management Conference***, Nottingham Trent University, UK

4. Adeniji Oseni, A. & O'Brien, D. (2024). Situated Learning and Gendered Career

Trajectories of Skilled Business Postgraduates from the Global South in Ireland. ***LIVES & NCCR - On the move International Conference*** *University of Gevena*, Switzerland,

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7. Adeniji Oseni, A. & O'Brien, D. (2023). Exploring Knowledge Development and Transfer Process Among Highly Skilled African Business Postgraduate Migrants in Ireland. *49th* ***Academy of International Business UK & Ireland Chapter Conference,*** Glasgow Scotland.

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List of Abbreviations

Abbreviation	Full Meaning
CoP	Community of Practice
CR	Career Resilience
CS	Career Shock
DFA	Department of Foreign Affairs
EEA	European Economic Area
EU	European Union
HEA	Higher Education Authority
HEI	Higher Education Institution
OE	Outcome Expectations
PhD	Doctor of Philosophy
SCCT	Social Cognitive Career Theory
SDG	Sustainable Development Goals
SE	Self-Efficacy
SLT	Situated Learning Theory
STEM	Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics
UN	United Nations

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1.0 Chapter One: Introduction

This study is introduced by outlining its purpose, scope, and theoretical framing, and by situating it within wider debates on skilled migration, international education, and career development. The introduction establishes the foundation for the research by positioning it within these broader scholarly debates. In today's globalised world, international mobility for education and employment has become an increasingly common choice for individuals seeking career development (De Haas, 2021; Leung, 2017). For third-level graduates from the Global South, the opportunity to pursue a postgraduate qualification in developed economies in the Global North promises a skilled migration pathway of academic achievement and international employment opportunities. However, this career journey is highly complex and often places considerable personal demands on migrants, far beyond what they envisioned when they commenced their journey. To date, studies have rarely focused on uncovering the story of this vulnerable cohort beyond their educational qualification. This research explores the intricate career development journeys of highly skilled migrants from four English-speaking African countries, which are among the leading sources of postgraduate business student migrants in Ireland. These migrants make the bold decision to study in the Global North and strive for a successful transition beyond graduation into full-time employment. Specifically, it examines their learning journeys, navigating through the educational pathway and beyond into job search and secure employment, and work visa (permit) status in their host economy. The research aims to understand how these individuals overcome a host of barriers and progress through a significant process of self-development to secure permanent roles.

Wang and Lent (2022) acknowledged that studying abroad serves as a pathway to achieve broader goals, such as enhancing educational experiences and expanding career opportunities. Although a huge percentage of individuals who embark on this journey are from the Global South, with their destinations in the Global North (see Choudaha, 2017; Kir et al., 2021; Liu-Farrer, 2009), very little research has been conducted to uncover their story. In the Irish context, while studies have focused on international students from Asia (Huibing & Lin, 2020; Sun & Nolan, 2021), research on African students remains scarce. This cohort of migrants is on a skilled migrant journey as they progress through an educational postgraduate pathway that promises a future of career enhancement in the advanced host country. Their goal is to further develop their career by pursuing postgraduate studies in the host country, with the aim of transitioning smoothly into professional business practice. The career development journey was explored using a career narrative approach, where participants shared their stories from making the decision to leave their home countries through to education, job search, and employment in Ireland. These narratives were gathered through in-depth, semi-structured interviews, which were then transcribed and analysed thematically using Braun and Clarke's (2021) reflexive thematic analysis. To understand the career development journey of this skilled migrant cohort from the individuals' perspectives, the study focused on how the individuals' skills and belief in themselves evolved through the journey.

Drawing on Lent et al.'s (1994) Social Cognitive Career Theory (SCCT), this research investigates how self-efficacy, a crucial role in the transition process from school to career (Paolini, 2015), evolved among business postgraduate migrants from the Global South as they navigated their transition from studying in Ireland to securing permanent roles and becoming professionals in Ireland. As the journey unfolded, the learning processes that drive this evolution became increasingly apparent. Specifically, it was the importance of Communities of Practice (CoPs), as

conceptualised by Lave and Wenger's (1991) in their Situated Learning Theory (SLT), that emerged as the key learning mechanism. Through a series of different CoPs from education to transition and to professional practice, these migrants transitioned from newcomers to experts in their field. The analysis revealed the complex learning mechanisms and the role the migrants themselves play in accessing these CoPs throughout their transition from home to host country. A major finding has also been that throughout the journey, there are unpredictable and uncontrollable events during their career development journey. Elements of Career Shock (CS) Theory (Akkermans et al., 2018; Seibert et al., 2013) are very evident throughout the journey, but it is in the stage between college graduation and initial job search where the participants are most severely impacted. It is the individuals' ability to overcome the challenges that this career shock creates through the support of a community of practice of fellow skilled migrants on a similar journey that is the key ingredient in transitioning beyond that vulnerable stage towards a secure employment status. Once that happens, it is evident that these individuals begin to flourish in their careers and make considerable advancements in their professional lives. Additionally, *career resilience* – the ability to adapt and sustain career growth despite challenges – emerged as a critical theme in the data, reflecting participants' experiences in navigating unfamiliar labour markets, overcoming systemic barriers, and leveraging social learning to advance professionally. Uncovering the pathway through which this development happens has major implications for how the journey of international postgraduate students from the Global South can be supported. As universities across the Global North look to recruit more and more international students, there is a major onus on uncovering the challenging journeys these students go through, not only in their college life. Quite often, universities are selling a vision of career enhancement far beyond graduation when they recruit the students; therefore, research needs to uncover what that journey actually entails.

Taking a gender-informed perspective, this research focuses on three interconnected areas: the situated learning experiences that shape career development, the exploration of gender on career development trajectories in transitioning from students to professionals in a new environment, and the transfer of business knowledge and skills between Ireland and Nigeria, Ghana, Kenya, and Tanzania. These areas are examined through the lens of Situated Learning Theory (Lave & Wenger, 1991) and Social Cognitive Career Theory (Bandura, 1986; Lent et al., 1994), which together provide a framework for understanding how learning, self-efficacy, and contextual factors influence career development in migration contexts. Prior research highlights the importance of perceived barriers in shaping career trajectories, particularly for women and individuals from diverse ethnic backgrounds (Albert & Luzzo, 1999; Lent et al., 2000; Luzzo & McWhirter, 2001; McWhirter et al., 1998; McWhirter, 1997; Swanson et al., 1996). Building on this, the study emphasises the role of self-efficacy in enabling individuals to navigate and overcome these barriers (Bandura, 1997; Hackett & Byars, 1996; Lindley, 2005).

This section has introduced an overview of the state of the art in career development and skilled migration literature, highlighting their relevance to the aim of this research in understanding the career development journeys of highly skilled postgraduate migrants from the Global South in Ireland. It has also identified the challenges they face and outlined the theoretical frameworks of *Social Cognitive Career Theory*, *Communities of Practice*, and *Career Shock* that inform the study. The next section sets the background to the study, setting out the broader context of international student migration and highlighting the significance and timeliness of this research.

1.1 Study Background

This section situates the study within the broader global trends in skilled migration and international student mobility. It highlights how higher education abroad has become both a pathway into international labour markets, facilitating career development, and an avenue for learning and knowledge acquisition, particularly for students from the Global South pursuing postgraduate education in the Global North. It further introduces the role of self-efficacy as a critical factor in understanding how students from the Global South develop their careers in a new environment. The migration of highly skilled individuals has emerged as a significant and expanding component within global migration patterns (Iredale, 2001). Particularly, the international mobility of students has shown a notable increase over time, driven by factors such as the internationalisation of higher education (Edwards et al., 2003; Horie, 2002; Teichler, 2004; Urban & Palmer, 2014) and the pursuit of international careers and professional development (Liu-Farrer, 2009; Schworm et al., 2017; Wolfeil, 2010), among other reasons. Higher education abroad has been acknowledged as a pathway for students to enter the international labour market, motivated by the pursuit of international careers and professional growth (Chaloff & Lemaître, 2009; She & Wotherspoon, 2013; Wolfeil, 2010). The increase in the migration of highly skilled individuals, driven by the growing global demand for skilled labour (Fernando & Cohen, 2016), has established skilled migrants as significant contributors to global economic sustainability (Ariss et al., 2012; Crowley-Henry et al., 2018; Ziguras & Law, 2006). Graduate students from Global South regions, such as Africa, often migrate to the Global North, typically in the Western part of the world. Reports from ICEF monitor (2021, 2022), as well as the *BusinessDay News Nigeria* (2020), reveal that Nigeria is one of the prominent countries from which students migrate abroad to pursue higher education. This migration indicates that Nigeria has become one of the most

sought-after markets for student recruiters in developed countries. Specifically, Ireland is experiencing an increasing number of international students year after year (Dunne, 2009). More recently, as expressed in the Irish Department of Foreign Affairs 2021 report, Ireland has become of greater interest as a postgraduate study destination for Nigerians and other African graduate students. This is because Ireland is a hub for multinational corporations due to its relatively low corporate tax rate. Consequently, it represents a growing corporate landscape of global innovation and business opportunities (Irish Department of Education and Skills, 2015; OECD, 1994). In addition, it offers a high-standard higher education system coupled with two-year post-study work opportunities in several global corporate enterprises that it houses across diverse industries.

Examining the origins of African students moving abroad for study purposes, a report by Campus France (2016) revealed that Nigeria ranks second after Morocco in the international mobility of African students, with Europe accounting for 49% of their destinations. In Nigeria, since the early 2000s, the continuously increasing rate of unemployment has caused a mass migration abroad of Nigerian graduates for postgraduate studies. *The Nigeria Market Sentiments and Study Motivations Research Report* (2022) revealed that nine out of every ten Nigerian students seek opportunities to study abroad. The majority of them target the United Kingdom, the United States of America, Canada, and Australia to access better job opportunities through postgraduate studies and professional visa schemes (ICEF Monitor, 2021, 2022). For migrant postgraduates, institutional and socio-structural barriers limit their potential to explore opportunities that can enable significant growth and contribute economic and social value to both their host and home countries.

Additionally, based on Choudaha's (2017) analysis of international student mobility trends across three overlapping seven-year waves from 1999 to 2020, institutions are recommended to innovate not only to increase international student enrolment but also to enhance support services that

promote student success, including meeting expectations for career and employability outcomes. The trends in Wave III, the most recent wave from 2013 to 2020, indicate growing competition among new and traditional destinations to attract international students. The study identifies distinct shifts in the needs of international students across these three waves. In the first wave (1999–2006), the primary need was financial support. During the second wave (2006–2013), the focus shifted to academic support. The third and most recent wave (2013–2020) highlights a growing demand for career support. This evolution from financial to academic and career support underscores that international students increasingly seek benefits beyond financial and academic assistance; they aim to establish and develop their careers in the host country after graduation. Choudaha also noted that developing economies such as Vietnam, Nigeria, and India are anticipated to supply some of the needed skills and talent to destination countries. Therefore, it is crucial to understand how international students navigate their post-study careers, integrate, and transition into the host country's workforce. This study seeks to explore these aspects to inform more effective institutional strategies and policies that support international student success.

While these studies provide valuable insights into student mobility and institutional support, less attention has been paid to the career development processes of highly skilled migrant postgraduates, particularly regarding how they acquire knowledge and skills and develop the self-belief and resilience required to overcome persistent barriers in unfamiliar host-country environments. Developing careers in a new socio-cultural and professional context is inherently complex (Bennett, 2018; Clarke, 2018; Nghia et al., 2020; Tomlinson & Jackson, 2021), yet existing scholarship does not fully explain the mechanisms through which migrants navigate these challenges. Moreover, higher education is not only a pathway to professional employment but also a critical site for knowledge development and skill acquisition (Raghuram, 2013; Yorke, 2006;

Ziguras & Law, 2006). Theories of learning emphasise that social interactions within educational and professional contexts are crucial for developing competencies that underpin career success (Ackerman, 1996; Brown et al., 1989; Fuller et al., 2005; Yakhlef, 2010). In this regard, Situated Learning Theory and the concept of Communities of Practice provide a framework for understanding how migrants learn and build self-efficacy through social engagement, collaboration, and participation in professional networks. There exists a perennial relationship between higher education and economic sustainability (Yorke, 2006), as the advancement of sustainable and innovative practices in knowledge-based economies is crucial for international competitiveness. The importance of knowledge produced and shared by higher education institutions is increasingly essential for economic progress, government functioning, and cultural creation (Ziguras & Law, 2006). Knowledge and skills are desirable attributes among migrants of all kinds (Raghuram, 2013). These studies have examined the role and impact of social interactions in the learning process, applying social and relational theories to analyse and understand how people learn in various contexts. Situated Learning Theory, developed by Lave & Wenger (1991), has since become a prominent theoretical lens through which learning through social interactions and participation has been studied.

Drawing on this learning theory, the study focuses on business postgraduate migrants from the Global South who have successfully transitioned into full-time business professional employment in Ireland. Using the career narratives method, it captures retrospective accounts of the learning mechanisms and social interactions that enabled them to overcome barriers and develop self-efficacy to advance their careers. The study highlights how international student mobility connects with learning experiences and career development, showing how skilled migrants, through an

educational pathway, move from newcomers or novices to professionals and experts in a new environment.

This section has situated the study within broader global trends in skilled migration and international student mobility, emphasising Ireland's growing role as a postgraduate destination for students from the Global South, particularly Nigerians. It has highlighted how higher education abroad provides both opportunities for career development and avenues for learning and knowledge acquisition, while also introducing self-efficacy as a key concept in understanding how these students navigate their educational and professional journeys. The next section sets the context of the specific study group, focusing on African postgraduate migrants in Ireland and situating their experiences within the Global North context.

1.1.1 Context: African Business Postgraduate Immigrants in Ireland

This section provides the context of the specific study group, focusing on highly skilled postgraduate migrants from the Global South and situating their experiences within the broader Global North context. It frames the research within the Irish higher education and labour market landscape, highlighting the growing enrolment of African postgraduate students, particularly those from Nigeria, Ghana, Kenya, and Tanzania, in business programmes. The section examines the significance of this cohort for Ireland's innovation-driven economy, the opportunities for skill development and knowledge transfer, and the pathways for retaining international skilled graduates, including the Critical Skills Work Permit scheme, which facilitates their integration into the workforce. Given that Ireland stands as a global hub for top-ranking higher educational institutions and international enterprises (OECD, 1994; Teigland et al., 2021, 2022), the research aligns with the country's innovation-driven economy, attracting a notable influx of international

students, especially from the Global South. According to the 2023 report by the Irish Higher Education Authority (HEA), international students now constitute 13.7% of the student body, marking an increase from 31,720 in 2022 to 35,140 in 2023, representing a rise of 1.3%. Notably, Africa ranks as the fourth largest source of international students in Ireland, following India, China, and America. Among African nations, Nigeria contributes the largest share, accounting for 2.2% of all international students, with Algeria, Egypt, and Zimbabwe each comprising less than 1%, specifically 0.4%, 0.3%, and 0.3%, respectively. In business postgraduate programmes, Nigerian students represent the highest number among African nations at 2.4%, with Ghana at 0.2%, Kenya at 0.3%, and Tanzania at 0.1%. The report also highlights a notable trend: a significant number of international students pursue full-time business programmes at the postgraduate level. This surge in enrolment prompts a closer examination of their educational and professional journey, especially regarding integration into the Irish workforce and overcoming associated barriers. By understanding and addressing these challenges, Ireland stands to benefit from the valuable contributions of these skilled migrants, fostering economic growth and facilitating knowledge exchange with their home countries, even as they reside in Ireland.

A recent report published by the Irish Department of Foreign Affairs shows that Ireland has experienced over a 50% increase in the number of international students migrating from Africa to study in Ireland between 2019 and 2020, with over 1,200 students across 15 higher education institutions (Department of Foreign Affairs, 2021). Despite this trend, reports by the Higher Education Authority, Ireland (2017) and McGinnity et al. (2021) indicate that many postgraduate immigrants encounter barriers in accessing learning opportunities for business development skills in corporate enterprises.

A survey conducted by the Higher Education Authority in 2017 revealed that business and business-related programmes are the most popular area of study for international graduates in Ireland, comprising 24% of all graduates. The African international postgraduates' cohort, dominated by Nigerians, is used as the study group in this research following the *Nigeria Market Sentiments and Study Motivations Report 2022*, which shows that the rate at which Nigerian graduates are migrating to developed countries to pursue postgraduate studies and gain work experience is increasing rapidly, despite the challenges and barriers they experience in resettling abroad. According to the *ICEF Monitor Reports* (2021, 2022), Nigeria remains one of the most significant countries from which students continue to migrate in large numbers to developed countries for postgraduate education and professional experience. This indicates that Nigerian postgraduate students take the risk of crossing international borders in search of opportunities to add value to themselves, as well as to their home and host countries, by contributing new knowledge and skills acquired from their educational experiences to the growth of international enterprises while developing their professional competencies.

In Ireland, critical skills refer to those identified as being in short supply with respect to qualifications, experience, or expertise, and which are required for the proper functioning of the economy (Department of Enterprise, Trade, and Employment, 2002). To address this shortage, the *Critical Skills Work Permit* scheme was implemented to attract highly skilled individuals with specialised expertise and grant them access to the job market and, ultimately, permanent residency in the country.

This section has provided a detailed contextual understanding of the African business postgraduate cohort in Ireland, emphasising their increasing presence and the attractions of Ireland as a hub of

opportunities for career development and integration into the Irish workforce. It establishes the rationale for focusing on this cohort to explore career development, learning experiences, and knowledge transfer. The next section outlines the problem that the research seeks to address.

1.2 Statement of Problem

This section outlines the problem addressed by the study, highlighting the limited understanding of the career development experiences of highly skilled migrants, particularly those from the Global South. It identifies gaps in the literature regarding the integration of skilled migrants into host-country labour markets, the mechanisms through which they develop careers and self-efficacy, and the social and institutional factors that shape their professional trajectories. It further establishes the theoretical foundation for the research by identifying gaps in existing career development and skilled migration literature. The section situates the study within *Social Cognitive Career Theory* (SCCT) and *Situated Learning Theory* (SLT), emphasising how learning mechanisms, communities of practice, self-efficacy, career resilience, and career shocks shape the career development of highly skilled Global South postgraduate migrants in Ireland. The section also demonstrates how current frameworks are limited in explaining the social, cultural, and contextual factors that influence migrants' career trajectories and highlights the need to integrate SCCT and SLT to better understand these processes.

Despite growing attention to research on international skilled mobility within the context of the globalised economy (Andresen et al., 2014; Crowley-Henry & Al Ariss, 2018; Hardill & MacDonald, 2000; Iredale, 2001), skilled migrants remain a significantly understudied minority

group in the management literature (Zikic, 2015). For instance, Favell et al. (2006) highlighted the need for more in-depth, micro-level phenomenological studies that explore the everyday lived experiences of skilled migrants alongside examinations of their career trajectories. Notably, the pathways into professional occupations for skilled migrants, particularly those from developing economies, remain unclear and underexplored, with limited understanding of the dynamics of their careers, career outcomes, and the strategies they employ to build successful professional trajectories (Sarpong & Maclean, 2021). The career experiences of skilled migrants and the strategies they use to navigate challenges in host countries remain insufficiently examined in existing research (Al Ariss & Syed, 2011). Al Ariss et al. (2012) further emphasised the pressing need for focused research on the career trajectories of this group, arguing that skilled migrants face distinct challenges linked to their migration status – challenges that require nuanced and context-specific investigation. They contend that this cohort encounters unique challenges stemming from their migrant status, warranting tailored research attention to address these gaps comprehensively.

Similarly, Bailey and Mulder (2017) pointed out that, in addition to inequalities related to gender, ethnicity, and class, highly skilled migrants experience labour market disparities, including difficulties in securing employment and in having their skills adequately recognised within the host country. While minority migrant groups are increasingly engaging in international careers, the barriers and opportunities they face remain underexplored in the literature (Al Ariss & Syed, 2011). Much of the existing research tends to treat skilled migrants as a relatively homogenous group and often conceptualises them as inherently mobile and well-equipped with valuable human capital, thereby portraying them as capable of seamlessly navigating boundaries and achieving positive career outcomes with relative ease (Zikic et al., 2010). However, such assumptions obscure the structural and contextual constraints that can significantly shape, and in many cases

limit, their career choices and progression (Ramboarison-Lalao et al., 2012). In line with this, several studies (for example, Adhikari & Melia, 2015; Shirmohammadi et al., 2019) have demonstrated that skilled migrants, particularly those from the Global South, often experience deskilling as they integrate into the economies of the Global North.

Additionally, the practice of individual resilience in navigating and developing careers within specific professions remains an underexamined aspect of career research (Bimrose & Hearne, 2012; Kossek & Perrigino, 2016). This gap is particularly evident concerning learning and career journeys and the integration of skilled migrants into the host country. Existing theoretical frameworks fall short of fully exploring the intricacies and trends in highly skilled migration (Iredale, 2001). For example, there remains a significant knowledge gap regarding how skilled migrants from developing countries integrate into developed host economies, and the lived experiences of skilled migrants' careers in their host countries remain underexplored. Although a few studies in the human resource discipline, such as Guo and Al Ariss (2015) and Zikic et al. (2010), have investigated the career success and outcomes of individual skilled migrants, as well as the contextual factors influencing these dynamics (see, for example, Crowley-Henry et al., 2018; O'Connor & Crowley-Henry, 2020), there is still much more to be examined in this area.

Furthermore, although several theoretical propositions exist on how students can enhance their knowledge, skills, and cross-cultural competence through international education experiences (Spitzberg & Changnon, 2009), research on the impact of international students' social experiences remains limited. Few studies have examined the social experiences of international students in their host countries (Lee & Rice, 2007), specifically the social learning process through which students develop cross-cultural skills in an international environment (Mikhaylov, 2014). Similar

studies often focus on specific aspects such as evaluating the effectiveness of studying abroad (Forsey et al., 2012), exploring the experiences of specific ethnic groups in foreign universities (De Vita, 2000; Ladd & Ruby, 1999), and investigating the experiences of local students with their international peers (Dunne, 2009; Jon, 2013).

Additionally, research on highly skilled migrants' international careers has predominantly been conducted at the macro level, addressing issues such as inter-country analysis of skilled migrants' knowledge flow and transfer (Lam & Rui, 2022; Park, 2019; Sturge et al., 2016; Wang, 2015), as well as the impact in terms of brain drain or brain circulation (Burgers & Touburg, 2013; Chand, 2019; Docquier & Marfouk, 2006; Ho & Tyson, 2011; Saxenian, 2002; Saxenian, 2005). Ariss et al. (2012) and Crowley-Henry et al. (2018) emphasised the theoretical void, highlighting the necessity for a more nuanced investigation into the career growth, accomplishments, integration, and adaptation of highly skilled immigrants within their host countries.

International student mobility trends have evolved significantly over the past two and a half decades, with changing needs from financial support (1999–2006) to academic support (2006–2013), and most recently to career support (2013–2020). Despite the increasing emphasis on career and employability outcomes, many institutions still focus primarily on enrolment growth rather than on comprehensive support services (Choudaha, 2017). This shift highlights a gap in understanding how international students navigate their post-study careers and transition into the host country's workforce. Addressing this gap is crucial for developing strategies that support international students in ensuring successful career development and outcomes in a competitive global market.

Many studies concerning international student mobility and international education have addressed the subject partly, focusing primarily on the educational aspects of students' migrant experiences

(Chen, 2006; Finn et al., 2021; Mpinganjira, 2009) while giving minimal attention to the post-study career lives of these graduates. A limited number of studies, such as Kir et al. (2021), Collins et al. (2017), Schworm et al. (2017), Brooks et al. (2012), and Salt (2011), have drawn research attention to the significance of international education in the post-study lives of international graduates. Kir et al. (2021), focusing on African students in China, found that personal professional ability, university curriculum, interpersonal and communication skills, and social support strongly shaped students' perceived employability. Similarly, Collins et al. (2017) revealed that international education holds significant value in the post-study lives of international student migrants. They argued for further investigation into international student mobility to understand how it shapes graduates' lives beyond the academic journey.

1.2.1 Theoretical Foundation

Migration from the Global South to the Global North has become a defining feature of global mobility, with international student migration representing a particularly prominent pathway for highly skilled individuals seeking career advancement. This study focuses on business postgraduate migrants from the Global South who have successfully transitioned from education into professional employment in Ireland. By concentrating on those who completed this transition, the study captures retrospective accounts of the learning mechanisms that enabled them to navigate complex challenges and overcome barriers in their career development within the host-country environment.

However, existing theoretical frameworks in career development and skilled migration literature do not fully explain how individuals surmount persistent career barriers in unfamiliar host-country contexts, particularly in the crucial transition from international student to business professional,

despite this being one of the most significant routes through which skilled migrants enter the labour markets of the Global North. Extant scholarship has emphasised the complexities of such transitions and the need to account for their nuanced social, cultural, and structural dimensions (Ariss et al., 2012; Collins et al., 2017; O'Connor & Crowley-Henry, 2020; Sarpong & Maclean, 2021). Yet there remains limited theorisation of the learning processes that underpin the ability to overcome these career barriers. To address this gap, the present study integrates learning theory and career theory, showing how social learning contexts, conceptualised through Communities of Practice (Wenger, 1998) shape the development of self-efficacy (Bandura, 1997; Lent et al., 1994) and thereby enable successful career transitions.

To understand how highly skilled migrants overcome persistent career barriers, it is necessary to examine the role of learning experiences and self-efficacy in shaping career trajectories. Existing frameworks such as *Social Cognitive Career Theory* (SCCT) and *Situated Learning Theory* (SLT) provide a foundation, yet their application in international migration contexts remains limited. Few studies exist on the influence of learning experiences within the framework of SCCT (Schaub & Tokar, 2005). While SCCT highlights the role of self-efficacy in career decision-making, SLT, through the concept of Communities of Practice (CoP), explains how social learning environments foster the development of self-efficacy and equip individuals with the strategies needed to navigate career barriers (Goodwin, 2019; Lave & Wenger, 1991; Welch & Welch, 2015).

SCCT emphasises how self-efficacy beliefs shape career choices and the persistence required to overcome barriers (Bandura, 1997; Hackett & Lent, 1992; Lent et al., 1994), but it does not fully account for the social learning processes that facilitate this development in complex, multicultural contexts. In this study, SLT, through its concept of CoP, is used to explore SCCT to deepen

understanding of how learning experiences shape self-efficacy in career development, enabling migrants to acquire knowledge, refine skills, and internalise strategies that enhance their confidence and capacity to navigate career challenges.

Sheu and Bordon's (2016) analysis of SCCT research conducted in an international context highlighted several key areas for further theoretical advancement and investigation. They observed that much of the international research has centred on models related to interest, choice, and satisfaction (Lent et al., 1994; Lent & Brown, 2006, 2008), as well as on the fundamental social cognitive elements of SCCT such as self-efficacy, outcome expectations, interests, choice goals, goal progress, and contextual supports and barriers. However, they pointed out a significant gap in attention to factors such as individual differences (for example, personality traits and internal locus of control), cultural dynamics (for example, individualism and collectivism), and broader contextual elements like opportunity structures in international applications of the SCCT framework. They suggested ways in which these variables could be integrated into future research efforts.

Additionally, Sheu and Bordon addressed sampling and methodological challenges inherent in international SCCT research, advocating for the inclusion of currently understudied regions such as Africa and emphasising the importance of incorporating relevant cultural and contextual factors to enhance the theory's explanatory capability, practical utility, and cross-cultural relevance. These areas were identified as key for further theoretical development in international contexts. Moreover, Lent et al. (2017) identified a theoretical gap in the career management literature, emphasising the need for further research into the factors that influence self-efficacy and outcome expectations. Building on this, Goodwin (2019) proposed that professional relationships, such as

participation in communities of practice, could serve as a key area for exploration, particularly as a potential locus for fostering self-efficacy and career optimism. Limited studies have explored the impact of learning experiences within SCCT (Schaub & Tokar, 2005). Predominantly, SCCT applications have been concentrated in the STEM fields, with limited attention to business and social sciences (Fouad & Santana, 2017; Lent et al., 2018; Sevilla & Snodgrass Rangel, 2023; Sheu et al., 2018). Moreover, the limited availability of qualitative research methods and qualitative assessment tools within the SCCT framework underscores a significant research gap, with only a few studies identified. Bridging this gap is essential for attaining a more comprehensive understanding of career development processes and effectively catering to the diverse needs of individuals across different contexts (Wang et al., 2022). While SCCT has predominantly been applied in quantitative studies focusing on various aspects of career behaviours, interests, values, barriers, and decisions (Emirza et al., 2021; Flores & O'Brien, 2002; Franco et al., 2019; Lent et al., 2017; Lent & Brown, 2019; Lindley, 2005; Penn & Lent, 2019; Schaub & Tokar, 2005), the use of qualitative methods has been limited (Buthelezi et al., 2010; Young et al., 2020). Given SCCT's predominant quantitative application, there is a pressing need for a more extensive exploration of its qualitative dimensions, particularly regarding learning experiences and their influence on career development. This is especially pertinent for highly skilled immigrants transitioning from developing to developed economies, as they encounter numerous barriers in their learning journey. The scope of SCCT extends beyond mere numerical quantification, particularly concerning concepts such as self-efficacy for migrants. There is significant potential in delving deeper into understanding the experiences and emotions associated with how individuals' learning experiences shape their career trajectories.

Despite the critical relevance of the concept of CoP from Lave and Wenger's (1991) Situated Learning Theory (SLT), its application in career development studies remains limited. Only a few studies, such as those by Cox (2013), Welch and Welch (2015), and Goodwin (2019), have explored its potential. Welch and Welch (2015) found that CoPs foster supportive environments in which individuals can develop the career capital necessary to build and sustain successful international careers. More recently, Goodwin (2019) highlighted the opportunity to advance the theoretical understanding of CoP within career development, emphasising its capacity to provide deeper insights into how individuals build their careers in diverse academic and professional contexts. Building on this, CoP can be used to investigate how migrant individuals learn through social interactions and engagement within international host communities, as well as the implications of these experiences for their transitions into postgraduate career lives. Although many studies have applied SLT to understand learning processes in educational and organisational settings (Fox, 1997; Hodgkinson-Williams et al., 2008; McGraw & Palmer, 1999; Pg Hj Besar, 2018; Quay, 2003; Tight, 2004), a significant research gap exists in the application of SLT to examine how individual migrants learn through social interactions and engagement in international host communities during higher education studies overseas, and the implications of this for their postgraduate career lives. The current body of literature has predominantly limited the use of SLT to understanding learning within educational or organisational contexts and has not extensively explored its impact on learners' career trajectories. This identified gap in the literature establishes a significant rationale for this study, which aims to expand the application of SLT in international higher education research, uncovering how the social learning approach influences knowledge and skills development and subsequently impacts graduate career success.

This perspective is particularly valuable in understanding the unique challenges and opportunities faced by migrants as they navigate unfamiliar social, cultural, and professional environments. By examining how these individuals engage with and learn from their host communities, researchers can uncover critical insights into the role of social learning and situated interactions in shaping career trajectories. Furthermore, applying CoP to this context not only expands its theoretical application but also provides practical implications for designing more inclusive and supportive educational and career development initiatives tailored to the needs of diverse populations.

Furthermore, Abdullahi et al. (2024) recently highlighted a gap in modern career research, noting that despite being recognised as a positive work-related attribute, career resilience (CR) has not received sufficient attention, as the focus has largely been on career outcomes. The predominant focus on career outcomes has overshadowed the role of CR in navigating the complexities of career transitions and overcoming challenges, particularly in a new environment. This is especially relevant for highly skilled postgraduate migrants. Addressing this gap, the study explores how CR facilitates career development in an advanced, multicultural labour market by supporting integration and the transition from education to professionalism. In doing so, it offers new insights into the career trajectories of skilled migrant professionals.

Additionally, the current understanding of how career shocks – unplanned, external events – shape career trajectories remains limited. While traditional models have largely emphasised deliberate decision-making and controlled career outcomes, career shocks are disruptive, often unforeseen events that can radically alter an individual's career path (Bright et al., 2005; Seibert et al., 2013). These events compel individuals to engage in a process of sensemaking that is critical for adapting to new circumstances, yet this aspect has been largely overlooked in existing frameworks.

Moreover, a recent study underscored that the modern career landscape is increasingly characterised by complexity, dynamism, and unpredictability (Akkermans et al., 2021). Although research by Hirschi (2010) and Seibert et al. (2013) demonstrated that career shocks significantly impact early career transitions and success, there is a paucity of studies examining how these shocks interact with individual learning experiences and self-efficacy among skilled migrants. This study attempts to address this gap by integrating the concept of career shock within established theoretical frameworks of SCCT and SLT to provide a more in-depth and comprehensive understanding of career development. By investigating how career shocks influence the career trajectories of skilled Global South postgraduate migrants in Ireland, this research elucidates the interplay between individual agency and external, unanticipated events, offering novel insights into the processes that drive successful career integration and transitions in multicultural labour markets. In essence, this study contributes to theory by integrating SCCT and SLT to explain how social learning mechanisms within CoPs shape self-efficacy and enable skilled migrants to overcome career barriers. By focusing on those who have successfully transitioned from student to professional roles, the research uncovers the nuanced learning experiences and adaptive strategies that traditional career and migration theories have not fully captured, contributing new insights to career development, skilled migration, and learning literature.

This section has demonstrated that while international skilled mobility is increasingly researched, there is insufficient attention to the lived experiences, career pathways, and learning processes of highly skilled migrants from developing economies. It highlights gaps in both macro-level studies of knowledge transfer and micro-level studies of individual career development, underlining the need for focused research on how African postgraduate migrants navigate barriers, develop skills, and integrate into host-country professional environments. It also establishes the theoretical gap

by showing that while SCCT and SLT offer valuable insights into career decision-making, learning, and skill acquisition, their application to international migration contexts, particularly for business postgraduate migrants from the Global South, remains limited. It highlights the need for qualitative, context-sensitive research to examine how migrants develop self-efficacy, navigate career barriers, respond to career shocks, and engage in social learning through communities of practice. This theoretical framing provides the rationale for the present study's focus on learning experiences, career resilience, and the integration of skilled migrants into host-country labour markets. The next section presents the study aims, articulating the research questions and objectives formulated to explore how learning experiences contribute to overcoming career development barriers, foster self-efficacy, and facilitate knowledge transfer among highly skilled African postgraduate migrants in Ireland.

1.3 Research Goal

The goal of this research is to explore how learning experiences interact with contextual factors to shape the career development of highly skilled international postgraduate migrants from developing economies in their advanced host country. Specifically, the study aims to investigate their integration into professional roles and the reciprocal flow of knowledge, skills, and competencies between Ireland and Africa. It examines how career shocks influence their career trajectories and their successful transition into the Irish labour market. The study applies the situated learning mechanism to understand the lived experiences of African business postgraduates, focusing on how participation in diverse *Communities of Practice* fosters essential skills for international business. It further investigates how these experiences contribute to career success, particularly in securing permanent roles within the Irish labour market. Additionally, the

research examines how unpredicted events shape participants' sensemaking and self-efficacy in navigating their career development, specifically regarding how career shocks impact their integration into the Irish job market.

Taking a gendered perspective, this research highlights the contextual challenges and opportunities faced by this cohort and seeks to offer recommendations for enhancing their successful transition. It contributes to the broader discourse on skilled migration, career development, and knowledge transfer between developed and developing economies by exploring these dynamics from the individual (micro) viewpoint rather than a macro-level perspective. The study examines the gendered dimensions of situated learning experiences that significantly contribute to the knowledge, skills, competencies, and self-efficacy evolution among highly skilled African postgraduate students of business residing in Ireland. The primary focus is to elucidate how these experiences intricately shape their career success and the attainment of permanent employment within the Irish labour market after graduation. It unravels the knowledge, skills, and competencies crucial for international business practices, examining how interactions and participation in diverse *Communities of Practice* foster their development.

Ultimately, the research explores how the situated learning experiences of Global South business postgraduate migrants impact their career development and self-efficacy, as well as how unpredicted events shape the sensemaking of their development in Ireland. The study further investigates the translation of acquired knowledge, skills, and competencies into securing suitable permanent jobs in Ireland, thereby advancing their careers in the international environment.

Consequently, the study seeks to investigate and highlight the barriers that impede international postgraduates of African origin from accessing learning opportunities in international corporate

enterprises in Ireland. Importantly, this research accentuates the gender differences inherent in the barriers experienced by international postgraduates, presenting a nuanced analysis relative to other social identities. The research findings are expected to contribute significantly to the theoretical underpinnings of international business education, career advancement, and global mobility. Furthermore, the research endeavours to propose practical strategies to enhance the international learning environment, thereby contributing to the broader discourse on international business and global mobility.

1.3.1 Research Questions

To achieve this research goal, the following questions are posed.

1. How do the careers of highly skilled business postgraduate migrants from Nigeria, Ghana, Kenya, and Tanzania in the Global South develop as they progress from education to job search and successful transition to full-time permanent employment in Ireland in the Global North?
2. What are the complexities and gender differences that they face in their experiences?
3. Do their acquired skills and knowledge flow back to their home countries?

1.3.2 Research Objectives

1. To identify and analyse the influential situated learning experiences that lead to the career development of these highly skilled business postgraduates in Ireland.

The objective of this research is to identify and analyse the influential situated learning experiences that contribute to the career development of highly skilled African business postgraduates in Ireland. This involves exploring the specific learning contexts and experiences these individuals encounter through social interactions during their time in Ireland, from academic to professional

life. By examining these situated learning experiences, the research aims to uncover how these experiences shape and influence their career trajectories, skills, and professional growth. Understanding which aspects of their learning journey are most impactful will provide valuable insights into how these experiences facilitate or hinder their career advancement. This objective seeks to highlight the key factors and processes that play a critical role in their professional development in integrating and successfully transitioning into the Irish job market. Ultimately, it aims to offer a comprehensive analysis of how these influential experiences contribute to their success and adaptation to a new professional environment. By investigating the specific contexts and experiences encountered during their studies in Ireland, the research aims to uncover the factors that facilitate or challenge their transition from education to professional roles. This includes understanding how these experiences contribute to their career growth, skill acquisition, and integration into the global business environment. The insights gained will provide a clearer picture of how integrating through the postgraduate education pathway impacts career development and professional success. Ultimately, this objective seeks to offer practical recommendations for enhancing support mechanisms that aid in the successful transition of these graduates into the international job market. This knowledge will not only enhance academic discourse but also provide valuable insights for educational institutions, policymakers, and professionals involved in the development and support of international postgraduate students, particularly focusing on gender-specific considerations.

2. To investigate the complexities encountered during integration and transitioning, and to explore the role of gender in shaping their career development journeys.

The second objective of this research is to investigate the role of gender in the career development journeys of highly skilled African business postgraduate migrants in Ireland. This involves exploring how gender may influence various aspects of their professional growth and career trajectories during their time in Ireland. The investigation seeks to uncover whether there are any distinct gender-related patterns or differences in the experiences, challenges, and opportunities faced by these migrants as they transition from postgraduate education to professional roles in the international business landscape. By delving into this aspect, the research aims to provide a nuanced understanding of how gender intersects with other factors in shaping career outcomes for this cohort. This objective will help identify if and how gender influences career progression and the overall integration experience in the Irish job market. The insights gained will contribute to a more nuanced understanding of gender dynamics in the context of skilled migration and career development. Additionally, the findings will provide valuable information for tailoring support services and policies to address any gender-related issues that may arise, thereby enhancing the overall effectiveness of career development programmes for international business postgraduate migrants. This objective underscores the importance of considering gender-specific needs and experiences in fostering equitable professional opportunities within the international business environment.

3. To explore the flow of business knowledge and skills between Ireland and Africa through highly skilled African business postgraduates employed in Ireland.

This objective aims to understand how these individuals contribute to the exchange of expertise and competencies between their host and home countries. By investigating how the business knowledge and skills they acquire in Ireland are transferred back to Africa, and how their

experiences in Africa might influence their work in Ireland, the research seeks to map out the reciprocal nature of this knowledge flow. This exploration includes examining the mechanisms through which these postgraduates facilitate knowledge exchange in their home country while living and working in their host country. Understanding this flow of knowledge is crucial for highlighting the role of international business professionals in bridging gaps between developing and developed economies. The insights gained will provide a deeper understanding of the impact of international migration on global business practices and offer practical recommendations for enhancing the effectiveness of such knowledge transfer. Additionally, this objective contributes to the broader discourse on the global mobility of skilled professionals and the strategic advantages of leveraging their unique insights and experiences. Having stated the research goal, questions, and objectives by translating the identified problem and theoretical gaps into a focused inquiry that offers theoretical, practical, and policy contributions, the next section outlines the scope of the study. This clarifies the study's boundaries, focus, and limitations.

1.4 Scope of the Study

This study explores the career development experiences of highly skilled African business postgraduates in Ireland, focusing on those who have completed a Level 9 (Master's) programme in Business. While the participants predominantly consist of Nigerian nationals, the study is not exclusive to them. As Africa's most populous nation and the largest economy in Sub-Saharan Africa, Nigeria is home to a diverse, young population increasingly seeking educational opportunities abroad. This surge in international mobility is driven by Nigeria's high youth unemployment rate, currently at 56.1%, positioning the country as a leading contributor to outbound student mobility globally (Campus France, 2020). This demographic trend presents enormous educational market opportunities for universities and other higher education institutions

in foreign countries, as Nigeria's young population migrates to study abroad in search of better living standards. According to a 2020 report by *Campus France*, a French agency for the promotion of higher education, international student services, and international mobility, Nigeria recorded 85,251 students who travelled overseas to study in 2017. This figure ranked Nigeria eighth globally and first in Sub-Saharan Africa among countries producing students for outbound international mobility. Ireland has become an attractive destination for international postgraduate students, particularly from Nigeria and other African countries, due to its strong educational system, multinational hubs, and post-study work opportunities (Department of Education and Skills, 2015; Department of Foreign Affairs, 2021; Dunne, 2009).

A recent report from the Irish Higher Education Authority in 2023 indicates that international students now comprise 13.7% of Ireland's student body, with Africa as the fourth-largest source. Nigeria leads among African nations, contributing 2.2% of all international students, many of whom are enrolled in full-time postgraduate business programmes. While the majority of participants in this study are Nigerian, there are also participants from Ghana, Tanzania, and Kenya. The prominence of Nigerian students in Ireland's international student population underscores the need for a deeper investigation into how international business postgraduates, particularly from African countries, integrate and transition into the Irish professional business environment. Nigerian participants, who form the majority in this research, provide key insights into the broader experiences of African postgraduate migrants navigating the Irish labour market. Although the study emphasises Nigerians, it remains inclusive of other African nationalities, offering a comprehensive understanding of the challenges and opportunities facing this cohort.

This scope establishes the boundaries of the study, situating its focus on business postgraduates from the Global South, specifically Nigeria, Ghana, Kenya, and Tanzania, within the Global North context of Ireland. Having defined the study's context and participants, the next section outlines the theoretical contributions that guide the analysis and frame the research within broader skilled migration, career, and learning scholarly discourse.

1.5 Theoretical Contributions

This study makes a significant theoretical contribution by integrating *Social Cognitive Career Theory* (SCCT) with *Situated Learning Theory* (SLT). It further draws on the concepts of career shock (CS) and career resilience (CR) to develop a robust framework that explains the career development of highly skilled postgraduate migrants from the Global South in the Global North. Taking a non-positivist, interpretivist–constructivist approach, the study reveals how learning processes in specific social and cultural contexts actively shape the development of self-efficacy. This perspective allows the researcher to uncover the in-depth, lived experiences of skilled migrants as they navigate and overcome complex barriers in a new environment, adding depth and richness to existing understandings of how learning experiences shape self-efficacy in career development. Unlike most existing applications of SCCT, which predominantly adopt a positivist perspective focused on measuring relationships between constructs such as self-efficacy, outcome expectations, and goals, this research demonstrates how self-efficacy is continually reshaped through dynamic, context-specific learning experiences.

This research advances SCCT by uncovering how self-efficacy is shaped by learning experiences, particularly informal learning experiences in multicultural and structurally constrained contexts. It extends SLT by uncovering the crucial and pivotal bridging learning context (Transition CoP) that facilitates career development transitions from newcomers to professionals in a new environment where migrants are faced with shocks and must demonstrate resilience to accomplish successful transition. This is a novel finding that identifies a significant migrant-led informal learning space that emerges in the absence of institutional support, revealing how CoP can form in liminal and precarious periods of post-study transition. Furthermore, it reconceptualises career shocks as recurrent, structurally induced disruptions that act as catalysts for informal learning, resilience, and self-efficacy development.

Together, these insights contribute a multidimensional and context-sensitive understanding of career development that challenges linear, individualistic models and instead positions skilled migrants as active agents navigating complexity and exclusion in host labour markets. The detailed theoretical contributions are presented and critically discussed in Chapter Six. The next section outlines the practical contributions of this study.

1.6 Practical Implications

Migration has become a central focus of efforts by international, regional, and national organisations aiming to enhance sustainable development through structured pathways for skilled mobility. These efforts align with the United Nations *Sustainable Development Goals* (SDGs) 8 and 10, which emphasise promoting decent work and economic growth, and reducing inequalities by facilitating safe, orderly, and regular migration. According to the United Nations, Department of Economic and Social Affairs (2019), structured migration pathways hold transformative

potential, not only by lifting individuals out of poverty but also by contributing to the development of both origin and destination countries. Addressing adverse drivers such as insecurity and lack of work opportunities in home and host countries can enable migrants and nations to benefit from international mobility and economic growth.

Gender equality is another vital component within these initiatives. SDG 5 specifically addresses the importance of ending discrimination against women and promoting their full participation and equal opportunities in decision-making, including leadership roles within the business and economic sectors. Advancing gender equality within migration and business development initiatives ensures that both women and men can fully contribute to and benefit from international partnerships.

Knowledge transfer between developed and developing nations is an additional focus of these global initiatives, particularly in fostering international business knowledge that contributes to economic growth in Africa. By promoting quality education (SDG 4) and strengthening global partnerships (SDG 17), international efforts, including Ireland's *Strategy for Africa to 2025* report by the Department of Foreign Affairs in 2021, seek to facilitate collaborations where expertise and knowledge flow effectively to support Africa's sustainable development. As these initiatives advance, exploring the process of knowledge development by highly skilled migrants from developing nations in developed countries will be crucial to understanding how migration contributes to international business knowledge and sustainable economic progress. Moreover, this research has important implications for institutions and policymakers. It suggests that a stronger nexus between university supports, visa systems, and labour market expectations is needed to mitigate career transition shocks and support more seamless transitions for international graduates.

1.7 Implications for the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals

This study has important implications for United Nations *Sustainable Development Goals* 4 (Quality Education), 5 (Gender Equality), 8 (Decent Work and Economic Growth), and 10 (Reduced Inequalities). It is equally timely considering the Department of Foreign Affairs (2021). *Ireland's Strategy for Africa to 2025*, which emphasises doubling postgraduate fellowships for African students and strengthening educational and development cooperation, because it provides evidence on how African postgraduate migrants successfully transition from education to professional employment in Ireland. Therefore, the study offer insights that can inform the implementation and evaluation of these strategic initiatives.

1.7.1 SDG 4: Quality Education

Target 4.3 aims to ensure equal access for all women and men to affordable and quality technical, vocational, and tertiary education, including university. This study speaks directly to that target by examining how Global South postgraduate migrants from selected African countries access Level 9 business education in Ireland. It does so by exploring how their learning experiences – formal, informal, and through *Communities of Practice* – shape their skills and career transitions in the Global North. Furthermore, Ireland's *Africa Strategy to 2025* includes a commitment to increase fellowships for postgraduate students from Africa. Thus, the findings will help gauge whether those policy goals are being met in ways that translate into meaningful career outcomes for skilled migrants undertaking the journey, and for the host country's education and economic systems.

1.7.2 SDG 5: Gender Equality

Targets 5.1 (ending discrimination) and 5.5 (ensuring women's full participation and equal opportunities for leadership at all levels) are especially relevant. The gender lens of this study highlights how the findings reflect overall gender parity in the educational and work transition experiences of skilled migrants from the Global South in Ireland. Both male and female participants reported broadly similar opportunities and challenges in international postgraduate education and in transitioning into professional roles. These insights can inform policy and institutional practices to strengthen support and inclusion, ensuring that parity is maintained while further reducing inequalities in access, recognition of skills, and the school-to-decent-work transition of international students.

1.7.3 SDG 8: Decent Work and Economic Growth

Targets 8.5 (full and productive employment and decent work for all) and 8.6 (reducing the proportion of youth not in employment, education, or training) are particularly pertinent. By exploring the transition from postgraduate education to securing full-time or permanent employment in Ireland, the study addresses how learning experiences and resilience enable African migrants to access decent work, thereby contributing both to Ireland's labour market goals and to broader SDG commitments.

1.7.4 SDG 10: Reduced Inequalities

Targets 10.2 (social, economic, and political inclusion of all) and 10.3 (ensuring equal opportunity and reducing outcome inequalities) are key here. This study investigates how structural and social barriers, including discrimination, visa restrictions, and the under-recognition of prior work

experience from the Global South, affect the career development of highly skilled postgraduate migrants in the Global North. By highlighting these challenges, the study seeks to inform practices and policies that promote equal opportunity and work towards reducing inequalities of outcome in host-country labour markets for international graduates from Africa.

1.7.5 *Timeliness and Policy Relevance*

Ireland's *Strategy for Africa to 2025* sets out specific goals such as doubling postgraduate fellowships for African students and strengthening educational partnerships. Because this study is conducted around 2025, its findings will help assess the effectiveness of those targets and can offer recommendations as the strategy is being reviewed or implemented. Thus, the research is not only academically relevant but also policy critical. It has the potential to inform Ireland's international development agenda, higher education policy, and work permit or skilled migration policy, particularly regarding the retention of skilled graduates and knowledge transfer between Ireland and African countries.

Having highlighted the theoretical and practical contributions of this study, the research demonstrates its multifaceted significance for academic scholarship, business practice, and global policy debates. Theoretically, it advances SCCT, SLT, and career development research by showing how self-efficacy and resilience are dynamically shaped through both formal and informal learning experiences in migration contexts. Practically, it provides insights for policymakers, higher education institutions, and employers on how to better support the career development and integration of highly skilled international graduates. At the global level, it informs debates on knowledge transfer, sustainable development, and migration governance,

highlighting the role of African postgraduate migrants as knowledge carriers and agents of change. Collectively, these contributions position the study as a focused inquiry that enriches academic discourse while offering actionable guidance for business and policy practice. The next section presents the overall structure of the thesis.

1.8 Conclusion Summary

This introductory chapter has laid the foundation for the study by situating it within the broader context of global skilled migration and international student mobility. It has highlighted Ireland's growing role as a destination for African business postgraduate students and established the rationale for focusing on highly skilled migrants from Nigeria, Ghana, Kenya, and Tanzania. The chapter presented the research goal, questions, and objectives, and clarified the study's scope, emphasising the investigation of learning experiences, self-efficacy development, career resilience, and knowledge transfer in the transition from education to professional employment. It also outlined the theoretical contributions of the study, demonstrating how *Social Cognitive Career Theory* and *Situated Learning Theory*, alongside the concepts of career shock and resilience, provide a framework for understanding migrant career development.

The practical implications for higher education institutions, policymakers, and employers were discussed, alongside the study's alignment with the United Nations *Sustainable Development Goals* 4, 5, 8, and 10, showing its relevance to global debates on inclusion, equitable opportunities, and knowledge exchange. Integrating these theoretical, practical, and policy dimensions, the chapter positions the study as a focused inquiry into the experiences of African postgraduate migrants navigating complex labour markets and international mobility contexts. Having established this groundwork, the next chapter reviews the relevant literature on international

student migration, career development, learning, and self-efficacy, providing the scholarly context for the study's investigation.

2.0 Chapter Two: Literature Review

2.1 Framing the Study: Literature and Theoretical Perspectives

This research explores how African business postgraduates integrate and transition into the professional environment in Ireland, aiming to understand their learning experiences and career development trajectories. The study focuses on understanding individual learning and career development experiences from a micro-level perspective, rather than adopting a macro viewpoint, thereby analysing these dynamics from the individual's perspective. At the core of this study is the application of Lent et al.'s (1994) *Social Cognitive Career Theory* (SCCT), which provides a comprehensive framework for understanding how self-efficacy, outcome expectations, and personal goals shape career development. Although SCCT provides a valuable framework for understanding career development, it falls short of fully addressing the contemporary realities of career development, particularly the unpredictability and lack of control individuals often encounter. To deepen this exploration, this study also draws on Lave and Wenger's (1991) *Social Learning Theory* (SLT), which emphasises the role of social interaction, participation, and engagement in learning and adapting to new environments. Together, these theories allow for a nuanced analysis of how individuals build self-efficacy and develop professional competencies in response to both personal efforts and external conditions.

However, through the analysis of data collected from the participants, an emergent theme has come to the fore: *Career Shock* (CS) (Akkermans et al., 2021; Seibert et al., 2013). This theory, which refers to unexpected and often uncontrollable events that significantly disrupt career trajectories, provides an additional layer of understanding. SCCT emphasises the interplay between individual agency and environmental influences, making it a useful lens for examining the complex journey

of skilled migrants navigating career pathways in a foreign context. SCCT, like many other traditional career theories, often assumes that individuals have a significant degree of control over their career development. Traditional career theories tend to emphasise individual personal agency, decision-making, and self-directed career planning, overlooking the unpredictable and uncontrollable external events that can shape career trajectories. While such theories assume that individuals have full control over how they navigate their careers, they overlook broader institutional forces such as social class, gender, ethnicity, education, and government policies that can significantly constrain career choices and opportunities (Mayrhofer et al., 2007). CS challenges this assumption by acknowledging the role of unexpected, uncontrollable events that can disrupt career trajectories, thereby addressing a limitation in theories such as SCCT that may overemphasise personal agency (Akkermans et al., 2021). This complements the dominant focus on individual agency by incorporating contextual factors that influence career development (Akkermans et al., 2018). SCCT and SLT help explain the learning processes and self-efficacy development, and the emergence of career shock theory highlights the unpredictable challenges that shape professional integration.

This research, therefore, not only applies SCCT and SLT to analyse the participants' experiences but also introduces career shocks as a critical factor influencing their transition and career development. These three theories form a comprehensive understanding of the migrants' career development. SCCT provides the overarching framework of career development and self-efficacy, which is the foundation of the study. SLT serves as a mechanism for learning and development, explaining how self-efficacy is built through learning in social contexts, while Career Shock Theory illustrates how unexpected disruptions can alter career paths, prompting reliance on learned skills and coping mechanisms developed through CoP, which serve as the catalyst for adaptation

in the transition process. These shocks often trigger reflection and action, which further shape the individual's career trajectory. The combination of these theoretical perspectives offers a robust framework for understanding the complexities of skilled migration and career adaptation in a globalised world. The conceptual framework for the study is developed and presented.

2.2 Structure of the Literature and Theoretical Exploration

This section sets the background for the conceptual and theoretical exploration of the study. It is structured into three distinct sub-chapters reviewing the constituent key topics that form this research. It explores the research topic from two major perspectives: concepts and theory. It examines the concept of skilled migration and international student mobility, which provide the broad framework for the study, and establishes the theories that underpin the research.

The first sub-chapter begins by reviewing the existing literature in the area of skilled migration and then examines international student mobility as a unique flow of skilled migration. The second sub-chapter explores the core theory of the study, *Social Cognitive Career Theory* (SCCT), and complements it with the contemporary *Career Shock* (CS) theory that addresses the shortfalls of SCCT in comprehensively addressing the research question. In the third sub-chapter, it reviews learning theories to establish the most suitable framework – *Situated Learning Theory* (SLT) – for the study and explores how this theoretical learning framework has been used to identify its potential for further application in the research context. Finally, the chapter concludes by presenting the conceptual framework, which is built from the theoretical foundations discussed earlier, followed by a summary of the key points.

2.3 Skilled Migration

2.3.1 Introduction

This chapter explores existing research on highly skilled migrants, with a specific focus on international student migrants. The primary objective is to emphasise the significance of employing a qualitative approach to study international student mobility at a more in-depth level by examining how their situated learning experiences influence their integration and transition to career lives after study in the host country. Since international migration or mobility is a broad concept, it encompasses diverse groups of migrants with varying levels of expertise and skills, as well as from different origins and destinations with diverse levels of economic development. This study focuses on highly skilled international students migrating from the Global South to the Global North to pursue postgraduate education and to seek international work experience and opportunities for permanent immigration status in the host country after their studies.

To begin, the study explains the term “highly skilled migrant” by reviewing its usage in existing literature. This sets a background to aid understanding of why international students are classified as highly skilled migrants in this research. It then goes further to explain the concept of international student mobility and its link to employability for students’ international career success and transition from a temporary to a permanent immigration status in the host country. Thus, it establishes the crucial role of international student mobility in facilitating individual student migrants’ international career pursuits. Essentially, this chapter aims to elucidate the connection between international student mobility, knowledge and skills development, and international career development.

2.3.2 Highly Skilled Migrants

In business and management literature, the term *highly skilled migrant* (Lam & Rui, 2022; Park, 2019) is used interchangeably with various other terms, including *highly educated migrant.* The term *highly skilled migrants* is widely used in business and management literature, but its definition varies significantly depending on the context and discipline. The term, as used by Lam and Rui (2022) and Park (2019), is employed interchangeably with various other terms, including *skilled migrants* (Al Ariss & Syed, 2011; Ariss et al., 2012; Crowley-Henry et al., 2018; Zikic, 2015), *highly educated migrants* (Ong et al., 1992; Trevena, 2013), *highly qualified migrants* (Jendrissek, 2016; Ryan, 2015), *immigrant professionals* (Fang et al., 2009), and *qualified immigrants* (Zikic et al., 2010), among others. However, the meaning of this term can vary depending on the source, country, and context, as well as the perspective from which it is defined (Weinar & Klekowski von Koppenfels, 2020).

Different disciplines, such as economics, demography, sociology, and political science, may have distinct definitions of highly skilled migrants. Moreover, researchers studying the impact of highly skilled migrants on the labour market tend to adopt data-driven definitions, while policymakers often employ policy-driven definitions. In policymaking and political fields, definitions often revolve around the profession, pay scale, and level of education, with tertiary education being a benchmark (Chaloff & Lemaître, 2009). In the academic world, definitions of highly skilled migrants vary among authors, with a greater focus on education level rather than income (Smith & Favell, 2006). The academic literature predominantly emphasises the educational, skill, and income requirements when defining highly skilled migrants, particularly in relation to their evaluation within the job market (Weinar & Klekowski von Koppenfels, 2020). In contrast,

researchers exploring the lived experience of educated migrants may challenge conventional conceptualisations (Raghuram, 2013).

One way to attract highly skilled migrants is through tertiary-level education pathways, where international students are allowed to stay after completing their studies if they can find suitable employment within their field (Chaloff & Lemaître, 2009; She & Wotherspoon, 2013). International students are an attractive migrant flow because they increase the host country's pool of highly skilled workers, who are increasingly important for economic development (Lee & Rice, 2007; Raghuram, 2013; Salt, 2011; Ziguras & Law, 2006). Indeed, several nations acknowledge the significance of students as potential skilled migrants who bring the advantages of fresh knowledge to the workforce. As a result, economically advanced countries aim to maximise the graduate capital (Tomlinson, 2017) of international students by retaining a portion of them as skilled immigrants after they complete their studies (Ziguras & Law, 2006).

2.3.3 Defining Highly Skilled Migrants

There is no universally accepted definition for the term *highly skilled migrants*, which has sparked ongoing debates and discussions within the field (Kõu et al., 2015). As a result, there is no consensus on its precise meaning, as it remains a topic that engenders extensive debate and discussion. Therefore, the definition of highly skilled migrants is multifaceted. In some contexts, the term emphasises education level, while in others, income and professional qualifications are considered essential criteria. Researchers studying the impact of highly skilled migrants on the labour market often adopt data-driven definitions, whereas policymakers tend to employ policy-driven definitions that revolve around the profession, pay scale, and education level. This divergence of perspectives contributes to the absence of a universally accepted definition of highly skilled migrants.

In the academic world, the emphasis is generally placed on educational attainment and skills requirements rather than income (Smith & Favell, 2006), particularly concerning their evaluation within the job market (Weinar & Klekowski von Koppenfels, 2020). However, it is important to acknowledge that the lived experiences of educated migrants may challenge conventional conceptualisations (Raghuram, 2013), suggesting the need for a more nuanced understanding of their experiences.

According to Al Ariss and Syed (2011), Iredale (1999), and Zikic (2015), skilled migrants are individuals who possess a high level of education from their home countries, a minimum of a bachelor's degree from a university, and significant expertise in a specific field. Similarly, Chaloff and Lemaître (2009) stated that highly skilled migrants are often defined as individuals with a university degree and earning above a certain income threshold. Also, Weinar and Klekowski von Koppenfels (2020) also asserted that conventionally, highly skilled migrants are considered individuals with specific required skills for high-income positions and can integrate smoothly into a host environment (Raghuram, 2013). These perceptions position them as a desirable and valuable migration flow to organisations and countries, and thus, are usually in high demand (Al Ariss & Syed, 2011; Fernando & Cohen, 2016; Triadafilopoulos, 2013).

On this account, it can be posited that the term highly skilled migrant describes individuals with advanced education, at least a university bachelor's degree or its equivalent, and expertise in a specific field who migrate from their country of origin to a host country. However, the definition of the term can vary depending on the source, country, and context, leading to different interpretations and understandings. Various disciplines and stakeholders, such as economics, demography, sociology, and policymakers, may have distinct perspectives on defining and categorising highly skilled migrants. In this study, we refer to highly skilled migrants as

international students with a bachelor's university degree from their African home countries who have migrated to Ireland for a business postgraduate study at the master's level, adopting the definitions provided by Zikic (2015), Al Ariss and Syed (2011), Chaloff and Lemaître (2009), and Iredale (1999, 2001). These individuals also meet the annual income threshold of €34,000, stipulated by the Irish Department of Enterprise, Trade, and Employment, to secure a work permit. This definition acknowledges the importance of both educational attainment and specialised skills in identifying this group of migrants, aligning with the perspectives of researchers who emphasise the value of education and expertise in the job market.

Building upon the multifaceted definitions of highly skilled migrants presented in the section above, a nuanced understanding of their role and significance in international student mobility emerges. Exploring the diverse viewpoints from a range of disciplines, including economics, demography, sociology, and political science, unveils the intricate complexities that surround the categorisation of highly skilled migrants (Chaloff & Lemaître, 2009; Weinar & Klekowski von Koppenfels, 2020). Navigating through the various criteria applied to distinguish highly skilled migrants reveals that the criteria extend beyond mere economic metrics and educational attainment, often embracing factors that influence integration into host environments (Al Ariss & Syed, 2011; Raghuram, 2013). Moreover, the crucial role of international student mobility emerges as a strategic mechanism for attracting and retaining these highly skilled individuals, forming an integral part of economic development strategies within advanced host nations (Lee & Rice, 2007; Tomlinson, 2017). Having explored the multifaceted definitions and criteria that shape understandings of highly skilled migrants, the discussion now turns to international student mobility as a distinct and strategic channel through which this category of migrants is increasingly produced and circulated across global labour markets.

2.3.4 International Student Mobility

Research on international education is a burgeoning aspect of internationalisation and globalisation, with many studies stemming mainly from disciplines such as geography (Findlay et al., 2012; Perkins & Neumayer, 2014; Prazeres, 2013; Raghuram, 2013; Shields, 2013), education (Chen, 2006; Finn et al., 2021; Macrander, 2017; Urban & Palmer, 2014), and more recently, international business education and management (Kir et al., 2021; Ortiz, 2004; Schworm et al., 2017) and migration (Liu-Farrer, 2009). While international education has existed for a long time, its motivations have shifted significantly from focusing on diplomacy and intercultural exchange to emphasising globalism, often driven by economic factors (Lee & Rice, 2007). According to Wei (2013), international students were previously perceived primarily as customers rather than as valuable talents in their host countries. Likewise, Lee and Rice (2007) and Salt (2011) acknowledged the perception of international students as customers or consumers, leading to a rise in international student recruitment for financial gain. Regrettably, this focus on recruitment often neglects the experiences of international students after enrolment, a key factor contributing to their dissatisfaction. However, there is now a growing tendency to recognise international students as talented individuals rather than as mere customers.

The pursuit of international education is notably increasing (Prazeres, 2013; Wei, 2013), particularly at the tertiary level and predominantly among students from developing countries studying in developed countries (Chen, 2006; Monk, 2012). This trend exists because advanced economies constitute the core of the global tertiary education system, whereas developing economies are positioned at the periphery (Bound et al., 2021; Macrander, 2017; Perkins & Neumayer, 2014). Interestingly, Wei (2013) highlighted the significant influence of economic factors in attracting international students to specific countries. Wei found that international

students consider the economic status of their prospective study destinations and, therefore, often favour economically advanced countries as their preferred academic choices. Given that international students pursuing higher education constitute and contribute significantly to the global talent pool, it is crucial for every country to recognise and prioritise the attraction of international student talent to improve their global economic status.

International student mobility has gained increasing importance in international and global mobility literature. International education plays a vital role in equipping students with the knowledge and skills necessary to integrate effectively into the global workforce (Mpinganjira, 2009). According to Liu-Farrer (2009), most studies on student mobility emphasise the increasing importance of employment in the lives of student migrants. While substantial research exists on the socio-economic and demographic attributes of international student migrants, there is a notable dearth of studies exploring the connections between mobility and employability (King et al., 2010). Only a few studies, such as Brooks et al. (2012) and Salt (2011), have examined the connection between international students mobility and employability or career prospects from both the students' and employers' perspectives. Brooks et al. examined how British students perceive overseas education as a value-adding component to stand out in the job market and whether such education provides tangible employment advantages. Salt, in contrast, examined the relationship between international student mobility for higher education and subsequent transition into the corporate job market in the host country.

Furthermore, the exploratory study of Findlay et al. (2012) on the motivations and significance of international student mobility revealed that students acquire multiple forms of social and cultural capital through their international educational experiences. More importantly, the study highlighted the need to analyse student mobility within a broader framework that encompasses

life-course aspirations, rather than isolating it as a separate phenomenon. Findlay et al.'s argument supports Tomlinson's (2017) concept of graduate capital resources, which encompass social and cultural capital acquired through both formal and informal experiences that facilitate employability. This suggests that international students develop social and cultural capital within their host country through social interactions and participation in multicultural formal and informal learning spaces, underscoring the importance of social learning.

International student migrants, particularly those from economically disadvantaged regions such as Africa, view international education as a pathway to integrate into the systems of economically advanced host countries upon completing their studies (Grimm, 2019; King et al., 2010; Mathies & Karhunen, 2021). These individuals, known as "student switchers" (Robertson, 2011), perceive transitioning from student visas to long-term or permanent residence as a rational life strategy. Moreover, some host countries actively seek to attract talented students from economically disadvantaged nations to address critical skills shortages in their domestic labour markets (Gribble, 2008; Hazen & Alberts, 2006). According to Bryła (2019), international student mobility yields enduring and immeasurable value through a range of experiences that are of utmost significance. Among the principal benefits derived from this mobility are the profound enhancement of intercultural understanding and the development of self-confidence. As a result, international student mobility emerges as an exceptionally effective approach for fostering the development of intercultural skills.

Additionally, Collins et al. (2017) examined how international student mobility influences the post-study lives of graduates, focusing on how situated learning and cultural capital are manifested among them. Their study revealed that international education holds significant value in the post-study lives of international student migrants. However, they argued that this value is context-

specific, depending on the networks and spaces, comparable to communities in practice, in which students participate. Their study called for further investigation into international student mobility to understand how it shapes graduates' lives beyond their academic journey.

These findings highlight the significance of graduate capital resources in analysing international student mobility. International student mobility is a multifaceted phenomenon with far-reaching implications for the development of graduate capital resources (Findlay et al., 2012; Tomlinson, 2017). Research shows that the knowledge and skills acquired through international education, such as cross-cultural competence, effective communication, and improved confidence, are pivotal in securing good jobs and thriving in a globalised world (Bryła, 2019; Deardorff, 2006; Jones, 2013).Studies have shown that cross-cultural competence and effective communication skills are highly valued by employers in global markets (Deardorff, 2006; Jones, 2013). Moreover, the increased confidence gained from international experiences enhances graduates' ability to navigate diverse professional environments effectively (Glass et al., 2015). Therefore, the benefits of international education extend beyond academic achievements, playing a crucial role in shaping graduates' professional trajectories and enabling their success in an interconnected world.

2.3.5 Attracting Highly Skilled Migrants Through Education Pathway

One strategy employed by economically advanced countries to attract highly skilled migrants is through tertiary-level education pathways. International students are considered attractive potential skilled migrants because they contribute to the host country's pool of highly skilled workers and bring fresh knowledge and perspectives to the workforce. These perceptions position them as a desirable and valuable migration flow to organisations and countries and thus are usually in high demand (Al Ariss & Syed, 2011; Fernando & Cohen, 2016).

In many advanced economies, there is evidence of a growing demand for skilled migrants, driven by factors such as skill deficits, aging demographics, and declining birth rates (Al Ariss, 2010; Ozbilgin et al., 2011). Skill shortages have significantly reshaped the labour landscapes of numerous nations. Consequently, policies have been implemented to facilitate the transition of international students into skilled immigrants by allowing them to remain and seek suitable employment after completing their studies (Ariss et al., 2012; Ziguras & Law, 2006). These nations recognise the potential benefits of retaining international students as skilled immigrants after their studies, aiming to maximise the "graduate capital" they possess (Tomlinson, 2017) and bolster their economies (Ziguras & Law, 2006).

2.3.6 Conclusion Summary

This chapter explores the meaning of highly skilled migrants, setting the stage for understanding international student migrants as a cohort of highly skilled migrants, considering the diverse definitions in the literature. It examines the concept of international student mobility, exploring the theoretical discourse over time while highlighting key discussions, theoretical viewpoints, and gaps in the literature. Significantly, it emphasises how international student mobility impacts the post-study career paths of highly skilled student migrants, especially those originating from developing economies and settling in advanced host countries. The chapter also explores how international students are drawn to economically advanced host countries as highly skilled talents, contributing to the local economy through an educational pathway. This highlights the distinctiveness of this particular cohort of highly skilled migrants. Furthermore, it reviews the relevance of situated learning experiences through communities of practice in the career development of international students within their host countries. It illuminates their journey through education to post-study careers, addressing the challenges and experiences they encounter.

Ultimately, the chapter explores how international migration facilitates their learning and career achievements. This comprehensive exploration lays the foundation for the subsequent chapters, offering deeper insights into the dynamics shaping the world of international student migrants and their learning experiences abroad. Collectively, these insights lay the groundwork for the next stage of the review, which examines career development literature and theoretical frameworks for analysing the experiences of highly skilled postgraduates from the Global South in the Global North.

2.4 Career Development

2.4.1 Introduction

This section introduces the concept of career development and explains how Social Cognitive Career Theory (SCCT) provides insights into how individuals make career choices, build self-efficacy, and achieve success in different contexts. It also establishes the relevance of these theoretical perspectives for understanding the career development of highly skilled postgraduate migrants from the Global South as they navigate the Irish labour market in the Global North.

Baruch and Rosenstein (1992) viewed career as the progressive development of an employee through various experiences and roles across one or multiple organisations. Similarly, Welch and Welch (2015) noted that career typically refers to the sequence or pattern of jobs held over a person's lifetime, along with the associated attitudes and behaviours. In recent literature, career mobility has emerged as one of the most prominent themes (Akkermans & Kubasch, 2017). Career theories provide frameworks that explain how these different elements interact to influence occupational choices and advancement throughout an individual's life (Lent, 2021). Given that work plays a central and pivotal role in people's lives, it serves as a crucial avenue where

individuals' decisions can have significant professional and personal impacts (Cook et al., 2002). In this regard, career theories such as SCCT reflect this understanding by emphasising the role of self-assessment and the importance of learning experiences in the career development process. According to SCCT, effective career decision-making hinges on a deep awareness of one's own characteristics and the ability to interpret learning experiences to guide career choices and achieve success (Brown & Lent, 2013; Lent et al., 1994).

Lent et al.'s (1994) SCCT provides a comprehensive conceptual framework for understanding the development of vocational interests, decision-making in career choices, and academic or career success (Schaub & Tokar, 2005). Central to this theory is the idea that individuals' career trajectories are shaped by a multitude of factors, including their personal traits (such as interests, skills, and values), experiences with learning and social interactions, and the resources, opportunities, and challenges within their environment. SCCT provides an effective theoretical lens for understanding the integration and transition of business postgraduate migrants from the Global South as they develop their careers in Ireland in the Global North. It is particularly relevant because of its emphasis on learning experiences, self-efficacy, and the influence of contextual factors on career trajectories. This focus enables a comprehensive exploration of how migrants navigate the complexities of a new labour market while developing the essential competencies for success. Additionally, SCCT facilitates the examination of gender differences in the career development of male and female migrants.

This section has introduced how career development is conceptualised in the literature, underlining the value of career theories in explaining occupational trajectories and positioning SCCT as a particularly relevant framework for examining the career development of skilled migrants. The next subsection shifts focus to the concept of career itself, examining how its meaning has evolved

within academic and professional discourse and laying the groundwork for connecting these definitions to the lived experiences of this study's participants.

2.4.2 Career

This section explores how the concept of career has been defined and understood in the literature, outlining the shift from traditional, linear, and organisationally bound models to more contemporary, dynamic, and self-directed perspectives. It highlights how different theories and frameworks conceptualise career development in relation to individual agency, organisational structures, and broader societal forces. By reviewing these perspectives, the section establishes the intellectual foundation for understanding how careers are shaped in complex and changing contexts such as skilled migration.

The concept of career encapsulates the evolving relationship between individuals and their work, connecting them to organisations and broader social institutions over time (Inkson et al., 2012). Expanding on this idea, Kossek & Perrigino (2016) define career as a progression that unfolds over time, highlighting its developmental and adaptive nature. This perspective emphasises that careers are not fixed trajectories but are continuously shaped by personal growth, contextual factors, and changing labour market conditions. Traditionally, careers followed stable, hierarchical employment structures, primarily within large organisations, which was an approach that prevailed until the mid-1980s. This conventional model, known as the "bounded" or "organisational career," was characterised by upward coordination and long-term employment within a single firm. However, career structures have since shifted towards more flexible and self-directed employment paths, where individuals shape their own trajectories rather than following a predefined organisational route. This modern approach is referred to as the "boundaryless" or "protean

career." Among the various interpretations of the boundaryless career, this study relates to two key aspects: (i) careers are sustained through external networks and access to information, and (ii) individuals perceive their career journeys as leading to a boundaryless future, regardless of structural constraints (Arthur & Rousseau, 1996).

Baruch and Sullivan (2022) conceptualise career as the accumulation of work-related and other significant life experiences, both within and outside formal organisations, that form a distinctive trajectory over an individual's lifetime. In today's increasingly complex and fluid work environments, careers are no longer linear but are shaped by a range of dynamic forces (Tomlinson et al., 2018). Multiple contextual factors, including regional and global economic conditions, labour market fluctuations, technological advancements, government regulations, and shifting societal and cultural norms, play a significant role in shaping career pathways (Gunz et al., 2020). As the responsibility for managing careers has shifted from employers to individuals, there has been a move toward more self-directed career approaches (Gubler et al., 2014; Hall et al., 2018). This shift has also brought increased awareness of how various actors, including institutions, organisations, and broader systems, can either facilitate or constrain career opportunities (Baruch & Rousseau, 2019; Baruch & Sullivan, 2022).

Over the years, a diverse range of theories, concepts, and models have been developed to explain career development, spanning both traditional and contemporary paradigms. Traditional career theories, such as Holland's Person–Environment Fit Theory (Holland, 1997) and Super's Life-Span, Life-Space Theory (Super, 1980), conceptualised careers as relatively linear and stable pathways shaped by individual traits, vocational preferences, and life-stage development. However, in response to the increasing complexities of globalisation, labour market volatility, and

heightened worker mobility, contemporary career theories have emerged to reflect more dynamic, non-linear, and fluid career trajectories. Among these, the Boundaryless Career model (Arthur & Rousseau, 1996) challenges traditional firm-based structures by emphasising mobility across organisational and geographic boundaries. It viewed careers as increasingly independent of organisational constraints, with more permeable boundaries within and between organisations.

Similarly, the Protean Career theory (Hall, 2004) highlights self-directed career management, where individuals take ownership of their careers based on personal values and subjective definitions of success. Complementing this, the Intelligent Career framework (Arthur et al., 1995) identifies three key career competencies: knowing why, knowing how, and knowing whom, as essential for navigating modern, boundaryless careers. The Social Cognitive Career Theory (Lent et al., 1994, 2000) is grounded in the premise that social learning experiences shape individuals' career development by influencing their self-efficacy beliefs, outcome expectations, and goal formation. Meanwhile, Career Construction Theory (Savickas, 2005) adopts a narrative perspective, viewing careers as life stories that individuals actively construct to make sense of their experiences. Central to this theory is the concept of career adaptability, comprising four psychosocial resources: concern, control, curiosity, and confidence (Savickas & Porfeli, 2012). Similarly, the Kaleidoscope Career Model (Mainiero & Sullivan, 2005) posits that individuals make career decisions and transitions based on shifting priorities across three parameters: authenticity, balance, and challenge. This model also offers a gender-sensitive lens, particularly for understanding how women's career priorities shift over time. The Career Ecosystem perspective (Baruch, 2015; Baruch & Vardi, 2016) further broadens the analytical scope by examining how careers are shaped by the interaction of individuals, organisations, institutions, and external forces, including global talent flows, immigration policies, and technological

advancements. Additionally, the Career Shock framework (Akkermans et al., 2018) explores how unplanned and disruptive events can prompt critical reflection, re-evaluation, and reorientation in career paths, thereby shaping long-term development.

Although the various frameworks are rich and diverse and offer unique ways of understanding several areas of career research, this study draws specifically on SCCT (Lent et al., 1994, 2000) and CS (Akkermans et al., 2018) to explore the career development of skilled postgraduate migrants from the Global South transitioning to the Global North, focusing on Ireland. SCCT is particularly suited for examining how learning experiences across different contexts, such as education, job search, and early professional roles, shape self-efficacy, outcome expectations, and career goals. CS Theory offers a valuable lens for understanding how unexpected disruptions influence career trajectories and foster adaptive strategies. These theories combined align closely with the lived experiences of skilled migrants navigating unfamiliar sociocultural and institutional environments.

This section has examined the concept of career as both an evolving relationship between individuals and work, and as a trajectory shaped by organisational, institutional, and contextual factors. It has outlined key shifts from traditional organisational careers to contemporary notions such as boundaryless, protean, and intelligent careers, while also considering gender-sensitive, contextual, and disruption-focused frameworks such as the Kaleidoscope Career Model, Career Ecosystems, and Career Shocks. These perspectives demonstrate the diversity of approaches to conceptualising career, underscoring the importance of adopting flexible, multidimensional lenses. The next subsection focuses specifically on Social Cognitive Career Theory (SCCT), exploring its core constructs – self-efficacy, outcome expectations, and goals – and demonstrating its relevance

for understanding how highly skilled postgraduate migrants from Nigeria, Ghana, Kenya, and Tanzania navigate educational, transitional, and professional pathways in Ireland. SCCT provides the primary framework for analysing how learning experiences, self-efficacy beliefs, outcome expectations, and contextual factors interact to shape career development in migration contexts.

2.4.3 Social Cognitive Career Theory (SCCT)

This section introduces SCCT and highlights its emphasis on self-efficacy, outcome expectations, and goals. It demonstrates how SCCT explains the role of learning experiences, contextual influences, and personal agency in shaping career interests, decisions, and transitions. Special attention is given to its relevance for gender, race, and minority career development, as well as its applicability to understanding the study-to-work transition of skilled migrants.

SCCT is a theory of career development rooted in constructivism. It originated from Krumboltz's social learning theory of decision-making (Krumboltz et al., 1976; Mitchell & Krumboltz, 1996) and from the integration of the self-efficacy concept into women's career development by Hackett and Betz (1981). SCCT serves as a theoretical framework for analysing the complex dimensions inherent in academic and career trajectories (Lent, 2021). The theory highlights the significance of learning experiences, both direct and indirect, in shaping individuals' career interests, values, and decisions. It considers the influence of individual cognitive factors such as self-efficacy and outcome expectations, as well as learning experiences and personal interests, on career development. SCCT explores both environmental and individual aspects that shape an individual's career decision-making process (Lent et al., 1994). The theory underscores the importance of learning experiences in students' skill development and competence enhancement to cultivate self-efficacy, which plays a critical role in the transition from school to career (Paolini, 2015), ultimately promoting a seamless transition from school to work (Lent et al., 1999). According to

Lent et al. (2002), SCCT investigates the intricate realms of human cognition, exploring the nuanced pathways through which personal experiences shape an individual's career trajectories. It unravels the delicate interplay between people's career interests, abilities, and values. The theory probes into the depths of understanding how individuals' stories intertwine with the broader context, crafting a narrative of how people navigate through life's career journeys. It is a journey of self-discovery, where personal and environmental elements interact to shape people's careers.

In understanding the intricacies of career development, SCCT embraces three core elements rooted in general social cognitive theory: (1) self-efficacy, (2) outcome expectations, and (3) personal goals. These elements are considered foundational in shaping one's career journey, empowering individuals to take charge of their own paths. Notably, self-efficacy stands out as a focal point in career literature, drawing significant attention and exploration (Lent et al., 1994). Lent et al. (2002) highlighted that although the precise impact of these learning experiences on self-efficacy is contingent on various factors, personal achievements are often regarded as the most influential or persuasive factor in shaping self-efficacy. Achieving success in a task or performance domain typically enhances self-efficacy, while repeated failures tend to erode it. Building upon Bandura's three-factor causal model, SCCT formulates a three-factor interaction model of career development. This model centres on the core concepts of self-efficacy (Can I do this?), outcome expectations (What will happen if I do this?), and personal goals (How much do I want to do this?). These elements intersect to shape individuals' career trajectories (Buthelezi et al., 2010). Lent et al. (1994) suggested that contextual variables influence individuals' career interests and decisions, which are shaped by their learning experiences within the framework of SCCT.

SCCT is also associated with studies and investigations into the career development of women and individuals belonging to racial and ethnic minority groups (Hackett & Lent, 1992). In

acknowledging the potential significance of the self-efficacy concept in career development, Hackett and Betz (1981) expanded upon social cognitive theory to encompass the career domain. They proposed that self-efficacy (SE) impacts the career decisions, achievements, and adjustment behaviours of both male and female genders, but they emphasised its particular relevance in elucidating women's career development. In addition to the influence of self-efficacy beliefs on fostering gender distinctions in career choices, Bandura (1977) suggests that cultural limitations, unequal reward systems, and restricted opportunities also play a significant role in shaping women's career paths. Hackett and Byars (1996) offer a social cognitive examination of the career progression of individuals from minority backgrounds, particularly African American women. They observe how culturally derived learning encounters, aligning with the sources of efficacy information (such as social encouragement for specific paths, exposure to discrimination, and role modelling), might variably affect African American women's perception of career self-efficacy, outcome expectations, goals, and eventual career advancement. Research has also established that gendered experiences may play a crucial role in shaping career self-efficacy, outcome expectations, and interests. For example, Williams and Subich (2006) showed that differential learning experiences contribute significantly to gender disparities in career-related self-efficacy, which in turn may restrict the range of career opportunities available to both women and men. Such findings suggest that these gendered experiences not only influence the development of career-related beliefs but also limit the breadth of potential career paths, thereby contributing to persistent patterns of occupational segregation. While earlier literature discussed this phenomenon in terms of occupational segregation, this study is focused on career development trajectories. This perspective recognises that while occupational segregation highlights systemic inequalities in job

distribution, examining the progression and evolution of individuals' careers offers additional insights into how gendered learning experiences shape career advancement.

Lent et al. (1999) have explored the implications of SCCT in comprehending and supporting students' career growth throughout their school years and during the transition to employment, while more recent work has extended its application to early career transitions (Damodar et al., 2024). They argued that the transition from study to work represents a pivotal phase in an individual's career development, where they shift from academic life to meeting the demands of the workforce. Rather than being a singular event, this transition is a gradual process that unfolds over time. It includes both preparation during studies, such as skill-building, internships, and career planning, and an adjustment period as individuals acclimate to new roles and responsibilities in the workplace. From this perspective, the transition is not merely about securing a first job; it involves navigating the complex interplay of developing professional identities, fulfilling employer expectations, and balancing work with other life roles. Seen as a developmental stage, this phase is essential for fostering long-term career adaptability and laying the foundation for future growth and stability in the workforce. This view highlights the dynamic and ongoing nature of the study-to-work transition, emphasising its importance within the broader context of lifelong career development.

Chartrand and Rose (1996) elaborated that in SCCT, contextual opportunities and influences are emphasised as pivotal components shaping various aspects of individuals' learning experiences, belief systems, interest formation, goal setting, performance levels, and achievements. Moreover, the theory acknowledges that environmental factors, such as diverse socialisation processes and available opportunities, can impede career development, alongside the in-depth understanding of these influences. Additionally, SCCT surpasses a mere recognition of personal characteristics like

gender, race, and ethnicity; it encompasses constructs that elucidate the intricate interplay among these traits, environmental factors, individual attributes, and eventual outcomes. Within SCCT, self-efficacy and outcome expectations are delineated as distinct elements, with the recognition that their susceptibility to influence by environmental factors varies. Furthermore, the theory posits that in contexts of restricted opportunities, the direct impact of self-efficacy and outcome beliefs on decision-making actions will supersede their indirect effects through interests and goals (Lent et al., 1994).

Wang et al. (2022) highlighted the significance of SCCT in understanding career development, demonstrating its adaptability to changing societal trends and its focus on meeting the needs of diverse groups. The authors emphasise SCCT's systematic exploration of cognitive, personal, and environmental variables to elucidate how these factors shape an individual's career development journey. According to SCCT, learning experiences contribute to an individual's self-efficacy and outcome expectations, which are deeply influenced by the context where their learning occurs (Schaub & Tokar, 2005; Tetteh et al., 2022). In career development literature, there is compelling empirical evidence supporting the significance of cognitive processes, especially perceived self-efficacy (Bandura, 1997; Lent & Hackett, 1994).

Having outlined the theoretical foundations of SCCT, explored its three core constructs, and illustrated how these interact with environmental and individual factors to shape career pathways, it has shown how SCCT accounts for gendered and minority experiences, as well as the challenges of transition phases, making it a particularly useful lens for examining the trajectories of highly skilled African postgraduate migrants in Ireland. The following subsections will examine the three central constructs of SCCT: self-efficacy, outcome expectations, and goals in greater detail.

2.4.3.1 Self-Efficacy

Self-efficacy is a fundamental construct within SCCT, playing a crucial role in the transition process from school to career (Paolini, 2015). Bandura (1986, p. 391; 1997, p. 3) defines *self-efficacy* as "people's judgements of their capabilities to organise and execute courses of action required to attain designated types of performances." He posited that self-efficacy functions as a generative capability, enabling individuals to integrate cognitive, social, emotional, and behavioural subskills to effectively accomplish targeted goals. Wang and Lent (2022) referred to self-efficacy beliefs as an individual's assessment of their ability to effectively carry out a specific task or set of tasks. More recently, Low et al. (2025) defined self-efficacy as an individual's belief in their ability to successfully complete tasks and attain desired outcomes in their career development.

Traditionally, *self-efficacy* is defined as specific to particular tasks (Bandura, 1999). While it was initially understood as a task-specific construct, researchers such as Lennings (1994) have provided evidence supporting a generalised self-efficacy disposition. This broader form of self-efficacy is believed to predict individual behaviour across diverse situations and contexts. However, there exists substantial evidence supporting the idea of generalised self-efficacy (Judge et al., 1999), which refers to the inclination to feel competent in mastering a wide range of tasks and activities. This concept shares similarities with coping efficacy. Scholars generally concur that there is a conceptual differentiation between confidence in one's ability to perform a specific task under ideal conditions and confidence in overcoming obstacles (Lent et al., 2000).

According to SCCT, self-efficacy is not a singular, rigid, or isolated trait. Instead, it comprises a dynamic collection of self-assessments tailored to specific performance areas, interacting intricately with other individual, behavioural, and environmental elements. Research findings

strongly indicate that self-efficacy beliefs exert a significant and direct influence on career decision-making and choice (Lent et al., 1994; Penn & Lent, 2019). This reciprocal relationship between self-efficacy and performance extends beyond isolated experiences, shaping long-term academic and career outcomes. Research has shown that students with high self-efficacy are more likely to achieve academic success, which in turn reinforces their confidence in their abilities (Schneider & Preckel, 2017). This dynamic interplay suggests that self-efficacy not only facilitates academic excellence but also fosters career resilience and adaptability, enabling individuals to persist through challenges and actively shape their professional trajectories. In the context of career development, strong self-efficacy beliefs empower students to set ambitious goals, seek learning opportunities, and navigate complex career pathways with confidence. Moreover, self-efficacy significantly impacts the development of key career determinants, including interests, values, and goals (Bandura, 1986; Betz & Hackett, 1986; Hackett & Lent, 1992; Lent et al., 1994; Low et al., 2025). The initial applications of Bandura's (1977) self-efficacy theory to career development emerged from studies focusing on women's career advancement. Concerns about the underutilisation of women's skills and their underrepresentation in high-status, typically male-dominated positions have long been central in career literature (Betz & Fitzgerald, 1987; Betz & Schifano, 2000). Hackett and Betz (1981) proposed that self-efficacy beliefs about careers may have a stronger influence than interests, values, and abilities in limiting women's career options. Betz and Schifano (2000) argued that high self-efficacy can play a pivotal role in expanding women's career interests, particularly in STEM-related fields, where they have been historically underrepresented. Self-efficacy plays a crucial role in whether individuals will attempt to and successfully overcome perceived barriers to career development (Bandura, 1997; Hackett & Byars, 1996; Lent et al., 2000).

Bandura (1977) identified four primary sources of learning experiences that shape and adjust individuals' sense of self-efficacy. Additionally, he highlighted that the environmental context in which individuals operate influences the type and accessibility of these sources. Bandura elaborated that, firstly, personal achievements, or performance experiences, serve as the primary source of self-efficacy. Successes enhance one's sense of self-efficacy, while failures can diminish it. Furthermore, a strong sense of efficacy developed in one area of functioning can transfer to other domains, thus promoting a more comprehensive sense of personal efficacy. Secondly, vicarious learning allows individuals to assess their self-efficacy by observing the achievements and failures of others. Successes among those similar to oneself typically reinforce confidence, while their failures may diminish it. Additionally, individuals can experience an increase in self-efficacy through observation, even when learning from diverse competent models. These models provide valuable knowledge, skills, and strategies that improve competencies. Thirdly, social encouragement from competent individuals can shape self-efficacy beliefs through deliberate influence efforts. Verbal persuasion, especially from individuals who possess trustworthiness, expertise, and attractiveness, can be particularly influential. However, if such individuals excessively portray the individual as highly competent, any temporary increase in self-efficacy will likely be short-lived, as failure experiences can quickly diminish it. Finally, physiological and emotional states play a significant role in self-efficacy assessment. Intense levels of emotional excitement are prone to be perceived as a lack of self-efficacy, while sensations of pain and fatigue might signal inefficacy in physiological conditions. Mood fluctuations, including depression, also influence the assessment of personal efficacy. Individuals tend to perceive themselves as capable in positive moods and as incapable in depressive states (Kavanagh & Bower, 1985). Moreover, individuals consider both the experienced level of vigour and their understanding of how emotional

excitement has impacted performance in past situations. The reliability of experiential learning sources thus plays a crucial role in the magnitude of changes in perceived self-efficacy. Various factors influence the cognitive processing of efficacy information arising from enactive, vicarious, exhortative, and emotive sources (Bandura, 1977).

Self-efficacy beliefs are rooted in these four primary sources of efficacy information, which interact with individual characteristics such as gender, race or ethnicity, disability, health status, and other innate traits and genetic predispositions (Lent et al., 1994). Among these sources, personal mastery experience stands out as the most influential factor: successful performances enhance self-efficacy, thereby boosting the likelihood of future effectiveness, while challenges or barriers tend to diminish it (Lent et al., 1999). Moreover, self-efficacy is influenced by observational learning, where individuals draw insights from others' experiences; social persuasion, which includes verbal encouragement or discouragement; and physiological and emotional responses, such as debilitating anxiety or positive mood states (Bandura, 1986). These sources of self-efficacy are also influenced by the individual's interpretation of them. In essence, they determine what instils a sense of capability in people (Barnard et al., 2008). Shahab et al. (2019) also suggested that individuals with high self-efficacy exhibit greater confidence in their ability to successfully carry out specific tasks or actions.

Bikos et al. (2021) evaluated how individuals preparing for international mobility, particularly international students, develop confidence in their ability to adapt to unfamiliar sociocultural environments. They developed the Self-Efficacy for Sociocultural Adaptation Scale, a pre-departure tool designed to assess how prepared people feel for the challenges of cross-cultural adjustment. The scale was shown to be a useful and reliable way of understanding how early self-

belief shapes later outcomes such as adaptation, well-being, and global learning. This is relevant to the present study as it reinforces the importance of pre-migration self-efficacy beliefs and outcome expectations, which were also evident among participants in this study. Their findings, although quantitative, help to contextualise how self-efficacy formed before departure can influence migrants' career-related decisions and adjustment trajectories in the host country.

2.4.3.2 Outcome Expectation

Individuals are often motivated to pursue their goals based on what they expect to gain from their efforts. While self-efficacy addresses the question "Can I do this?", outcome expectations relate to "What will happen if I do this?" (Barnard et al., 2008; Gore & Leuwerke, 2000). *Outcome expectations* refer to an individual's beliefs about the possible consequences of their actions, both positive and negative, especially in future career-related situations (Bandura, 1986; Lent et al., 2008; Lent & Brown, 2008). SCCT highlights outcome expectations as a core individual factor shaping career development (Franco et al., 2019). These beliefs often concern whether a particular career path will yield desirable outcomes such as financial security, personal fulfilment, or improved quality of life (Lent et al., 1994). In essence, outcome expectations capture how individuals mentally project the potential benefits or drawbacks of their career-related decisions.

According to SCCT, individuals are more likely to pursue a course of action when they anticipate positive results and are less inclined to act when they foresee negative consequences. These expectations are shaped by a range of personal influences, including prior experiences, self-efficacy beliefs, and perceived competence (Liguori et al., 2018). Importantly, outcome expectations do not develop in a vacuum. SCCT recognises the significant role of contextual and

sociocultural factors in shaping these expectations. Franco et al. (2019) observed that even strong expectations of success can be disrupted when individuals encounter systemic or environmental barriers. Similarly, Lent (2013) argued that sociocultural and identity-related experiences such as discrimination, immigration status, or access to professional networks can influence how individuals evaluate the likely outcomes of their efforts. For international or migrant professionals, factors such as cultural adaptation, exclusionary hiring practices, and limited recognition of foreign credentials may critically shape or recalibrate outcome expectations over time.

Bandura (1986) further identified three broad types of outcome expectations: physical (e.g. financial gain), social (e.g. approval or recognition), and self-evaluative (e.g. personal satisfaction or pride). These dimensions collectively influence motivation and persistence in career development. While both self-efficacy and outcome expectations are influential, Bandura emphasised that self-efficacy is typically the stronger predictor of behavioural persistence. Individuals with high self-efficacy are more likely to maintain their efforts even in uncertain or adverse conditions (Lent et al., 1994). Lent (2021) expanded on this by noting that outcome expectations are informed through both direct experience and vicarious learning. Observing the experiences of others, coupled with one's interpretation of past successes and failures, contributes to evolving beliefs about which career paths are likely to be rewarding. Notably, self-efficacy also helps shape outcome expectations. When individuals feel confident in their abilities, they are more likely to expect favourable results.

2.4.3.3 Goals

A goal reflects an individual's determination to pursue a specific activity or accomplish a desired outcome (Bandura, 1986). Goals serve as a mechanism through which individuals mentally

envision desired future outcomes (Barnard et al., 2008) and evaluate their own behaviour based on internal performance standards. By setting goals, individuals organise and direct their actions, maintain persistence over extended periods even without external reinforcement, and enhance the likelihood of achieving desired outcomes (Lent, 2021; Lent et al., 1994). Career goals, often referred to as occupational aspirations, represent an individual's commitment to specific career-related pursuits. Within SCCT, goals encompass plans, aspirations, and intentions, reflecting an individual's commitment to engaging in a specific activity. The goal construct highlights how individuals apply their self-efficacy beliefs and outcome expectations to guide their future career pursuits (Tetteh et al., 2022). Goals represent an individual's commitment to engage in specific activities or achieve certain outcomes, such as overcoming challenging high school courses, graduating, pursuing further education, or securing a particular job (Lent et al., 1999). Lent et al. (1994) argued that goal-setting is a fundamental process through which people assert personal control and agency.

Self-efficacy beliefs and outcome expectations not only spark interest in career pursuits but also play a pivotal role in shaping the long-term trajectory of one's career (Sheu et al., 2010). In this context, self-efficacy and outcome expectations are essential in forming vocational interests that drive overall career development and influence performance outcomes, extending their impact beyond initial career choices. Moreover, these socio-cognitive processes are directly shaped by learning experiences, which, in turn, influence how individuals navigate their career journeys. As Schaub and Tokar (2005) noted, while personal attributes and background contextual factors indirectly affect career development by shaping learning experiences, self-efficacy beliefs and outcome expectations exert a more direct influence on the evolution of vocational interests and, consequently, on the entire career development process.

SCCT provides a robust lens to understand the influence of learning experiences on career development, especially in terms of self-efficacy. By examining career progression through the interaction of personal, environmental, and behavioural factors, SCCT sheds light on how highly skilled African business postgraduate migrants overcome career shocks and contextual constraints to achieve successful integration into Ireland's professional landscape. It offers a comprehensive framework to explore the nuanced learning experiences of these postgraduates and highlights the influence of self-efficacy on their career development as they transition from study to career. Having discussed the three constructs of SCCT, the next section explores the barriers to career development faced by women, situating these within the broader framework of contextual factors. This focus highlights how gendered experiences and structural constraints intersect with self-efficacy, outcome expectations, and goals to shape career trajectories.

2.4.4 Contextual Barriers and Gender Dynamics in Career Development

Within the framework of SCCT, scholars have underscored the need for an in-depth empirical examination of contextual factors, particularly emphasising the significance of perceived barriers to career development (Albert & Luzzo, 1999; Lent et al., 2000; Luzzo & McWhirter, 2001). Research exploring career barriers has yielded valuable insights into career development dynamics, particularly concerning women and individuals from diverse ethnic backgrounds (Luzzo & McWhirter, 2001; McWhirter et al., 1998; McWhirter, 1997; Swanson et al., 1996). It is recognised within the SCCT framework that career barriers may significantly impact career choices (Lindley, 2005). Lent et al. (1994) viewed contextual factors as key influences in shaping experiences that form career interests and choices, and SCCT posits that these factors (e.g. perceived barriers) define the opportunity structure within which career plans are developed and

executed (Luzzo & McWhirter, 2001). SCCT regards socio-cultural influences, educational settings, aspirations, decision-making, achievement, and adaptation as pivotal elements in individuals' career decision-making processes. This theory offers insights into the perceived barriers to career development and proposes approaches to effectively manage and address them (Barnard et al., 2008). In addition to comprehending the perception of these barriers, examining individuals' self-efficacy in managing them is crucial for a more comprehensive understanding of their influence on career development (Lindley, 2005). This body of literature suggests that self-efficacy plays a critical role in determining whether individuals will endeavour to successfully navigate perceived obstacles to career advancement (Bandura, 1977; Hackett & Byars, 1996; Lent et al., 2000). Bandura (1986) suggests that expectations of self-efficacy impact the probability of an individual initiating a behaviour and persevering in it, especially when encountering challenges. In essence, SCCT provides a systematic and comprehensive framework for understanding career development, emphasising the importance of individual cognitive factors, learning experiences, and contextual variables in shaping individuals' career trajectories.

SCCT has also been widely applied to examine gendered dimensions of career development, particularly in relation to self-efficacy, outcome expectations, learning experiences, and perceived barriers. For example, Lindley (2005) found that women's outcome expectations in several of Holland's career themes were positively related to their perceptions of barriers, challenging the assumption that awareness of obstacles reduces optimism. Interestingly, she also observed that self-efficacy beliefs related to coping with barriers were more strongly associated with men than with women. Similarly, Fouad and Santana (2017) reviewed a wide range of SCCT-based research on women and racial–ethnic minorities in STEM, noting that while much of the work focuses on early career choices, more recent studies have begun to explore workplace transitions, particularly

for women, and have called for further research in these later career stages. Inda et al. (2013) also tested the SCCT model in predicting engineering interest and major choice among male and female students, confirming its relevance across gender lines. Their study revealed that women reported lower levels of self-efficacy and interest than men, although no significant differences were found in outcome expectations or career goals. Notably, women perceived more support from peers and family, while men more frequently reported family-related barriers. Additionally, Williams and Subich (2006) found gendered differences in learning experiences across Holland's RIASEC typology, with women reporting more Social domain experiences and men more Realistic and Investigative ones, each aligning with respective patterns of self-efficacy and outcome expectations. While these studies have significantly contributed to understanding gender within SCCT, most have centred on early-stage career decision-making and largely domestic populations. This research seeks to advance this body of work by exploring the gendered career development experiences of highly skilled migrant men and women from the Global South (Nigeria, Ghana, Kenya, and Tanzania) as they transition from postgraduate education to employment in Ireland. This research offers a post-migration lens on SCCT, investigating how gender shapes learning experiences within situated contexts in career development trajectories.

Having explored career development through the SCCT lens, with particular attention to contextual barriers and gendered dynamics, the next section introduces the concept of career shock. Career shock complements SCCT by highlighting that assumptions of individual agency alone are insufficient to fully theorise contemporary career development. Instead, it emphasises how unexpected and disruptive events, both positive and negative, can significantly shape career trajectories, particularly within the migration context.

2.4.5 Career Shock (CS)

Like other key career topics such as career capital, proactive career behaviours, and career decision-making, the emerging discourse on career concepts emphasises a shared focus on individual agency, control, and self-direction as fundamental to career development and eventual success (Akkermans et al., 2018). This suggests that understanding career development from the perspective of the individual is essential. The focus on individual agency, control, and self-direction implies that career success is largely shaped by how individuals take ownership of and manage their own career paths. Significant life events can have a substantial impact on many individuals' career paths (Hirschi, 2010). These events are often unforeseen, meaning they either cannot be predicted and prepared for or, if anticipated, their effects are unexpected. Such occurrences have been referred to as chance events (Bright et al., 2005; Hirschi, 2010) and, more recently, career shocks (Seibert et al., 2013).

CS is a contemporary career theory that addresses the impact of unplanned or unexpected external events on an individual's career trajectory while emphasising the critical role of the context in which career development occurs (Blokker et al., 2019). It captures significant aspects of an individual's lived experience, offering a more comprehensive and realistic understanding of career processes that previous models lacked. Incorporating the role of context and chance events, it provides a deeper perspective on how careers are shaped. However, research on career shocks remains limited. Most recent studies on careers have predominantly focused on the assumption that individuals have control over their career paths and can actively shape their careers through their decisions, efforts, and strategies, implicitly overlooking the significant impact that CS can have on individual career trajectories. This perspective often downplays the role of external

factors, such as unexpected events or career shocks, and focuses more on the notion that career outcomes are primarily the result of individual actions and planning. Akkermans et al. (2018) emphasised that to gain a deeper understanding of modern career processes, it is essential to incorporate career shocks into the academic discussion on career development.

Research by Bright et al. (2005) has shown that the majority of individuals experience career shocks, which can profoundly reshape the direction of their careers. Akkermans et al. (2018, p. 4) defined *career shock* as a "disruptive and extraordinary event that is, at least to some degree, caused by factors outside the focal individual's control and that triggers a deliberate thought process concerning one's career." Subsequently, Akkermans et al. (2020) highlighted that a career shock comprises two essential components: (1) a triggering event and (2) an initial sense-making process. This means that a disruptive or unexpected event alone does not automatically qualify as a career shock without the accompanying process of interpreting and making sense of its impact.

CS can have either positive or negative effects, with their occurrence varying in terms of predictability and being either positively or negatively valenced (Akkermans et al., 2018; Holtom et al., 2005). Shocks play a crucial role as key triggers in career development episodes, and how individuals respond to these events can significantly influence their overall career success. Research supports this claim, with studies like Bright et al. (2005) demonstrating that unexpected, chance events have a profound impact on career trajectories. Hirschi (2010) demonstrated that career shocks play a significant role in young adults' transition from school to work. His findings revealed that most participants experienced career shocks, and these events were strongly linked to their perceived career success. Similarly, Seibert et al. (2013) introduced the concept of career shocks. They investigated the influence of career shocks on employees' decisions to pursue

graduate education. Their research provided strong evidence that both positive and negative shocks impact these decisions, as sudden promotions or job losses reshape career paths and influence decision-making. Furthermore, Akkermans et al. (2018) argued that career shocks are a critical but often overlooked element in modern career development, emphasising the need to account for them in career theories. However, much of career development research has yet to fully integrate the role of career shocks. De Vos and Van der Heijden's (2015) framework underscores that sustainable career development is characterised by the unfolding of careers over time, influenced by diverse social environments and driven by individuals' sense of agency and meaningfulness. This perspective offers an opportunity to incorporate career shocks by conceptualising them as structural and contextual factors that shape careers across time and social spaces.

Career development in the modern era is characterised by greater complexity, dynamism, flexibility, and unpredictability (Akkermans et al., 2018, 2021a, 2021b; Ali & Mehreen, 2022; Baruch, 2004; Nalis et al., 2021). Against this backdrop, career shock recognises the inevitability of surprises in one's career trajectory or development. Studies have challenged the prevailing notion of a linear and controllable career trajectory, arguing instead that career shocks are a common and influential part of career development. For example, Nalis et al. (2021) illustrated how career paths are actively reconstructed following shocks, influenced by both the nature of the shock and individual responses over time, and highlighted the unpredictable nature of careers and the diverse strategies individuals employ to navigate disruptions. Given the unpredictable and impactful nature of career shocks, there is a pressing need to include this concept in career development research. This will provide a more comprehensive understanding of how careers are shaped, acknowledging the significant role that chance and unplanned events play in career

trajectories. Career shocks are integral to career development, acting as contextual factors that precede and influence career trajectories.

Given the unpredictable and impactful nature of career shocks, there is a pressing need to include this concept in career development research. This will provide a more comprehensive understanding of how careers are shaped, acknowledging the significant role that chance and unplanned events play in career trajectories. Career shocks are integral to career development, acting as contextual factors that precede and influence career trajectories. These events, which occur partially beyond the individual's control, play a significant role in shaping career outcomes. Career shocks provide a more nuanced and comprehensive understanding of career development by incorporating contextual factors into career research. These shocks often arise from external factors beyond an individual's control, emphasising the importance of context in shaping career trajectories. Therefore, it is essential to deepen our understanding of how modern career development arises from the interaction between personal agency and external events (Akkermans et al., 2021). Investigating CS represents a critical step towards reintroducing the role of external circumstances into career studies. To fully grasp the complexities of modern career development, it is essential that career shocks become a key focus of scholarly discourse (Akkermans et al., 2018). It can be argued that shocks mark a major turning point in the career trajectory of individuals, thus acting as triggers for career development, as career shocks inherently prompt individuals to reflect on and critically assess their career development process (Akkermans et al., 2018; Baruch et al., 2016). This underscores the significant role career shocks play in modern career development, as further emphasised by Akkermans et al. (2021).

While research has acknowledged the importance of individual agency in career development (Akkermans et al., 2018; Akkermans & Kubasch, 2017), a significant gap persists regarding the impact of unexpected external events (career shocks) on skilled migrants' career trajectories. Existing career theories often overlook the role of chance events and the unpredictable nature of careers, especially for migrants navigating new socio-economic environments. CS also highlights the significant influence of context on career development (Blokker et al., 2019). This could potentially apply to highly skilled postgraduate migrants from the Global South who relocate to advanced economies such as Ireland, where their career paths may be unexpectedly disrupted by external factors such as immigration policies, discrimination, or challenges in recognising foreign qualifications. Recent research highlights the central role of self-efficacy in shaping how individuals experience and respond to career shocks. Ali and Mehreen (2022) found that self-efficacy mediates the relationship between unexpected career disruptions and proactive career behaviour. Individuals who possess a strong belief in their ability to manage challenges are more likely to respond to shocks with adaptive, future-oriented actions such as networking, skill development, or seeking guidance. This suggests that self-efficacy acts as a psychological resource that enables individuals to reinterpret disruption as an opportunity for learning and strategic progression rather than as a setback. Ahmad and Nasir (2023) also showed that self-efficacy plays a mediating role in how individuals derive optimism from positive career shocks, such as unexpected promotions or new opportunities. Importantly, the strength of this relationship increases when individuals consider the long-term consequences of their actions, suggesting that forward-looking individuals with higher self-efficacy are more likely to sustain motivation and make the most of unexpected developments. These studies reinforce the idea that self-efficacy is not a fixed trait but a dynamic and developable resource. It is shaped through experience and

context, and it influences how individuals interpret and act upon career events, whether negative or positive. In migration contexts, where career shocks are frequent and often structural, self-efficacy becomes a vital enabler of resilience, adaptability, and agency. These insights support a view of career development as both socially constructed and psychologically mediated, with self-efficacy at the heart of individuals' ability to navigate uncertainty and sustain forward movement.

Despite this, CS remains underutilised in studies exploring the international career transitions of skilled migrants, particularly within the context of developing-to-developed country migration. Understanding how skilled migrants respond to these shocks is crucial, as these events can either hinder or accelerate their integration and success in the host country. Bright et al. (2005) demonstrated that such unexpected, chance events significantly impact career trajectories, while Hirschi (2010) found that career shocks are strongly linked to perceived career success during young adults' transitions from school to work. Seibert et al. (2013) also found that both positive and negative shocks, such as sudden promotions or job losses, reshape career paths and influence decision-making. Therefore, this study aims to bridge this gap by exploring how CS interacts with migrants' learning experiences and self-efficacy, as well as how these events influence their long-term career outcomes. It attempts to contribute to the body of knowledge by highlighting the critical role of contextual factors such as career shocks in shaping the career development processes of international migrants, an area that remains significantly underexplored in the management and career development literature (Akkermans et al., 2018; Bright et al., 2005; Seibert et al., 2013).

Additionally, research such as that by Seibert et al. (2016) and Akkermans et al. (2020), has offered deeper insights into the nature and impact of career shocks, highlighting resilience as a crucial

factor in successfully navigating them. They suggest that while career shocks are largely outside the individual's control, resilience enables adaptive responses, helping individuals sustain motivation, reassess goals, and re-engage with career opportunities despite setbacks. Early career research has further identified self-efficacy as a foundational element of career resilience (London, 1983), suggesting that resilience is not merely reactive but also proactive and developmental, contributing to career recovery and long-term adaptation. Therefore, CR can be conceptualised as a mechanism through which individuals absorb, reinterpret, and strategically respond to career shocks, including those triggered by structural barriers or crises. Having acknowledged the role of resilience in navigating career shock, it is essential to critically examine the concept of career resilience within the career literature. Understanding career resilience provides deeper insight into how individuals, particularly migrants, adapt to career disruptions and navigate the contextual challenges in their career development journey.

This section has explored the concept of career shock, reviewing its emergence within the broader literature on chance events and analysing its significance as a disruptive factor in career development. It has discussed how career shocks complement SCCT by emphasising the impact of unexpected external events, particularly within migration contexts where both positive and negative shocks can reshape career pathways. Importantly, research highlights that self-efficacy is strongly linked to career resilience and plays a critical role in shaping how individuals respond to shocks (Abdullahi et al., 2024; Akkermans et al., 2014; Akkermans et al., 2020; London, 1983; Lyons et al., 2015; Seibert et al., 2016). Since self-efficacy is recognised as a foundational element of career resilience (London, 1983), the next section examines career resilience in greater depth, focusing on how individuals draw upon psychological resources to withstand, adapt to, and grow from career disruptions.

2.4.6 Career Resilience (CR)

London (1983) provided one of the earliest conceptualisations of CR, defining it as "a person's resistance to career disruption in a less than optimal environment" (p. 621). He identified three key dimensions of career resilience: self-efficacy, risk-taking, and dependency. Individuals with high self-efficacy, a greater willingness to take risks, and lower dependency, meaning they are less reliant on superior or peer approval, are more likely to demonstrate career resilience. This highlights the central role of self-efficacy not only in career development but also in fostering the confidence and persistence required to navigate career challenges. While resilience is often framed as an organisational-level phenomenon, referring to the ability to recover from environmental shocks or crises (Linnenluecke, 2015), scholars have also examined resilience at the individual level as a key factor in adapting to adversity (Robertson et al., 2015). Individual-level resilience has been described using various terms, including individual, employee, and career resilience, with overlapping definitions. Mishra and McDonald (2017) argued that CR is fundamentally centred on individual career development rather than serving organisational interests. They argued further that while organisations may benefit from a highly resilient workforce, these advantages are secondary and indirect, with the primary emphasis remaining on the individual's ability to navigate career challenges and growth. Despite these definitional nuances, it is important to recognise that individual resilience is not only demonstrated in response to crises but is also displayed in routine, everyday professional contexts (Branicki et al., 2019). Coutu (2002) argued that individual resilience plays a crucial role in determining why some people succeed despite hardships. According to Coutu, resilient individuals share three key characteristics: a staunch acceptance of reality, a deep belief often reinforced by strongly held values, that life is meaningful, and an astounding ability to improvise.

Building on this understanding of individual resilience, career resilience specifically refers to an individual's ability to navigate career development, a process that can be multifaceted, unstable, cyclical, and transitional over time (Bimrose & Hearne, 2012). Moreover, career resilience is not confined to functioning within a single organisational setting; rather, it encompasses the ability to actively steer and advance one's career across its entire span, potentially across different employers (Mishra & McDonald, 2017). Kuntz et al. (2017) emphasised that career resilience involves a strong commitment to learning and proactive strategies, particularly in adverse contexts. Similarly, Bimrose and Hearne (2012) highlighted the importance of developing effective coping strategies that enable individuals to adapt to challenging or disruptive circumstances. Expanding on this perspective, Tokbaeva and Achtenhagen (2021) defined career resilience as a deliberate process of enhancing self-confidence, skills, and competencies while drawing on hope, realistic optimism, and support networks to build a fulfilling career over its entire lifespan. Moreover, self-efficacy has been shown to have a positive impact on CR and is recognised as a key factor in its development. Research, such as that of Abdullahi et al. (2024) and Lyons et al. (2015), highlights a strong relationship between self-efficacy and CR, suggesting that individuals with higher self-efficacy are better equipped to navigate career challenges, adapt to changing circumstances, and persist in the face of adversity. Akkermans et al. (2014) also highlighted the significance of self-efficacy in career resilience, emphasising that higher self-efficacy enables individuals to actively engage in work- and career-related activities, ultimately enhancing their ability to build resilience, adapt, and persist through career challenges.

Some scholars conceptualise resilience as a process, linking CR to personal traits that help individuals navigate career challenges. However, more recent research has expanded this perspective, emphasising its dynamic and context-dependent nature. Mansfield et al. (2012) define

CR as a complex, multi-dimensional, and evolving phenomenon that develops over time through interactions between individuals and their environment. This process-oriented view suggests that CR is not a static trait but a skill cultivated through experience and social engagement. Understanding CR as an ongoing process highlights the various mechanisms that shape how individuals respond to career disruptions and transitions. Gu and Day (2013) further argued that resilience arises from the interplay between personal characteristics and external factors, becoming particularly essential in times of change, adversity, or unexpected challenges. This perspective reframes CR as more than just an individual's capacity to endure difficulties; instead, it is an adaptive, learned capability shaped by surroundings. CR, according to Mishra and McDonald (2017), is an ongoing developmental process through which individuals persist, adapt, and thrive in their careers despite challenges, transitions, and disruptions over time. They highlighted three key aspects of CR. First, rather than being a single event, CR unfolds continuously throughout an individual's career. Second, it is a developmental process, representing a form of positive adaptation to changing circumstances. Finally, CR acknowledges that career setbacks may arise due to challenges not only in professional settings but also in personal aspects of life, reinforcing the interconnected nature of career development and broader life experiences.

This section has explored how the literature conceptualises career development and resilience as dynamic, adaptive processes shaped by self-efficacy, contextual challenges, and ongoing learning across career transitions. It has shown that career resilience is not merely an individual trait but a developmental process that evolves through experience, reflection, and interaction with others. Understanding career resilience as both a psychological and social process provides a foundation for examining how learning occurs within social contexts and how these learning experiences shape migrants' capacity to adapt and thrive. The next section therefore turns to the learning

dimension of the literature, focusing on the mechanisms through which individuals develop knowledge, skills, and mastery (professional) identity by participating in CoP. This shift deepens the analysis by situating career adaptation and self-efficacy within socially embedded learning processes that underpin the transition from education as novices to professionals in full-time permanent employment in a new host environment.

2.5 Learning

2.5.1 Introduction

Having explored skilled migration, international student mobility, and career development in the modern era, with particular emphasis on how learning experiences shape career progression amid unpredictable and uncontrollable events, and how resilience enables individuals to overcome such shocks, the next section turns to the concept of learning. The uniqueness of the educational pathway to international skilled migration necessitates further exploration to understand the nuances of these learning experiences and career trajectories within their host economy. This chapter aims to analyse the multifaceted dimensions of situated learning experiences that contribute to the development of knowledge, skills, and competencies among highly skilled African postgraduate students in the field of business, residing in Ireland. By focusing on this cohort of migrant learners, the study aims to fulfil its objectives of identifying and analysing situated learning experiences that influence their knowledge and skills development within the host country, investigating the gender dynamics of the career journey of these individuals, and exploring the flow of business knowledge and skills between Ireland and Africa through these individuals who are situated and employed in Ireland.

In this chapter, the focus is on elucidating the process by which international students acquire knowledge and skills through multicultural engagement for their career development in their host country. By acknowledging the importance of the social context of learning, the chapter aims to provide valuable insights into the intricate processes that contribute to the learning and career development of these student migrants in an international host setting and their subsequent integration and successful transition into the host environment.

2.5.2 Learning Theories

Learning theories and concepts are profoundly rooted in the field of psychology, specifically within educational psychology. Psychologists, educators, and researchers share a common interest in understanding how individuals acquire knowledge, skills, and attitudes (Ormrod & Anderman, 2020). These theoretical and conceptual frameworks are instrumental in explaining the intricate interplay of cognitive, behavioural, and social processes involved in learning. According to Pritchard (2017), learning is a dynamic process through which behaviour is modified, shaped, or controlled by experience or practice. It involves acquiring knowledge and skills through study, teaching, instruction, or personal experiences. Learning entails the individual process of constructing understanding by drawing from a diverse range of sources and experiences. Various theories conceptualise learning in different ways. There are four main categories of educational learning theories from which other theories of learning stem. These, according to Leonard (2002), are (i) behaviourism, (ii) cognitivism, (iii) constructivism, and (iv) humanism.

Behaviourism emphasised external stimuli and conditioning as determinants of learning, while cognitivism introduced the importance of mental processes and internal structures in knowledge acquisition. Humanism expanded this view by situating learning within the broader context of

personal growth, emotions, and intrinsic motivation. Constructivism emerged as a comprehensive framework that views learners as active agents who construct knowledge through interaction with their environment and prior experiences (Brown et al., 1989; Kirshner & Whitson, 1997; Kolb, 1984; Lave & Wenger, 1991). Within this perspective, learning is not a passive transfer of information but an active, contextual, and meaning-making process. For international student migrants, constructivism is particularly relevant as it recognises the role of diverse cultural, educational, and experiential backgrounds in shaping how new knowledge and skills are developed and applied in host contexts. Among the various constructivist perspectives, three theories emerge: social constructivism (Vygotsky, 1978), experiential learning, and situated learning (Lave & Wenger, 1991). These theories offer valuable insights into how learning occurs through social interaction, reflection, and participation in authentic contexts. Of these, Situated Learning Theory provides the most robust framework for examining how highly skilled international student migrants in Ireland develop professional knowledge, skills, and identities through engagement within real-world social and professional environments. The next section introduces Situated Learning Theory as a key theoretical lens for understanding how learning, participation, and identity formation occur within CoPs, and how these processes underpin migrants' transitions from education to professional integration in the host labour market.

2.5.3 Situated Learning Theory (SLT)

The theory of Situated Learning was introduced by Lave and Wenger (1991) and highlights the social nature of learning, emphasising collaborative practices within a participatory framework. According to this theory, knowledge acquisition is not a mechanistic process but rather involves active participation in communities of practice. Lave and Wenger argued that newcomers need to engage and participate fully in the sociocultural practices of the host community to master

knowledge and skills. This often necessitates social interaction and collaboration within the "community of practice" (Pg Hj Besar, 2018). This concept, referred to as legitimate peripheral participation, facilitates the integration of newcomers into the community of practice, as they gradually move away from the periphery to engage in more dynamic and complex activities, eventually transitioning into the role of experts. This process usually occurs unintentionally. "A community of practice is a set of relations among persons, activity, and world, over time and in relation to other tangential and overlapping communities of practice" (Lave & Wenger, 1991, p. 98). Wenger (2011, p. 1) also defined communities of practice as "groups of people who share a concern or a passion for something they do and learn how to do it better as they interact regularly." Similar to SLT is the situated cognition theory (Brown et al., 1989; Kirshner & Whitson, 1997; Wilson, 1993). This theory suggests that the skills and knowledge individuals acquire are intricately connected to the context or environment in which learning occurs. In other words, learning is not detached from its surroundings but rather deeply influenced by them. This viewpoint challenges the notion that learning happens in isolation, emphasising the importance of understanding the interplay between individuals and their social environment for a comprehensive understanding of the learning process. Both situated learning theory and the theory of situated cognition argue that learning is contextual and situated, occurring within specific environments and cultures. Hence, decontextualised approaches to learning are considered ineffective in these theories.

Building on Lave and Wenger's seminal work, Pg Hj Besar (2018) argued that situated learning extends far beyond simply embedding learning in authentic practice contexts. The author applied this theory to students' learning approaches within the classroom, where students engage in progressively complex tasks within social communities. This process also necessitates the

acquisition of knowledge before effective participation in real-world settings. Consequently, it considers both the nature of the knowledge acquired and the methods of acquisition. In a formal classroom setting, "the teacher acts as a provider, facilitator, and mediator of knowledge; students are able to learn from that knowledge and practice it in group activities" (p. 56). As a result, students achieve a new level of understanding based on their experiences as practitioners within the group or community. The norms and values associated with participation and acquisition complement each other, with neither being sufficient on its own.

Applying SLT to learning in the academic setting, the theory suggests that students can link content knowledge with their personal experiences, essentially applying what they learn to their own contexts. This learning approach posits that students not only enhance their learning effectiveness but also engage more deeply with how they learn and make meaning from their learning process. Thus, this foundational concept of situated learning encompasses both cognitive and emotional dimensions of learning (Pederson, 2012). The theory of situated learning can be linked to the career development trajectories of international students by examining how this approach helps them integrate academic knowledge with real-world experiences, enhancing both their learning and professional growth. Extending this to international students, the theory of situated learning enables them to contextualise their educational experience within the diverse cultural and professional landscapes they encounter, thereby facilitating a deeper understanding and application of knowledge that is crucial for their career development. This theory not only improves their academic performance but also equips them with the practical skills and adaptive strategies needed in the global job market. By addressing both cognitive and affective aspects of learning, the theory of situated learning helps international students navigate and influence their career trajectories more effectively, ensuring they are better prepared for professional success.

2.5.4 Community of Practice (CoP)

The concept of CoP offers a powerful framework to understand how individuals develop knowledge, skills, identities, and social relationships within a shared context. Handley et al. (2006) built upon Wenger's definition of CoP. They argued that a CoP is a social environment where individuals acquire not only practical skills but also assimilate the community's shared norms, values, and relational behaviours that contribute to their sense of identity. Cox (2013) similarly highlighted that communities of practice consist of people connected by common interests, concerns, or passions who deepen their knowledge and skills through ongoing, purposeful engagement. Wenger (1998) identified three core characteristics that define the practice of a community, which collectively distinguish CoPs from other types of groups: mutual engagement, joint enterprise, and shared repertoire.

Mutual Engagement refers to the active participation of members working together. This involves not only shared work practices but also social interactions that maintain the community's cohesion. Crucially, mutual engagement does not require homogeneity; diversity within the group can enhance the practice by enabling members to connect meaningfully with different perspectives and knowledge contributions. Joint Enterprise describes the shared purpose or collective endeavour that members negotiate as they collaborate. It is a dynamic and evolving goal that belongs to the group through communal negotiation, even if disagreements arise. Such differences are seen as productive and contribute to shaping the enterprise. Members are mutually accountable, ensuring their actions do not impede others within the community. Shared Repertoire encompasses the collection of resources developed and used by the community in their practice, including routines, language, stories, tools, and symbols. This repertoire reflects the history of mutual engagement but

remains inherently ambiguous, fostering creativity and continuous reinterpretation. Differences in interpretation or misunderstandings are addressed directly only when they disrupt the group's ability to work together effectively.

Handley et al. (2006) further emphasised that learning within CoPs is not a simple acquisition of knowledge but an adaptive process shaped by the group's evolving social relations and identity constructions. As such, CoPs are seen as the basic building blocks of a social learning system, serving as the social "containers" that hold the competences necessary for sustained learning and practice (Wenger, 2000). In sum, CoPs represent a vital lens to explore how individuals and groups learn, adapt, and develop within social contexts marked by shared concerns, ongoing interactions, and collaboratively developed resources. This understanding is especially relevant in contexts where knowledge and identity are co-constructed, such as educational environments, workplaces, and informal peer networks.

2.4.5 Community of Practice (CoP): Facilitating Knowledge, Skills, and Career Development

The concept of CoP, introduced by Lave and Wenger (1991), highlights the role of social participation in knowledge creation and skill development. A CoP consists of individuals who engage in shared activities, collaborate, and exchange knowledge, ultimately enhancing their collective expertise (Wenger, 2011). Unlike traditional learning models that focus on isolated knowledge acquisition, CoPs emphasise learning through active participation, mentorship, and social interaction within a given professional or academic environment. In the context of this study, CoPs represent the various social and professional networks that skilled migrants engage with as they transition from education to employment. These communities serve as knowledge-sharing hubs where international business postgraduates gain access to industry-specific expertise, tacit

knowledge, and career development opportunities. Welch and Welch (2015) highlighted the role of CoP as a crucial platform that nurture the accumulation of career capital, enabling individuals to acquire the knowledge, skills, and networks necessary for establishing and advancing international careers.

Recent developments in the literature have extended the application of CoPs beyond their foundational conceptualisation by Lave and Wenger, particularly within educational and professional development contexts. For instance, Smith et al. (2019) demonstrated how a deliberately designed Programme Community of Practice can serve as a dynamic, emergent pedagogical space. Their study of small business owner–managers demonstrated how learning can be driven by participants' lived experiences rather than predetermined curricula, underscoring the potential for CoPs to foster professional identity and practice through peer learning and mutual engagement. This underscores the adaptability of CoP theory in contexts where peer exchange and experiential learning are central, and it aligns with this study's framing of CoPs as sites of strategic, context-sensitive knowledge building for skilled migrants navigating career transitions. Farnsworth et al. (2016), through a critical dialogue with Wenger-Trayner, further clarified foundational CoP concepts such as participation, identity, boundaries, and power, and their implications for educational research. By unpacking these theoretical dimensions, they offer researchers conceptual tools to assess the applicability of CoPs across diverse learning contexts. These perspectives reinforce the view that CoPs are not only sites of knowledge transfer but also of identity negotiation and professional development, which are central themes in this study's analysis of skilled migrants' transitions.

In the context of international education, CoPs act as dynamic learning spaces, where students' learning experiences are deeply influenced by the cultural and professional context in which they are embedded (Fuller et al., 2005; McGraw & Palmer, 1999). Therefore, CoP catalyses knowledge and skill development and social integration within academic and professional settings. By actively participating in CoPs within the host country, international student migrants can gain valuable insights into cultural nuances, collaborative practices, and industry-specific know-how. These collective learning experiences equip them with the necessary skills to thrive in a globalised business landscape, making CoPs a vital element in their educational and career journeys. Gaining an in-depth understanding of how CoPs operate and the active involvement of learners within these communities provides valuable insights into the dynamic and complex processes that shape knowledge and skill development within a situated learning framework. The connection between SLT and CoPs reinforces the significance of social interaction and the participatory nature of learning, both of which are integral to understanding the impact of learning experiences on the career trajectories of international student migrants. Following the principles of SLT, the concept of CoP plays a central role in fostering knowledge and skill development among international business postgraduates.

2.5.6 Developing Multicultural Awareness and Teamwork Skills Through Situated Learning Experiences

Considering the emphasis of the situated learning theory on social interaction, collaboration, and participation development of knowledge and skills, this research focuses on examining how the educational experiences of international business postgraduates in Ireland impact the following important skills: cross-cultural awareness/competence and teamwork/collaboration. Studies, for example, Alshare and Sewailem (2018), Butler and Zander, (2007), and Ramburuth and Welch

(2005), have emphasised the importance of these skills for business graduates in effectively navigating the complexities of the globalised business world in the twenty-first century.

In the globalised business landscape, cross-cultural awareness/competence, effective teamwork, and collaboration are crucial for career success. Many studies, including those by Alshare and Sewailem (2018) and Whorton et al. (2017), emphasised the importance of these skills for business graduates. Situated learning experiences in international education provide a unique platform for students to engage in collaborative projects, team-based assignments, and cross-cultural teamwork to develop a deep understanding of diverse cultural perspectives. Through interactions with classmates and lecturers from different backgrounds, international students gain insights into cultural nuances, communication styles, and business practices. This exposure enhances their ability to navigate cross-cultural environments, adapt to diverse work settings, and collaborate effectively with colleagues from around the world. Moreover, by working with peers from different cultural backgrounds, students develop a deeper appreciation of diverse perspectives, learn to navigate cultural differences, and strengthen their ability to work collaboratively across borders. These experiences equip them with the skills needed to contribute effectively to multicultural teams and succeed in global business environments.

By fostering cross-cultural awareness/competence and teamwork/collaboration skills, international education plays a vital role in preparing graduates to excel in diverse and dynamic professional environments. International students often seek to leverage the cultural knowledge gained from their overseas qualifications by acquiring work experience in the host country. Multicultural team projects in international business education play a vital role in cultivating intercultural competencies and preparing students for collaboration in multinational settings. By incorporating diverse learning modalities and embracing cultural diversity, these projects offer

students unique perspectives, enhance their problem-solving capabilities, and foster adaptability and cross-cultural communication skills. International students, in particular, can leverage their cultural knowledge and acquired skills to enhance their career prospects (Gribble et al., 2015).

2.5.7 Knowledge

Knowledge is an important element in the development of the modern global economy (Williams, 2007b). It emerges from the active participation in the current context and the ongoing interactions between individuals and various elements of the community they are involved in. Therefore, the process of knowing is continually creative and deeply connected to action (Pg Hj Besar, 2018). Furthermore, knowledge is fundamental to the creation of novel ideas, innovation, increased and efficient productivity, and sustainable competitiveness and growth (Huggins & Izushi, 2007). As a result, there is a growing demand for highly skilled individuals, many of whom originate from developing countries (Siar, 2011). The relationship between knowledge and migration has garnered significant attention, especially concerning student migration. Raghuram (2013) highlighted the close connection between the acquisition of skills and knowledge and student migration. On this note, exploring the learning experiences of highly skilled migrants is essential. In the exploration of knowledge within this research, it is crucial to consider its multifaceted nature. Various scholars have offered insightful definitions that capture the complexity of knowledge. For instance, Roberts (2000) defined knowledge as more than just the possession of information; it involves the practical application and productive use of that information. This understanding of knowledge encompasses elements such as awareness, understanding, and learning derived from experiences. It highlights that knowledge is not merely a static accumulation of facts but a dynamic process of gaining insights through engagement and interaction with the world.

Additionally, Davenport et al. (1998) emphasised the multidimensional character of knowledge by highlighting its integration of information, experience, context, interpretation, and reflection. From this perspective, knowledge is not limited to data alone; it encompasses the integration of information with real-life experiences, the context in which it is applied, the interpretation of that information, and the critical reflection that informs decision-making and action. These definitions collectively emphasise the practical and dynamic aspects of knowledge, going beyond the mere accumulation of facts or information. They draw attention to the importance of engaging with experiences, contexts, and reflection to shape meaningful and applicable knowledge. As international student migrants embark on their learning journeys and immerse themselves in diverse cultural and academic environments, their knowledge development becomes intricately intertwined with their experiences and the contexts in which they are situated.

2.5.8 Knowledge Transfer

Knowledge transfer is an integral part of the knowledge management process (Jasimuddin & Hasnain, 2012). According to Singley and Anderson (1989, p. 1), knowledge transfer at the individual level is "how knowledge acquired in one situation applies or fails to apply to another." The concept of knowledge transfer is a crucial subject of organisational learning theory. It has received wide attention in organisational learning and management literature due to its essentiality in the survival and growth of organisations (Argote et al., 2000). Consequently, research on knowledge transfer has predominantly focused on the organisational level (Argote et al., 2000; Björkman et al., 2004; Jasimuddin & Hasnain, 2012; Pérez-Nordtvedt et al., 2008; Riege, 2005; Wendling et al., 2013). Over time, research on the subject has extended beyond a focus on the organisational level to include the individual level. Recent studies on knowledge management have examined how knowledge is transferred across international borders, with a particular interest in

highly skilled individuals who migrate from developing countries to developed countries (Lam & Rui, 2022; Liu et al., 2015; Siar, 2011).

A crucial channel for transferring knowledge across international borders is global human mobility, with highly skilled migrants playing an agentic role of transforming international learning experiences into relevant knowledge at home (Lam & Rui, 2022). Indeed, it has been asserted that the movement of people and, by extension, knowledge between developed and less developed nations facilitates the development of a global circular system of social and economic relationships (Cassarino, 2004; Chand, 2019; Saxenian, 2005). Furthermore, Nonaka and Takeuchi (1995) argued, based on their dynamic model of knowledge, that the development and transfer of knowledge is a social process. Therefore, the evolution and transfer of knowledge require social interaction among individuals, which subsequently leads to the creation of new knowledge. Given that knowledge is embedded in a social context (Brown & Duguid, 1991; Fuller et al., 2005; Lave & Wenger, 1991; Roberts, 2000), the concept of international knowledge development and transfer necessitates a deeper examination of the process within the business discipline through migration among highly skilled individuals.

Recently, scholars have paid increased attention to studying how knowledge is transferred internationally through skilled migrants (Burgers & Touburg, 2013; Park, 2019). These studies highlighted the roles of skilled migrants in the transfer of knowledge, usually from developed countries to developing countries, through their involvement in international communities and professional networks. Research has focused more on the importance of highly skilled return migrants in transferring the information and expertise they have gained abroad to their home countries in recent years. However, minimal attention has been paid to the process of transnational learning and knowledge transfer (Lam & Rui, 2022; Park, 2019), accounting for a gap in research

on international knowledge development and the subsequent transfer of such knowledge. This is because return migrants are often referred to as knowledge carriers promoting the unilateral dissemination of knowledge and practices from developed to developing countries (Faist, 2008; Wang, 2015). Owing to this gap in global human mobility and international knowledge transfer literature, Lam and Rui (2022) noted that it is often assumed that knowledge, ideas, and practices simply move along with return migrants from the host countries to the home countries or flow through the migrants' social and professional networks.

While Händschke et al. (2018) emphasised the significance of highly skilled migrants in transmitting professional knowledge internationally, the view of the agentic role of skilled migrants has been directed more towards the absorption and reception of this knowledge by the home country, which is often in the Global South, such as Africa. The findings from Lam and Rui (2022) challenge the assumption underlying much of the migrant transnationalism literature of a one-way, linear flow of knowledge from the developed (host) country to the developing (home) country. This study, therefore, contributes to research on bi-directional migrants' transnational knowledge flow by examining the position of skilled migrants from the Global South in Ireland in accessing learning opportunities through postgraduate business education and post-study work experiences as agents of knowledge transfer back to Africa. In this case, the inward experiences of African business postgraduates in Ireland throughout their learning journey are explored, and the consequential impact of their experiences is investigated and analysed in the outward transfer of professional business knowledge back to Africa. This study considers the process of distanciated knowledge transfer rather than the prominent approach to knowledge transfer that has often been examined in the literature, where it is transferred through return migrants from developed countries to developing countries.

2.5.9 International Knowledge Transfer through Highly Skilled Migrants

International migrants are knowledgeable individuals who carry distinctive knowledge with them and learn constantly as they move across borders (Williams, 2006, 2007b). Migrants may play a significant role in the transfer of knowledge, particularly in situations where co-presence and physical proximity are essential for learning and knowledge transfer and where international borders pose fundamental economic and cultural barriers. More specifically, international migration is potentially a crucial channel for international knowledge transfer (Thompson et al., 2001; Williams, 2007b). Generally, the transfer of knowledge is facilitated by international mobility and migration (Williams, 2006; Williams, 2007a, 2007b). There is a vast body of research on international knowledge transfer through highly skilled migrants, with many highlighting the vital role that highly skilled migrants play in transferring knowledge across international borders. Scholars (Lam & Rui, 2022; Park, 2019) have described highly skilled migrants as knowledge conduits who facilitate the transfer of knowledge across borders as they migrate from one place to another. Despite the fundamental role of individuals in this transfer, literature has focused more on the organisational level (Liu et al., 2015; Pérez-Nordtvedt et al., 2008) than the individual level.

Additionally, migration studies have focused on individual migrants and their skills rather than knowledge and how their knowledge is socially situated in workplaces (Williams, 2006). Research has identified various methods for transferring knowledge, and studies have argued that these methods are socially situated (Brown & Duguid, 1991; Williams, 2007a). Amin (2002) emphasised the value of transferring knowledge either locally embedded in the form of physical interactions, or through distanced (virtual) relationships. Considering the possibility of remote channels of communication and dissemination of information via electronic media, the author argued that knowledge can be transferred without physical proximity between the source and recipient of

knowledge, i.e., a distanciated technique of knowledge transfer. While many studies have investigated the transfer of international knowledge through physical interactions within the local community of knowledge reception (Lam & Rui, 2022; Liu et al., 2015; Pérez-Nordtvedt et al., 2008; Siar, 2011), this study takes a different approach by investigating international knowledge transfer at the individual level through African third-level business postgraduates in Ireland, thereby advancing research on international knowledge transfer in the business field.

Furthermore, studies on international knowledge transfer have focused on the extent of international knowledge transfer (Agrawal & Henderson, 2002; Håkanson & Nobel, 2001; Tsang, 2002), treating it as a process simply involving the transmission and reception of knowledge across borders, with various challenges (Liu et al., 2015). These challenges include the willingness to transfer knowledge, the attractiveness of the origin of knowledge, the lack of absorptive capacity, and the learning intent of the knowledge recipient. Additionally, Williams (2007b) highlighted that the link between the different types of knowledge and migration concerning knowledge transfer may be more complex than has been claimed. This is because migrants, whether return or non-return, face multiple barriers in transferring knowledge from one place to another.

According to Siar (2011), international migration by highly skilled individuals is considered a beneficial process because it improves their intellectual and social capital, which potentially leads to the transfer of knowledge between their home and host countries. Knowledge transfer occurs when knowledge is disseminated, diffused, or communicated from one entity to another. The transfer of knowledge can be deliberate or the outcome of an unintentional process, such as social interactions and chance meetings (Welch & Welch, 2008). Whether knowledge transfer is deliberate or unintended, its impact on social and economic development (Sturge et al., 2016) has increased research interest across multiple disciplines.

2.6 Conceptual Framework

Having reviewed existing literature, the conceptual framework below was developed from the application of theories to the study, thereby establishing the theoretical foundation. The framework explains the career development journey of skilled postgraduate student migrants as they transition from their home countries to host countries. It also proposes how they navigate their postgraduate study experience and integrate into the professional workforce. This framework synthesises key career development theories: – SCCT, SLT, and CS – to provide a comprehensive understanding of how skilled migrants build their careers through these phases. The journey begins with skilled postgraduate student migrants, both male and female, who embark on postgraduate studies in the host country. A gender perspective is applied to understand their individual learning and career development experiences.

The initial phase is integration, representing the migrant's familiarisation and adaptation to the host country as they study. As newcomers, migrant students adjust to the new environment, forming the foundation of their career development pathways. During this phase, SCCT is crucial in providing insights into how migrants set and pursue their academic and career goals. The three core components of SCCT, namely self-efficacy (the migrant's belief in their ability to succeed and perform effectively in their designated tasks), outcome expectations (what they expect to achieve as a result of their efforts), and personal goals (their individual career ambitions), are central to their integration. Within the host country, skilled postgraduate migrants also engage in a CoP, where learning, adaptation, and gradual improvement occur. SLT complements this by explaining how individuals learn through shared experiences and interactions within these communities. Through CoP, SLT guides the learning process, fostering the development of

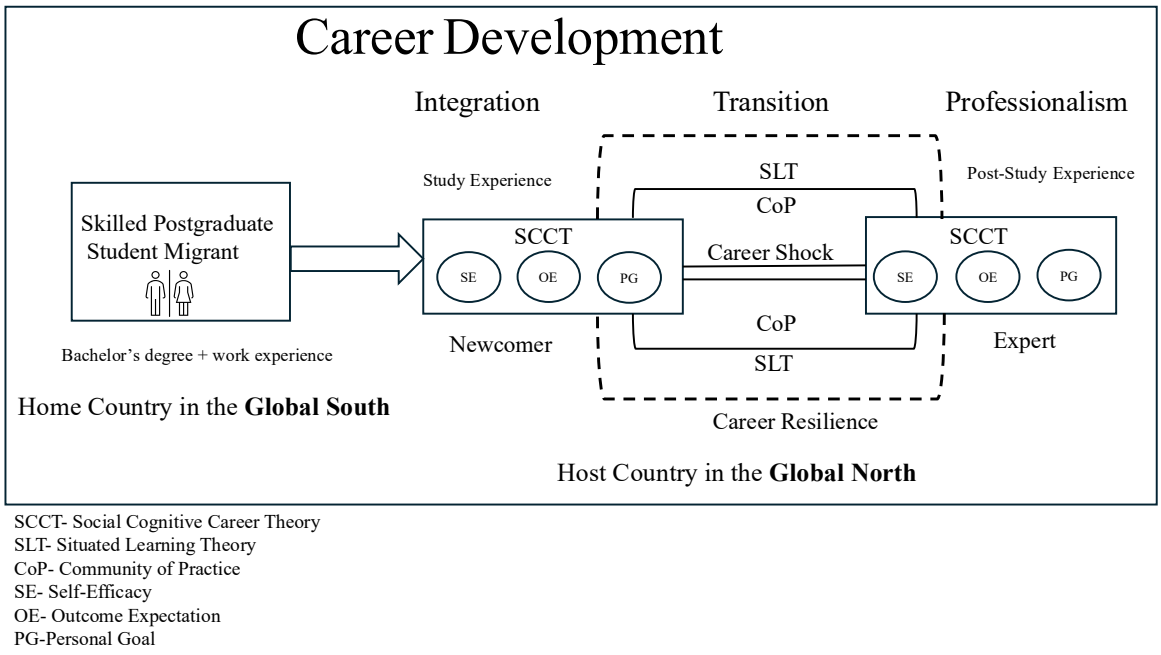
professional competencies and self-efficacy in the new environment, thereby enabling migrants to adapt to the cultural and professional norms and expectations of the host country.

Positioned between the integration and transition phases is career shock (CS), which introduces the concept that unexpected and uncontrollable events, whether positive or negative, can disrupt, redirect, or trigger actions in a migrant's career trajectory. These shocks often arise from context-specific challenges or other unpredictable events, significantly impacting career development in the host country. Recognising that career shocks trigger reactions that lead individuals to make sense of their circumstances and strive to succeed in achieving their goals, the framework also introduces CR as a critical driving force. CR captures the capacity of individuals to adapt, recover, and even leverage these shocks as opportunities for development. By facilitating a process of sensemaking in response to career shocks, CR empowers skilled migrants to transform disruptions into developmental milestones, thereby enhancing their ability to navigate the challenges inherent in transitioning to a professional environment.

Once postgraduate studies are completed, migrants enter the transition phase, moving from their study experience to professional work. In this phase, they encounter new challenges as they settle into the professional workforce of the host country. The SCCT framework continues to apply, as self-efficacy, outcome expectations, and personal goals evolve in response to post-study experiences. Here, career resilience plays a dual role: it not only mitigates the negative impacts of unexpected career shocks but also supports proactive adaptation by reinforcing migrants' belief in their ability to succeed despite adversity. Both integration and transition occur within the host country, emphasising the role of cultural, social, and economic factors in shaping career development.

This framework highlights how situated learning experiences in the host country's environment play a pivotal role in influencing both study and post-study success. It illustrates the career development journey of skilled postgraduate migrants from newcomers to professionals in the new host country. By integrating SCCT, SLT, CS Theory, and CR, the framework analyses how individuals learn to build self-efficacy, adapt, and remain resilient in their journey to professionalism in new environments and navigate disruptions that may affect their career trajectories. The interplay of these theories highlights CR as both a buffering and enabling resource, offering a comprehensive lens for understanding how skilled migrants develop their careers in the context of international skilled mobility and professional integration.

Integrating these concepts with the established frameworks of SCCT and SLT, the study aims to provide a more comprehensive understanding of career development. It emphasises that while external, unpredictable events (CS) play a critical role in shaping career paths, the individual's response, facilitated by CR, is central to achieving successful career transitions and setting realistic goals in the new host environment. This dual focus not only addresses a significant gap in the literature but also offers new insights into the complex dynamics of career development in multicultural and unpredictable labour markets.



SCCT- Social Cognitive Career Theory
SLT- Situated Learning Theory
CoP- Community of Practice
SE- Self-Efficacy
OE- Outcome Expectation
PG-Personal Goal

Figure 1. Conceptual Framework for the Career Development of Skilled Postgraduate Migrant Students in the Host Country

2.7 Conclusion Summary

This chapter has undertaken a comprehensive exploration of relevant literature, examining a spectrum of theories and concepts that collectively contribute to understanding the experiences and trajectories of highly skilled African business postgraduate migrants in Ireland. The review begins by examining skilled migrants and international student mobility, thereby establishing the contextual backdrop for the study. It then explores the concept of career, setting the stage for a discussion of SCCT and its core elements: self-efficacy, outcome expectations, and personal goals, which are pivotal in explaining how migrants set and pursue their academic and career goals. Building on this foundation, the chapter reviews the concept of CS, which highlights how

unexpected and uncontrollable events can disrupt or redirect career trajectories. Recognising that these shocks trigger critical sensemaking processes, the discussion extends to CR as a vital driving force. CR, as highlighted in the literature, encapsulates the ability of individuals to adapt, recover, and transform disruptions into opportunities for growth, thereby playing a central role in their career development. The literature further examines learning and SLT, emphasising the role of CoP in social learning. It explores how international business postgraduate student migrants engage in developing collaboration and teamwork skills, as well as cross-cultural competencies, as part of their learning and career development journey. This section also reviews knowledge transfer within communities of practice, emphasising how these processes contribute to the development of professional competencies and the overall learning experience. The concept of CR within the framework demonstrates how it not only mitigates the negative impacts of career shocks but also supports proactive adaptation in both study and post-study phases. This holistic approach reshapes conventional notions of career success for international student migrants by linking theoretical constructs with real-life experiences. In conclusion, the chapter reveals the intricacies of learning, collaboration, and adaptive capacity in overcoming disruptive events in career development. The review provides a deeper understanding of the nuanced factors that shape the career success of highly skilled African business postgraduate migrants in Ireland. This robust theoretical foundation, interweaving SCCT, CS, CR, SLT, and the processes of knowledge and skills transfer, provides new insights into the complex dynamics of career development in the context of international mobility and professional integration.

3.0 Chapter Three: Methodology

3.1 Introduction

This chapter outlines the research methodology and specific research design employed to investigate the career development journey of postgraduate business migrants from Nigeria, Ghana, Kenya, and Tanzania in Ireland, exploring their experiences from integration to transition. Much of the existing SCCT research has focused on measuring or evaluating self-efficacy through quantitative approaches to test the relationship between learning experiences, self-efficacy beliefs, and career outcomes (e.g. Bikos et al., 2021; Inda et al., 2013; Lent et al., 2008; Penn & Lent, 2019; Sheu et al., 2010). While this body of work has been valuable in establishing the predictive power of SCCT variables, it offers limited insight into the lived, contextual, and socially embedded processes through which self-efficacy develops. This study addresses that gap by adopting an in-depth qualitative process research approach to explore how learning experiences situated in CoPs shape the self-efficacy of highly skilled migrants. By foregrounding participants' narratives, the study moves beyond measurement towards a richer understanding of the processes through which self-efficacy, resilience, and professional identity are co-constructed in the migration context. Similar to the method used by O'Connor and Crowley-Henry (2020) in understanding the home-to-host career transition of skilled migrants, this study uses in-depth semi-structured interviews to explore the career narratives of business postgraduates from Global South home countries who transition to full-time permanent work status in the Global North host country. This approach provides nuanced insights into the career paths of this under-researched yet significant cohort of highly skilled migrants overseas.

This cohort of individuals is salient, as their successful career transition journey from home to host country is research-worthy, because they have come to study and have overcome complex, mostly

visa-related challenges to attain work permit status employment in a highly competitive environment where they face several systemic disadvantages. It provides a detailed analysis of the philosophical underpinnings of the research and the step-by-step procedure undertaken to achieve the research aim and objectives systematically and methodically. It also explains the steps taken to select participants, collect data, and ensure ethical rigour while situating the study within relevant theoretical frameworks.

This qualitative process research is grounded in an interpretivist–constructivist paradigm, adopting a subjectivist stance that recognises multiple realities as experienced and narrated by participants. The assumption underpinning this approach is that knowledge is socially constructed through interaction and meaning-making rather than discovered as an objective truth. A relativist ontology informs the research, as each participant's narrative is viewed as a valid representation of their reality, while the researcher's reflexivity and positionality are acknowledged as integral to the interpretive process.

An abductive approach is adopted, integrating theoretical insights with participants' lived experiences to explore their integration and career transitions from business postgraduate students to professionals within Ireland's multicultural landscape. The study used semi-structured interviews to uncover how participants navigate challenges and engage with CoPs in educational and workplace settings. Theoretically, SCCT and SLT frameworks, together with CS and CR concepts, guide the exploration of how self-efficacy, career shocks, and social interactions influence career trajectories. The rationale for the dominance of Nigerian participants is discussed, highlighting their prominence within the international student cohort from the Global South in Ireland. Ethical considerations, including informed consent, confidentiality, and reflexivity, are

addressed to ensure that the study conforms with ethical standards while authentically capturing participants' narratives.

Before delving into the specifics of the philosophical paradigm adopted in this study, it is important to outline the three fundamental assumptions that underpin research philosophy: ontology, epistemology, and axiology. These assumptions shape a researcher's worldview by influencing their beliefs and values about the nature of reality, how it can be understood, and how they engage with it in practice (Abdullah Kamal, 2019; Saunders et al., 2019). Together, they provide the foundation for understanding the philosophical underpinnings of the research and illustrate how these assumptions guide its overall design and implementation.

3.2 Philosophical Positioning of the Study

This research is philosophically positioned within a relativist ontology, an interpretivist–constructivist epistemology, and a reflexive axiology. Together, these assumptions form a subjectivist paradigm (see upper part of Figure 2), underpinned by an abductive approach to reasoning and a qualitative design using in-depth semi-structured interviews and reflexive thematic analysis. This paradigm provides the philosophical foundation for exploring how highly skilled business postgraduate migrants from the Global South construct meaning around their career transitions in the Global North. It foregrounds participants' narratives as situated, valid realities and enables the generation of new theoretical insights into how self-efficacy, resilience, and professional identity are co-constructed through learning and social engagement. The constructivist perspective provides a strong and context-sensitive foundation for the study, as it recognises multiple, situated realities and values participants' narratives as valid accounts of experience. It allows meaning to be co-constructed through researcher–participant interaction,

while continuous reflexivity strengthens trustworthiness and reduces interpretive bias. Crucially, it enables theory building that is firmly grounded in lived experience, making it well suited to uncovering how self-efficacy, resilience, and professional identity are co-constructed through learning and social engagement in the career transitions of skilled business postgraduate migrants from the Global South in the Global North. In contrast to a positivist paradigm, which is grounded in objectivism and seeks measurable, generalisable laws, this research aims to understand the realities and meanings of individual experiences within a home-to-host country career transition context. Positivism privileges detachment, quantification, and hypothesis testing through surveys and experiments. While valuable in studies designed to predict or measure variables, such reductionism would obscure the depth, nuance, and context dependence of migrants' lived experiences. In this study, the goal was not to test universal laws of career transition but to capture subjective individual meaning making, situated learning, and co-constructed identities. For this reason, the interpretivist–constructivist paradigm offers a more coherent and philosophically consistent foundation for understanding how the careers of highly skilled business postgraduate migrants from Nigeria, Ghana, Kenya, and Tanzania in the Global South develop as they progress from education to job search and successful transition to full-time permanent employment in Ireland in the Global North.

A relativist ontological stance assumes that reality is multiple, socially constructed, and context dependent (Burrell & Morgan, 2016; Saunders et al., 2019). This perspective enables multiple realities of individual participants within their social context to be gathered and analysed in exploring and understanding the career development journeys of business postgraduate migrants from African countries in the Global South who live in Ireland in the Global North. Each participant's lived experience represents a valid and situated reality shaped by cultural and

contextual social interactions (Kivunja & Kuyini, 2017; Kojo Otoo, 2020). Although alternative paradigms such as positivism, pragmatism, and postmodernism are acknowledged, the relativist interpretivist–constructivist paradigm is the most suitable for maintaining an exploratory focus and enabling in-depth analysis of the individual approach and meaning making central to understanding the career transition journeys of this skilled migrant cohort. Pragmatism, with its emphasis on practical problem solving, is less suited to a study concerned with meaning making rather than intervention outcomes. Postmodernism, while valuable for critiquing dominant narratives, aligns less with the focus here on co-constructed realities and participants' situated learning within CoPs. In contrast, an interpretivist–constructivist paradigm grounded in relativist ontology provides the most coherent and contextually sensitive framework for capturing the lived experiences of skilled postgraduate migrants in Ireland.

Epistemologically, this study is situated within the interpretivist–constructivist paradigm. Interpretivism seeks to understand the subjective meanings individuals assign to their experiences (Alharahsheh & Pius, 2020; Junjie & Yingxin, 2022; Myers, 2019), while constructivism emphasises that knowledge and meaning are co-created through interaction and shaped by social and cultural contexts (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011; Quay, 2003; Van Der Walt, 2020). This approach is particularly suited to exploring how skilled migrants interpret and navigate the complex processes of integration, resilience, and transition in a host country. It enables the study to capture nuanced insights into how participants engage with CoPs, negotiate systemic challenges, and construct their career identities within Ireland's multicultural professional landscape. In relation to other paradigms, this study does not adopt a positivist stance because its aim is not to measure objective variables or generate universally generalisable laws; such reductionism risks obscuring the depth of participants' situated learning experiences (Alharahsheh & Pius, 2020; Bogna et al.,

2020; Junjie & Yingxin, 2022). Nor does it align with critical realism, which seeks to uncover hidden causal mechanisms behind social phenomena (Bhaskar, 1998; Bogna et al., 2020; Fletcher, 2017; Lawani, 2021). Although valuable for explaining structural influences, critical realism is less suited to the central aim of this study, which is to privilege participants' subjective narratives and co-constructed meanings over causal abstraction. The interpretivist–constructivist paradigm therefore offers the most coherent and context-sensitive framework for understanding skilled migrants' career trajectories as lived, dynamic, and socially embedded experiences.

This research is positioned within an interpretivist–constructivist paradigm, grounded in a relativist ontology and supported by reflexive practice. These underpinning philosophies are outlined in detail in the following sections on ontology, epistemology, and axiology to demonstrate how they coherently inform the study's design, methods, and analysis. The researcher's philosophical stance is depicted by constructivism: the upper part of Figure 2.

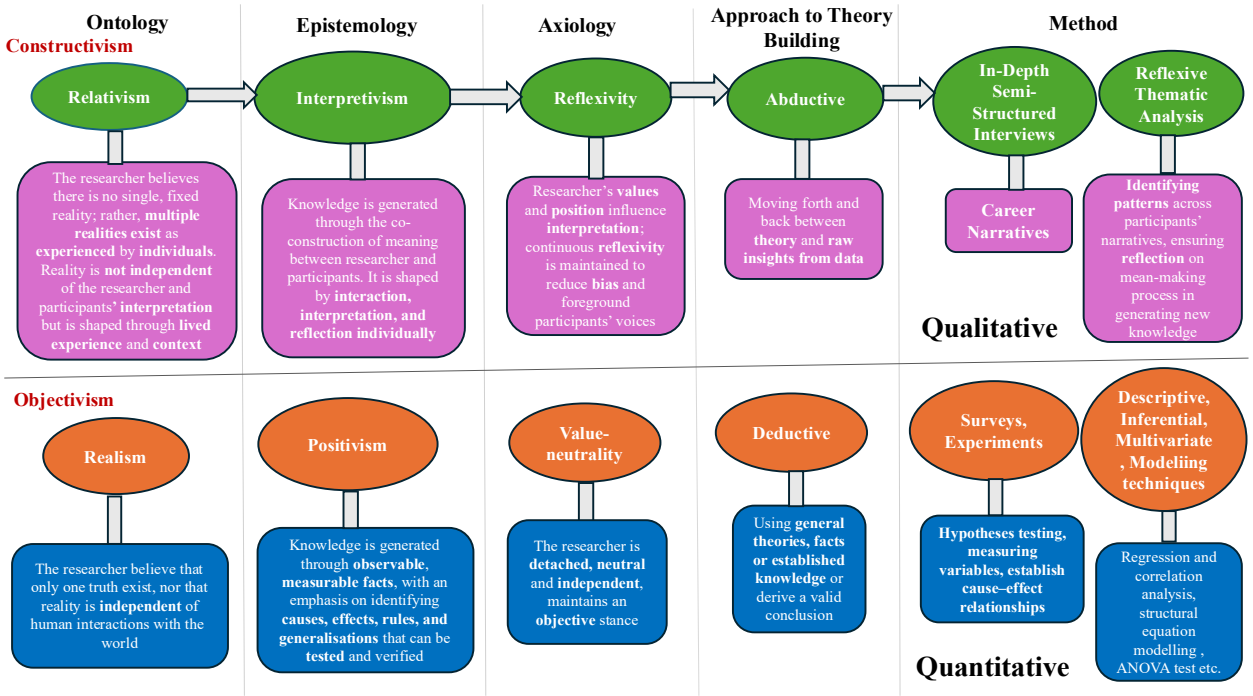


Figure 2. An Illustration of Constructivist vs Objectivist Philosophical Paradigm

3.2.1 Ontology

Ontology pertains to assumptions concerning the nature of reality (Kivunja & Kuyini, 2017; Kojo Otoo, 2020). The ontological assumptions of the researcher significantly influence the perception and investigation of the research subjects and therefore play a crucial role in shaping perspectives and guiding the approach to addressing the research problems and questions (Saunders et al., 2019). Ontologically, this study adopts a relativist perspective, which holds that reality is not singular or fixed but multiple, context-dependent, and socially constructed. From this standpoint, what is considered real varies according to individual perspectives, cultural backgrounds, and social contexts, meaning that there are as many realities as there are individuals and groups who experience them. Relativism assumes that each person's interpretation of the world is valid in its own right, and no single account can claim to represent an objective or universal truth (Kivunja & Kuyini, 2017; Kojo Otoo, 2020). In this perspective, how people perceive and interpret the world influences their behaviours and interactions, collectively contributing to the formation of the broader social reality. Therefore, the experiences and viewpoints of individuals play a central role in shaping the social world. In this research, individual postgraduate migrant experiences are collected and analysed in relation to the research question to understand how their situated learning experiences in Ireland through multicultural interaction, participation, and collaboration have influenced their post-study career success. These experiences differ from one individual to another, as they perceive reality differently (Burrell & Morgan, 2016).

3.2.2 Epistemology

Epistemology concerns assumptions about knowledge encompassing notions of credible, reliable, and authentic knowledge, as well as the methods for effectively communicating knowledge to others (Burrell & Morgan, 1979, 2016). The research epistemology guides the scope of

interpretations that can be made about the data and shapes the approach to theorising meaning (Braun & Clarke, 2006). This study combines interpretivism and constructivism (interpretivism–constructivism) as an approach to knowledge (theory) development. Interpretivism–constructivism as a research paradigm encompasses several fundamental dimensions. It involves pre-theoretical considerations that shape the research approach. Additionally, it is rooted in various theoretical orientations, including the purpose of interpretation, interpretation as a research procedure, the nature and status of facts, the idea that interpretation occurs at all levels of research, and the validity of theoretical constructions derived from interpretivism (Van Der Walt, 2020).

3.2.2.1 Tetradic Analysis of Philosophical Paradigms: A Comparative Analysis of Positivism, Critical Realism, Interpretivism, and Constructivism

Although several research paradigms, such as positivism, critical realism, and interpretivism, underpin scholarly inquiry, no single philosophy is without limitations. Acknowledging this, and following Heeks & Wall's (2018) concept of a "philosophical duopoly," this study presents a brief tetradic analysis to compare the strengths and weaknesses of these paradigms and justify the chosen approach.

3.2.2.2 Positivism

Positivism is rooted in the philosophical stance of the natural sciences, focusing on the observable aspects of reality to draw generalisations. It emphasises the collection of objectives, empirical data and the derivation of generalisable conclusions from observable phenomena (Alharahsheh & Pius, 2020; Saunders et al., 2019). It is grounded in an objective ontology that assumes a single,

measurable reality exists independently of human perception. This approach prioritises quantifiable data, replicability, and the rigorous testing of hypotheses, thereby aiming for high levels of validity and reliability (Creswell & Creswell, 2017; Guba & Lincoln, 1994). Its systematic and structured methodology makes it particularly well suited for research seeking to generalise findings across large populations. However, critiques of positivism, as highlighted by Alharahsheh and Pius (2020), suggest that while it is effective for investigating natural phenomena, it does not always adapt well to social contexts. This limitation can lead to overly simplistic generalisations that overlook individual intentions and behaviours, failing to capture the full complexity of human interaction. Given that this research aims to examine participants' perspectives in depth, a more nuanced approach is necessary. Additionally, positivism's reliance on established norms and its tendency to produce primarily descriptive findings may hinder researchers from uncovering the deeper, more intricate issues central to their studies. Consequently, positivism often overlooks the subjective dimensions of human experience, reducing complex social phenomena to mere variables. Such reductionism can obscure the nuanced, context-specific interpretations that are crucial when exploring phenomena such as the career trajectories of skilled migrants, where lived experiences and individual meanings play a central role.

3.2.2.3 Critical Realism

Critical realism (CR) is a relatively recent philosophical framework that serves as an alternative to the dominant paradigms of positivism and interpretivism. It emerged in response to critiques of both positivist and constructivist philosophies (Archer et al., 2013; Bhaskar, 1998) and offers a comprehensive approach that integrates elements from both to provide a balanced perspective on

ontology and epistemology (Gorski, 2013). CR occupies a middle ground by acknowledging that, while an objective reality exists, our understanding of it is inevitably filtered through human perception and social influences. This approach aims to uncover the underlying causal relationships among social events, thereby deepening our understanding of complex issues and informing strategic recommendations for addressing social problems (Fletcher, 2017).

CR is founded on the assumption that an external reality exists in both the natural and social sciences, though in the social realm, this reality is characterised in a way that reflects the unique nature of the social environment (Gorski, 2013). By appreciating that underlying structures shape observable events, CR enables researchers to explore not only empirical phenomena but also the generative mechanisms behind them. One of its key strengths lies in bridging the gap between objective reality and subjective experience. However, operationalising CR can be challenging, as it requires a careful balance between empirical observation and theoretical abstraction. This complexity may render CR somewhat theoretically demanding for research focused on the intricacies of human behaviour and context, such as the multifaceted experiences of international student migrants. Nonetheless, its capacity to conduct causal analysis within specific contexts remains a valuable tool for both analysing social problems and proposing effective solutions (Fletcher, 2017)**.**

3.2.2.4 Interpretivism

Interpretivism emerged as a critique of positivism, embracing a subjective perspective that prioritises the nuanced, context-specific variables shaping human behaviour. It holds that human beings generate layered meanings in ways that differ fundamentally from the predictable patterns of physical phenomena (Alharahsheh & Pius, 2020). Consequently, social science research adopts

methods tailored to the complexity of human experiences, rather than applying the same techniques used in the natural sciences. Unlike positivism, which aims to establish fixed, universal laws through generalisations, interpretivism seeks to capture rich, in-depth insights (Myers, 2019; Saunders et al., 2019). It posits that reality is understood through intersubjectivity, emphasising the significance of meanings and the social and experiential dimensions inherent in research. This approach enhances the validity of data by incorporating personal insights and accounting for a range of influential factors (Myers, 2019).

The strengths of interpretivism lie in its capacity to capture the full spectrum of human experience. By focusing on the entirety of an experience rather than isolating its parts, it enables a holistic understanding of complex phenomena. The formulation of research questions and problem identification is driven by the researcher's own interests, involvement, and commitment, while qualitative designs such as informal discussions and interviews naturally support an in-depth exploration of individual experiences. Moreover, interpretivism recognises personal experience as a vital contribution to scientific knowledge, fostering context-specific insights without relying on generalised measurements or predetermined expectations. This approach is particularly effective at uncovering the detailed, lived realities of participants, offering richer insights than the generalised, numerical descriptions typical of positivist methodologies (Thanh et al., 2015). However, interpretivism is not without its critiques. One notable weakness is its inherent subjectivity, which can challenge the generalisability and replicability of findings (Junjie & Yingxin, 2022). Additionally, the flexible, context-sensitive nature of interpretivist inquiry can sometimes result in ambiguities in data interpretation (Silverman, 2021).

Interpretivism highlights the distinction between humans and physical phenomena in the natural world, as humans actively construct meanings of experiences within their world. In the interpretive research approach, the focus is on studying these lived experiences and establishing the significance of their meanings (Saunders et al., 2019). This study aims to generate a novel and more nuanced understanding of the situated learning experiences of highly skilled international student migrants who have moved from developing economies to more developed host economies. By exploring and interpreting the data gathered on the learning experiences that facilitate the career development of highly skilled business postgraduate migrants from the Global South in Ireland, with an emphasis on the social and multicultural experiences of this cohort of highly skilled migrants within the context of the Global South and Ireland through their career journeys, this research offers fresh insights and interpretations on international student mobility and highly skilled migration literature. As interpretive research, this study is focused on interpreting (making meanings from) the career narratives of individual international student migrant participants. It examines how they learned to develop the critical knowledge, skills, and competencies that facilitated their successful permanent employment in corporate institutions in Ireland, enabling a smooth transition to a work permit visa. Acknowledging the uniqueness of individual international student migrant participants and the resulting complexity of their various experiences, this research accounts for this complexity by adopting a viewpoint that considers and understands their diverse experiences within their respective social contexts to capture the rich contextual nuances.

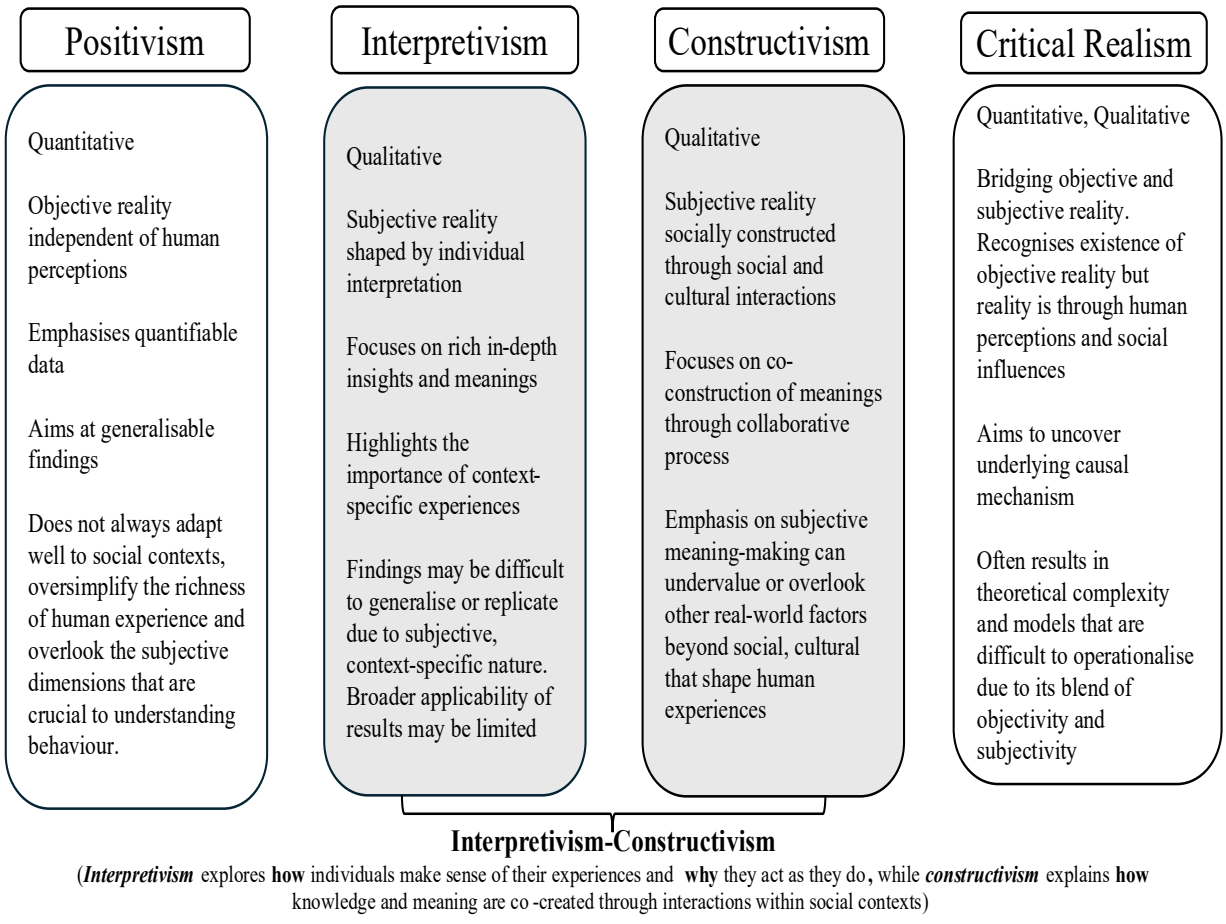
While interpretivism emphasises how individuals actively make meaning of their experiences, it is also essential to consider how these meanings are shaped through social interactions, cultural contexts, and shared understandings. Knowledge and meaning do not exist in isolation; they are socially constructed through engagement with others and shaped by broader institutional and

societal influences. Interpretivism, as articulated by Thanh et al. (2015) is a two-way process that involves both the "way up," where raw data is transformed into theoretical constructs, and the "way down," where these constructs are continuously refined in accordance with the data. This perspective aligns with constructivism, which extends interpretivism by emphasising the collective and social processes through which knowledge is created.

3.2.2.5 Constructivism

Constructivism, as a research approach and epistemological perspective, assumes that reality and human behaviour are in a constant state of flux, adaptation, and transformation across multiple contexts. Unlike positivism, which seeks objective truths, constructivism posits that knowledge is actively co-constructed through the interplay of individuals and their social environments (Van Der Walt, 2020). While closely aligned with interpretivism, constructivism places additional emphasis on the role of social interactions and subjective experiences in shaping reality (Leutwyler et al., 2012). A key strength of constructivism is its deep engagement with context, allowing for a rich, nuanced understanding of human experiences. By recognising that knowledge is socially and dynamically constructed, this approach is particularly valuable for research that seeks to capture complexity, fluidity, and evolving perspectives. Constructivism also fosters a collaborative research process, wherein knowledge emerges through the interaction between researchers and participants, making it well suited for studying lived experiences (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011). Furthermore, this paradigm encourages reflexivity, ensuring that the researcher remains aware of their influence on the knowledge production process, thereby enhancing the authenticity and depth of findings.

Despite its strengths, constructivism faces critiques regarding its lack of generalisability and potential for researcher bias. Since reality is viewed as socially constructed and context dependent, findings may not be easily replicable across different settings, limiting their broader applicability (Silverman, 2021). Additionally, the high level of subjectivity inherent in constructivist inquiry raises concerns about interpretive bias, as meanings are shaped through the researcher's own lens. Some critics argue that constructivism, in rejecting absolute truths, risks relativism, where all perspectives are considered equally valid, potentially challenging the rigour and reliability of research outcomes (Baggini, 2017; Chapman, 2018).



(***Interpretivism*** explores **how** individuals make sense of their experiences and **why** they act as they do**,** while ***constructivism*** explains **how** knowledge and meaning are co-created through interactions within social contexts)

Figure 3. Visual Illustration of a Comparative Analysis of Key Philosophical Paradigms and the Stance Taken in the Research

3.2.2.6 Epistemological Stance

In this study, interpretivism and constructivism are used collaboratively to provide a comprehensive, context-sensitive approach to understanding the career transitions of skilled business postgraduate migrants. This interpretivism–constructivism lens recognises that knowledge is not only socially constructed but also interpreted within specific socio-cultural and experiential contexts. By combining the in-depth, meaning-oriented focus of interpretivism with the co-constructive, dynamic perspective of constructivism, this study ensures that participants' career experiences are examined holistically, reflexively, and in relation to their evolving social environments. This dual perspective is particularly valuable for capturing the lived realities of skilled migrants as they transition from education to professional careers in a new multicultural environment. It enables an exploration of how they navigate learning, integration, adaptation, resilience, and self-efficacy within the host country. Despite challenges related to subjectivity and context dependency, the integration of interpretivism with constructivism enhances the depth and flexibility of inquiry.

Interpretivism–constructivism is grounded in a relativist ontology, which asserts that reality is socially constructed and composed of multiple, context-dependent truths (Burrell & Morgan, 2016; Saunders et al., 2019). This perspective emphasises that the meanings derived from data are not merely discovered but actively co-constructed through interactions between researchers and participants (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011). The combination of interpretivism's nuanced, meaning-

driven inquiry with constructivism's collaborative and adaptive emphasis makes this paradigm particularly well suited for exploring the complex career narratives of African business postgraduate migrants in Ireland. Rooted in nominalism, interpretivism–constructivism stands in direct contrast to positivism. Instead of emphasising the verification of objective truths, it focuses on assigning and constructing labels for the meanings that emerge from the data. While positivists are mainly concerned with the validity and reliability of their results, interpretivist–constructivists value the authenticity, plausibility, justifiability, criticality, rational argument, coherence, comprehensibility, defeasibility, and overall persuasiveness of their interpretations (Baggini, 2017; Chapman, 2018). This approach favours holistic complementarity over the mere accumulation of proven facts, arguing that even experiments typically considered to produce positivistic facts are shaped by subjective interpretive analysis.

3.2.2.7 Justification for Taking an Interpretivist–Constructivist Position

Given the research aim to explore the impact of situated learning experiences on the career development of business postgraduate migrants from the Global South in the Global North, an interpretivist–constructivist approach is particularly well suited. This perspective allows for the exploration of multiple realities and acknowledges that the knowledge constructed through participants' narratives is deeply influenced by their social, cultural, and personal contexts. It enables the researcher to capture the richness of these experiences, which might be lost under a positivist method that seeks to reduce phenomena to predetermined variables. Moreover, the theoretical frameworks of SCCT and SLT employed in this study are rooted in constructivism, thereby reinforcing and enhancing the philosophical foundations of the research methodology. Additionally, the study employs abductive reasoning to bridge the gap between theory and data. Abductive reasoning is not strictly linear; it fosters an iterative movement between empirical

observations and theoretical insights. This dynamic process, often described as the “way up” (transforming raw data into theoretical constructs) and the “way down” (refining these constructs considering new data), ensures that the analysis remains flexible and responsive to the complexities inherent in human experience (Brinkmann, 2014; Thanh et al., 2015). The iterative nature of abductive reasoning is particularly beneficial in qualitative research, as it allows emerging themes to be continuously revisited and refined, thereby enhancing the overall authenticity, plausibility, and coherence of the interpretations (Rinehart, 2021).

While paradigms such as positivism and critical realism offer valuable methodological rigour, they often fall short in capturing the subjective, evolving nature of lived experiences. After careful consideration of the potential philosophical perspectives available, the interpretivist and constructivist approach, supported by abductive reasoning, is considered the most suitable framework to address the research question and objectives. This approach not only acknowledges the complexity of individual experiences but also facilitates the ongoing refinement of theoretical insights.

This study leverages both interpretivism and constructivism paradigms to develop a comprehensive, context-sensitive understanding of career development from integration to transitioning among skilled business postgraduate migrants in a new environment. The combined approach acknowledges the role of social interactions, subjective meaning making, and dynamic adaptation in shaping learning experiences and career trajectories as migrants navigate their journeys from their home countries to Ireland. This lens provides a holistic and deeply contextualised exploration of how these individuals acquire, apply, and transfer knowledge across different socio-cultural and economic environments. Ultimately, this dual approach ensures that

the study remains both deeply grounded in empirical data and responsive to the broader social and cultural contexts that shape the career trajectories of international student migrants.

In this study, knowledge is constructed through the dynamic interplay between the rich, personal narratives of the postgraduate business migrants and the researcher's interpretative engagement with their stories. By exploring the career trajectories of these migrants from Nigeria, Ghana, Kenya, and Tanzania, from pursuing a master's degree in a business programme (NFQ Level 9) in Ireland to achieving full-time permanent employment after at least two years of post-study work, the research emphasises that meaning is not merely inherent in the data but actively generated through the interpretation of participants' lived experiences and the researcher's analysis. As these individuals recount their journeys of integration, job search, and professional transition in a multicultural Global North setting, their narratives reveal the evolving nature of identity, career development, and cultural adaptation, as well as the complex barriers and challenges they face. This interpretivist–constructivist approach systematically identifies and analyses influential situated learning experiences, examines multifaceted challenges during integration and transition, and explores the bilateral flow of business knowledge and skills between Ireland and Africa. Ultimately, the study demonstrates that knowledge is co-created through the continuous interpretative process between participant narratives and the researcher's insights, providing a robust framework for understanding how highly skilled business postgraduate migrants navigate their careers and contribute to both home and host countries. In sum, this research adopts an interpretivist and constructivist philosophical stance, recognising that knowledge is socially constructed through experiences and interactions. Interpretivism underpins the study's aim of understanding the subjective career trajectories of highly skilled business postgraduate migrants, while constructivism complements this by framing how learning experiences influence career

development through participation within different social contexts (CoPs). Together, these perspectives provide a cohesive foundation for exploring the relational and contextual dimensions of career development, learning, and knowledge transfer.

3.2.3 Axiology

Axiology pertains to the significance of values and ethics (Kivunja & Kuyini, 2017; Saunders et al., 2019). According to Heron (1996), our values serve as the underlying motivation for all human actions, and it is inevitable to integrate them into the research process. However, it is of utmost importance to consciously acknowledge and contemplate these values while conducting and documenting the research. As a researcher, having a clear understanding of one's own value stance aids in making ethically appropriate decisions and effectively justifies those decisions in the face of inquiries or challenges. Since a relativist perspective is adopted, it is maintained that the researcher cannot dissociate themselves from their values while actively engaging with the data. Consequently, the practice of reflexivity (Cunliffe, 2003) is embraced as a means to mitigate bias throughout the research process by openly acknowledging, actively reflecting upon, and questioning the researcher's values. This approach aims to ensure a more rigorous and impartial investigation, recognising that the researcher's interpretation of the data collected on participants' experiences is vital to the overall knowledge contribution. As Cunliffe suggested, reflexivity addresses philosophical issues concerning the nature of reality and knowledge. It also poses fundamental inquiries into the researcher's ability to grasp the intricate, interactive, and evolving essence of humans' social experiences.

3.2.3.1 Reflexivity: The Role of the Researcher

In conducting this study, the researcher's positionality played a significant role in shaping the research process. As an African postgraduate migrant in Ireland, the researcher shares lived experiences with the participants, which offered valuable insights into their narratives and fostered a deeper understanding of their social and multicultural contexts. This insider perspective not only facilitated rich engagement with participants but also promoted trust and open communication. However, as Finlay (2002) asserts, researchers must remain critically aware of their own positions to avoid overidentifying with participants and introducing bias into the data analysis. Ethical reflexivity involves a continuous process of self-examination and management of the researcher's influence throughout the research process (Berger, 2015).

In this study, particular attention was paid to ensuring that the researcher's assumptions and emotions were not imposed on participants' experiences. To further mitigate potential biases, the researcher engaged with colleagues knowledgeable in qualitative research methods. This practice provided an external perspective and encouraged critical discussions about the research process, helping to identify and challenge any preconceived notions or biases that may have influenced the study. The use of a systematic, reflexive thematic analysis (see Appendix II), grounded in the data, enabled careful engagement with the researcher's assumptions and ensured that the findings were rigorously tied to participants' narratives (Braun & Clarke, 2021). Additionally, the researcher maintained a reflexive journal (see Appendix III) throughout the data collection and analysis phases, documenting thoughts, feelings, and insights related to the research process. This practice served as a tool for ongoing reflexivity, allowing the researcher to track the evolution of understanding and recognise how positionality influenced the research outcomes. By combining

these strategies with a reflexive approach, the research upheld high ethical standards, respecting the integrity and authenticity of participants' stories while maintaining the researcher's reflexive stance. Ultimately, this commitment to reflexivity enhances the credibility of the study, ensuring that the findings authentically represent the voices and experiences of the participants.

Furthermore, reflexivity is actively embedded in the research process to acknowledge and critically engage with the researcher's positionality, assumptions, and influence in generating new knowledge. Since the study is grounded in an interpretivist–constructivist paradigm, the researcher plays an integral role in interpreting participants' narratives and constructing meaning from their situated learning experiences. Recognising that knowledge is co-constructed through interaction, reflexivity ensures that the researcher remains aware that personal perspectives, biases, and socio-cultural background shape the research process. This reflexive engagement extends beyond formal acknowledgment to a continuous process of questioning, adapting, and critically reflecting on methodological choices, analytical interpretations, and interactions with participants. Reflexivity is demonstrated through iterative engagement with the data, where emerging themes are scrutinised in light of the researcher's preconceptions and evolving understanding. Throughout the research, a conscious effort was made to document reflexive insights, methodological decisions, and ethical dilemmas, ensuring transparency in how interpretations were derived. This involved maintaining a reflexive journal and revisiting analytical frameworks to ensure that interpretations were not unduly shaped by personal biases but rather by the richness and complexity of participants' lived experiences. Additionally, the researcher acknowledged the power dynamics inherent in the research process, particularly in cross-cultural qualitative inquiry, and actively worked to foster a dialogical relationship in which participants' voices remained central to meaning making.

By taking reflexive actions, the study not only enhances the credibility and depth of its findings but also aligns with the broader commitment to ethical and responsible research. This process acknowledges that a critical examination of the researcher's role in producing new knowledge strengthens the authenticity, validity, and trustworthiness of the study's contributions. Through ongoing reflexive engagement, the research offers a more nuanced and ethically grounded exploration of the career development journeys of highly skilled business postgraduate migrants, ensuring that their narratives are interpreted with both sensitivity and scholarly rigour.

3.2.3.2 Reflexive Note on Interpretation of Findings

Given the interpretivist–constructivist paradigmatic orientation of this study, the researcher acknowledges that the interpretations presented here are neither objective nor isolated. Rather, they are co-constructed through an ongoing interaction between participants' narrated experiences and the researcher's knowledge, positionality, assumptions, and evolving understanding throughout the research process. While participants made meaning of their lived experiences as skilled migrants navigating educational and professional transitions in Ireland, the researcher's aim was to make meaning of their meanings (to interpret their stories) through theoretical, contextual, and personal lenses. This dual-layered interpretation is inherently shaped by the researcher's background, disciplinary orientation, and values, including a belief in the significance of social context, learning, and systemic structures in shaping migrant trajectories.

Throughout the research process, the researcher remained reflexively aware that interpretations were filtered through their own lens as a migrant from the Global South. This awareness shaped not only how the questions were asked and data analysed but also how patterns were generated in making meaning of participants' narratives. As such, the findings presented in Chapter 5 do not

claim to offer an objective or universal reality. Instead, they reflect a situated understanding that seeks to uncover the complexities of participants' journeys by recognising the layered and negotiated nature of knowledge construction in qualitative inquiry.

3.3 Abductive Reasoning

The study adopted an abductive reasoning approach to build upon existing theories, drawing on the data collected. It utilised the foundational frameworks of SCCT, SLT, and CS as guides in the coding process and thematic development (Thompson, 2022). Abductive reasoning encapsulates the bidirectional dynamic inherent in both interpretivism and constructivism by fostering an iterative movement between empirical data and theoretical insights. In this study, the abductive approach allowed the researcher to interpret how these experiences interact with and extend existing theoretical frameworks in exploring how migrants develop self-efficacy, respond to shocks, and learn through engagement within different CoPs. It is particularly valuable in exploring how skilled migrants learn to develop their careers from novices to experts in new environments, as it enables movement beyond description towards theoretical meaning making from raw data insights. This process allows researchers to refine both their data interpretations and the emerging theories, ensuring that meaning making remains a continuous, reflective dialogue rather than a strictly one-way, forward-moving progression. Moreover, both interpretation and constructivism are influenced by the theoretical assumptions embedded within the chosen frameworks that guide the researcher (Van Der Walt, 2020).

In doing so, it provides a robust methodological justification that effectively bridges the principles of interpretivism, constructivism, and abductive reasoning. This approach allows the integration of theoretical insights while remaining open to patterns that emerge naturally from the data. Taking

an abductive approach to reasoning enables a focus on the connection between a situation and the process of inquiry (Brinkmann, 2014). This approach was particularly well suited for examining the complex learning experiences shaping career development through shock and resilience among these highly skilled business postgraduate migrants within CoPs. This insight, made possible through abductive reasoning, allowed the refinement of theoretical understandings of the nuances embedded in their career development from their home countries to the host country by integrating both empirical and conceptual perspectives.

In abductive research, the process involves both inductive and deductive reasoning, engaging equally with empirical data and established theoretical frameworks (Rinehart, 2021; Hurley et al., 2021). Data collection was informed by theoretical perspectives, providing a foundation for exploration while remaining open to the insights that unfolded through participants' narratives (Alvesson & Kärreman, 2007). The empirical data were not confined to existing theoretical models but were explored in a way that allowed themes to emerge naturally. This enabled a deep exploration of participants' stories without being restricted by predefined theories. Rather than aiming to confirm or challenge specific ideas, this research sought to generate meaningful interpretations and explanations for the phenomena under investigation. The flexibility of abductive reasoning enabled the theoretical frameworks to evolve in response to the data, facilitating a deeper understanding of how these experiences shaped participants' career trajectories (Hurley et al., 2021). Through this iterative approach, the study not only enhances existing career development theories but also provides a contextually rich perspective on the interplay of critical constructs such as self-efficacy, resilience, learning, and career shock, integral to career development research in the context of skilled migration.

3.4 Data Collection

The data collection process spanned five months, from October 2023 to March 2024, during which online in-depth semi-structured interviews were conducted via Zoom. Each interview lasted an average of 80 minutes, and recordings were made with participants' consent for transcription purposes. Structured around six major phases, the interview questions aimed to capture the migration, learning, and career experiences of skilled international student migrants, drawing from the "career narrative method" of O'Connor and Crowley-Henry (2020). These phases covered various aspects, including pre-migration experiences, motivations for migrating to Ireland, educational experiences, transitions to work, post-transition career experiences, and future career intentions, including knowledge-transfer plans to their home country. Data collection ceased after 35 interviews, reaching saturation when new data no longer provided novel insights into the research questions. Saturation was determined through ongoing analysis of interview transcripts, identifying redundancy in themes and concepts across multiple interviews. This ensured sufficient breadth and depth of data to explore the research objectives thoroughly and achieve theoretical saturation. Continuing data collection until saturation was reached ensured high quality and qualitative rigour in accordance with qualitative research principles (Fusch & Ness, 2015; Morse, 2015). Saturation has become a standard practice for determining purposive sample sizes in qualitative research, enhancing the credibility and trustworthiness of the findings (Guest et al., 2006, 2020). Saturation is intimately connected to theoretical sampling, emphasising the consideration of key similarities and differences in emerging theories during the data collection process. This necessitates that sampling, data collection, and data analysis occur concurrently rather than as separate stages in a linear process (Bryman, 2012).

3.4.1 Processed-Based Narrative Inquiry

This study is situated within qualitative process research, which focuses attention on how and why phenomena emerge, develop, grow, or terminate over time (Berends & Deken, 2021; Langley et al., 2013). Although the study is cross-sectional, as data were collected at a specific point in time, it follows a process research approach, drawing on retrospective narratives to reconstruct the temporal unfolding of participants' career transitions from education to professional employment in Ireland. Retrospective interviewing is an approach commonly used within process research to capture process data when longitudinal access is not feasible (Langley, 2009). A defining feature of process research is not data collection over extended periods, but the ability of the data to incorporate time and capture temporal evolution within the phenomenon under investigation (Dawson, 1997). In this study, participants' narratives enabled the identification of key events, phases, and learning mechanisms that shaped successful career transitions, producing process-based understanding of how skilled migrants' career transition unfold in their host environment, with relevance to both theory and practice (Langley, 2009).

Clandinin and Caine (2008) assert that narrative inquiry serves as a methodological strategy for exploring and understanding human experiences through storytelling. This approach examines individual experiences in their time and context, taking into account three-dimensional factors of location, time, and social interactions. The essence of this method lies in its establishment of a connection between researchers and study participants, aiming to understand experiences through conversation, dialogue, and involvement in the ongoing lives of those being studied. Narrative inquiry consistently captures robust narratives that evolve over time, encapsulating both the lived and recounted experiences of research participants. This method emphasises experience as a narrative phenomenon and prioritises ethical relationships in the investigative process. Narrative

inquiry also plays a key role in educational research, aligning with humans' natural inclination for storytelling (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990). Narrative inquiry falls within the non-positivist paradigms of qualitative inquiry. Interpretive paradigms acknowledge the complexity of reality, shifting away from the positivist aim of constructing an objective, neutral, and unbiased representation of "actual" reality. Instead, they emphasise the subjective nature inherent in the study of social phenomena (Spector-Mersel, 2010).

In this study, narrative inquiry provides a framework for investigating the situated learning experiences of highly skilled business postgraduates in Ireland and their transition from students to professionals within the Irish business landscape. The method's emphasis on the richness of personal experiences (Creswell & Creswell, 2017) revealed how these experiences shaped the participants' successful transition in their career development journeys in Ireland. This approach offers insight into the learning processes that shape their career trajectories. Through reflective storytelling, participants articulated their motivations for studying in Ireland, the challenges of adapting to multicultural Ireland's educational and job landscapes, and the ways in which their learning experiences shaped their transition into professional roles.

The use of narrative inquiry facilitated an in-depth exploration of how these situated learning experiences contributed to participants' knowledge acquisition, skill development, and career progression. This methodological approach allows the study to examine how postgraduate migrants navigate barriers, leverage learning opportunities, and transition from international students to professionals within the Irish business sector. By engaging deeply with their migration stories, the research uncovers the socio-cultural, economic, and personal factors influencing their educational and career decisions. This approach aligns with the situated learning theory of Lave

and Wenger (1991), emphasising that learning occurs within a specific context and through social interaction, active participation, and engagement. Narrative inquiry is particularly suitable in this research as it allows exploration of the transition of postgraduate migrants from the Global South to the Global North, capturing how their learning journeys unfold before, during, and after migration. Furthermore, this methodological approach is well suited to this study because it captures the multifaceted aspects of individual postgraduate migrants' experiences and their embeddedness in the learning context (Clandinin & Rosiek, 2019). The use of narratives revealed not only the factual aspects of these experiences but, more importantly, the cultural and social dimensions that contribute to their holistic learning and understanding (Bruner, 1990; Clandinin & Caine, 2008). It allows an in-depth exploration of participants' narratives at multiple levels: (1) their perceptions of education and career opportunities in their home countries, (2) the factors influencing their decision to migrate for postgraduate studies, (3) their experiences of situated learning within the Irish education system, and (4) the impact of these experiences on their post-study employability. This aligns with the three-dimensional inquiry space (Clandinin & Caine, 2008), which considers time (past, present, and future), social interactions, and place in shaping narratives. Structuring the inquiry in this way allowed the study to provide a comprehensive account of how participants' learning journeys and career trajectories unfolded in different locations, times, and socio-cultural contexts

3.4.2 Semi-Structured Interview

This study employed semi-structured interviews to explore career narratives and how situated learning experiences influenced participants' transitions from students to professionals within the Irish business landscape. Semi-structured interviews were used for data collection because they

allow both depth and flexibility in exploring participants' complex career narratives (Cena et al., 2024). Unlike surveys, which capture breadth but restrict the flexibility needed to explore nuance and contextual richness (Creswell & Poth, 2016), or purely open- or closed-ended interviews, which may be too rigid or too loose to maintain research focus, semi-structured interviews facilitate rich, individual accounts of migration, learning, and career transitions. Structured interviews, although offering comparability, risk constraining participants' accounts within a focus-driven format (Bryman, 2015), while unstructured interviews, though open, can lack focus and consistency across cases (Patton, 2014). The semi-structured interviews are particularly well suited to the study's interpretivist–constructivist orientation and narrative-inquiry design. As a method balancing structure with flexibility (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2015), semi-structured interviews facilitated an open-ended yet guided conversation, allowing in-depth engagement with participants' experiences. Unlike structured interviews, which adhere strictly to predefined questions, or unstructured interviews, which are entirely open-ended, semi-structured interviews provide a framework enabling both consistency and adaptability. The interviewer begins with a set of core questions but remains responsive to participants' narratives, adjusting follow-up questions to explore emerging themes and significant insights in greater depth. This dynamic approach is particularly suited to the study's narrative-inquiry framework, as it fosters a co-constructive process of knowledge generation between the researcher and participants (Brinkmann, 2014).

Given the complexity of participants' transitions, these interviews were designed to be comprehensive and immersive, often extending beyond an hour, with an average duration of 80 minutes. This period allowed a nuanced exploration of key themes, including motivations for migration, adaptation to Ireland's educational and professional landscapes, and the role of learning

experiences in shaping career outcomes. The flexible structure of semi-structured interviews is particularly valuable for examining how situated learning occurred across different CoPs, such as formal and informal settings like classrooms, peer-migrant networks, and workplaces, and how these experiences collectively influenced career development. The interactive nature of semi-structured interviews not only enabled participants to articulate their experiences in their own terms but also positioned the researcher as an active participant in the knowledge-production process. This approach aligns with the study's interpretivist perspective, recognising that meaning is constructed through dialogue and that narratives are shaped within social and cultural contexts. By engaging participants in reflective storytelling, semi-structured interviews served as a vital mechanism for capturing the complex and evolving nature of career development among highly skilled business postgraduates in Ireland, revealing how their learning experiences contributed to their professional transitions.

3.4.3 Participant Selection Process

The participant selection process for this study was conducted over a 12-month period, from October 2022 to October 2023. A total of 35 participants were recruited, comprising 21 females and 14 males, representing four African countries. During this time, extensive discussions took place with both the supervisory team and the academic community to identify participants who would best align with the study's objectives. A research plan was drawn up to ensure the recruitment of appropriate participants consistent with the purpose of the study. The initial phase of the process involved engaging with universities from networks established through conferences to identify prospective participants. Additionally, professional groups of African skilled migrants were contacted to explore potential participants. Insights gained from these engagements informed

the criteria used to define suitable candidates for the study. These criteria are outlined in the following section. Once the characteristics of eligible participants were established, a LinkedIn post was created to highlight the study's purpose. The post was shared with relevant academic and professional groups, and tagged individuals helped amplify its reach. Several individuals expressed interest, and a list was compiled to document their profiles and contact details. The profiles were then reviewed to ensure alignment with the established selection criteria. Only those who met the criteria were retained. Following this, a thorough search was conducted on LinkedIn using the predefined criteria to identify potential participants. Personal invitations were sent to individuals who appeared to meet the study's requirements, and those who responded with interest were added to the participant pool. Many of the participants were ultimately recruited through referrals from individuals already involved in the study. This referral process significantly contributed to the recruitment effort, with the majority of participants being sourced in this manner.

3.4.3.1 Participants' Selection Criteria

This study focuses exclusively on individuals who successfully completed the full journey from postgraduate business education to professional employment in the host country. The rationale is that only those who have reached the endpoint of this transition can meaningfully reflect on the entire learning and career development process under investigation. Participants who did not transition into business-related professional roles, for example, those who secured employment in healthcare support or administrative assistance, or those who left Ireland after graduation, were not included. While the narratives of individuals who did not transition into business roles would undoubtedly provide valuable insights into alternative or less successful pathways, they would not have been able to offer a holistic account of how a successful transition was achieved. As such,

the study prioritised those whose experiences could best illuminate the dynamics of "how success happens" in the context of skilled migration and career development.

Therefore, the study participants were African postgraduate business students enrolled in full-time programmes at various recognised higher education institutions across different cities in Ireland. They were carefully and purposefully selected using purposive sampling, based on their LinkedIn profiles. To enhance outreach, a LinkedIn post was created, tagging numerous academic and non-academic relevant connections to encourage broader engagement and reposting. Despite these efforts, only a few participants were successfully recruited through LinkedIn. Consequently, the researcher established academic and social connections with the African Scholars Association Ireland and Home4All, a social WhatsApp platform for African postgraduates in Ireland, which in 2023 comprised over 300 members. The Home4All group proved particularly effective, yielding a significant number of participants through snowball referrals, as members referred peers they knew met the established criteria. Ultimately, this approach was instrumental in recruiting the majority of the study's participants. The selection criteria were as follows:

1. Having obtained at least a first degree in Africa before migrating directly to Ireland to pursue a Level 9 master's degree in business under the Irish National Framework of Qualifications (NFQ).
2. Having completed a master's degree in the business field at a recognised Irish higher education institution.
3. Having stayed back to work in an international organisation located in Ireland after graduation on a post-study graduate visa.

4. Having successfully transitioned from a post-study graduate visa status to a work permit status in Ireland by securing an eligible job as set out by the Irish Department of Enterprise, Trade, and Employment.

The rationale for selecting only participants who successfully transitioned from full-time postgraduate business studies to permanent, full-time professional roles in international business organisations is that they represent individuals who have fully completed the journey this study seeks to understand and theorise. Their experiences offer the most comprehensive insights into the career development process under investigation. This approach is further supported by Handley et al. (2006), who argue that individuals who successfully move from peripheral to full participation, and whose statuses are validated by the established members or "masters" of the community, can be considered as genuinely "participating" in the sense described by SLT.

Due to the strict eligibility criteria, several potential participants who were otherwise willing to take part in the study had to be excluded because they did not fully meet one or more requirements. For instance, some individuals who had completed Level 9 business degrees in Ireland were unable to secure employment in multinational business organisations and instead took up roles as healthcare assistants. Others had completed their undergraduate studies in Ireland rather than in Africa before pursuing postgraduate degrees in Ireland, which made them ineligible for the study. Additionally, some participants had left Ireland after completing their Level 9 degree, relocating to countries such as the USA, the United Kingdom, or Canada because they were unable to secure suitable roles in business organisations that would allow them to remain in Ireland on a work permit visa after graduation.

In selecting participants, to ensure that participants were able to give a good account of their learning, a limit of five years' post-graduation experience was considered. This criterion aimed to

capture a diverse sample of participants with recent experiences, ensuring that their recollections of learning experiences, difficulties during integration, and transition processes were clear and easily recalled. This approach was influenced by a similar qualitative study on the career development of international students conducted by Peng & Hu (2020), which also adopted a three-year post-graduation limit.

3.4.5 Sampling Strategy: Purposive and Snowball Sampling

To ensure the study captured the experiences most relevant to its objectives, only participants who had successfully transitioned from completing a Level 9 master's programme in Ireland to securing full-time professional employment in multinational or international business organisations under a work permit visa were selected. Purposive sampling, also referred to as selective sampling, involves deliberately selecting individuals who are most likely to provide rich and relevant data for the research (Campbell et al., 2020; Guest et al., 2006). The selection criteria ensured that participants had fully experienced the education-to-employment trajectory, enabling them to provide comprehensive insights into learning processes, career development strategies, and challenges encountered during this transition.

While purposive sampling allowed the research to focus on a highly specific population, it was complemented by snowball sampling, a method often used to access hard-to-reach or specialised populations (Johnson, 2014; Naderifar et al., 2017). Snowball sampling leverages existing participants' networks to recruit additional individuals who meet the study's eligibility criteria. In this study, the approach was particularly effective, as many participants were recruited through referrals from peers within the Home4All WhatsApp group and professional networks of African postgraduate students in Ireland. This method not only increased participation but also ensured

that recruited participants were genuinely representative of the cohort under study. Together, the use of purposive and snowball sampling enabled the study to capture a diverse and information-rich sample of 35 participants from four African countries, with a balance of genders (21 females and 14 males). This approach aligns with qualitative research principles, which prioritise depth, richness, and relevance of data over statistical generalisability (Cena et al., 2024).

3.4.6 Representativeness

The sample in this study is not an absolute representation of all African postgraduate students in Ireland. Rather, it reflects a deliberately defined subset: those who successfully completed the journey from business postgraduate education to professional employment in multinational organisations in Ireland. By focusing on this group, the study captures a distinctive set of experiences that reveal how participants transitioned from students (newcomers) to professionals in business practice in Ireland through securing permanent, full-time roles. While participants represented both genders and four African countries, the sample does not claim demographic representativeness across all African or international students in Ireland. Instead, its strength lies in the depth of narratives within a clearly bounded population whose career development is the phenomenon of interest (Smith & Osborn, 2015). Specifically, this study focuses on the career development and transition of African postgraduate business graduates in Ireland, with the unit of analysis being the individual participant, whose narrative provides insight into how situated learning and self-efficacy evolve across educational, transitional, and professional contexts.

Importantly, the sample reflects the largest represented cohort of African postgraduates in Ireland's business field at Level 9 (master's) programmes. Identifying these participants was challenging, as only a relatively small number of skilled African business graduates successfully make the

transition each year from postgraduate study to professional employment within Ireland's labour market. According to the 2023 report by the Irish Higher Education Authority, Nigeria is by far the largest source of African international students, representing 2.2% of the total international student population in Ireland. Within postgraduate business programmes specifically, Nigeria's dominance is even more pronounced, accounting for 2.4% of enrolments, compared to much smaller proportions from Ghana (0.2%), Kenya (0.3%), and Tanzania (0.1%). These figures mirror the composition of this study's participants, supporting the claim that the sample captures the most representative voices of African postgraduate business graduates transitioning into professional employment in Ireland.

3.4.7 Transferability

Although the findings are not statistically generalisable, they may be transferable to comparable contexts (Cena et al., 2024; Kojo Otoo, 2020). The experiences of these participants are likely to resonate with other highly skilled postgraduate migrants from the Global South pursuing professional careers in Global North host countries, such as other African nations, India, or the Philippines, particularly in settings where post-study transitions are shaped by similar visa regimes, labour market dynamics, and cultural integration challenges. To support transferability, thick descriptions of participants' narratives are provided in the findings chapters, enabling readers to assess the applicability of insights to other contexts. Furthermore, the study strengthens their potential relevance to research on skilled migration and career development more widely by situating the findings within broader integrative theoretical frameworks of SCCT and SLT.

3.5 Data Analysis: Thematic Analysis

In this study, reflexive thematic analysis (RTA) was adopted because it allows for the systematic identification of patterns embedded within participants' narratives while maintaining flexibility for interpretive engagement (Braun & Clarke, 2019, 2021). Although alternative methods such as grounded theory or content analysis could have been used, RTA provides a step-by-step framework that supports in-depth exploration of complex patterns in participants' experiences while remaining compatible with the study's interpretivist–constructivist paradigm and abductive design. Grounded theory, in contrast, primarily focuses on inductively generating new theory (Khan, 2014), which was not the aim here, as this study sought to explore participants' experiences through existing theoretical frameworks: SCCT, SLT, and the concepts of CS and CR. Content analysis, particularly when focused on coding reliability, tends to prioritise quantification or surface-level categorisation of data (Krippendorff, 2018), which may obscure the richness, nuance, and socially embedded meaning of participants' lived experiences.

Thematic analysis is a widely used qualitative research method for identifying, analysing, and organising patterns within raw data into coherent themes (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Campbell et al., 2021). It offers a systematic yet flexible approach to making sense of complex narratives by organising data into meaningful themes. According to Braun and Clarke (2013), thematic analysis provides a structured yet adaptable framework applicable across various epistemological positions, making it particularly suitable for research exploring subjective experiences. This approach is valuable in exploratory studies on learning and career development, as it enables researchers to capture how individuals construct meaning from their experiences. Importantly**,** reflexive thematic analysis foregrounds the researcher's active role in interpretation (Braun & Clarke, 2019). Through

reflexivity, the researcher critically considered how patterns were identified and interpreted, maintaining alignment with the study's interpretivist–constructivist paradigm while mitigating potential biases (Cena et al., 2024). This reflexive approach ensures that the analysis remains grounded in participants' narratives while acknowledging the researcher's influence in co-constructing meaning.

Thematic analysis not only provides a structured yet adaptable framework for qualitative inquiry but also facilitates an in-depth understanding of how experiences are shaped by social and contextual factors (Braun & Clarke, 2019). Within this framework, thematic analysis extends beyond individual perspectives to explore how structural and contextual influences shape participants' narratives. Analysing data from in-depth semi-structured interviews, thematic analysis provides insights into key aspects of participants' transitions, including motivations for migration, adaptation to Ireland's educational and professional landscapes, and the role of learning experiences in shaping career outcomes (Riessman, 2008). This method is particularly valuable for examining how learning occurs across different CoPs, such as formal education settings, peer migrant networks, and workplaces, and how these experiences collectively contribute to career development. The thematic analysis constructs a comprehensive understanding of how postgraduate migrants' learning experiences in Ireland facilitate their integration into the professional business landscape. The findings highlight the intricate ways in which education, social interactions, and multicultural engagements influence career trajectories, ultimately shaping participants' long-term professional growth.

Identifying and interpreting key themes within participants' narratives using thematic analysis not only reveals the individual learning processes of business postgraduate migrants but also provides

broader insights into the socio-cultural and contextual factors influencing their career development. This methodological approach underscores the significance of situated learning in shaping knowledge acquisition, skill development, and professional transitions, demonstrating the interconnectedness between education, social and cultural adaptation, and successful transition in the career development journey. This approach facilitated the identification of recurring themes and patterns in participants' narratives, offering a deeper understanding of how their learning experiences were shaped by Ireland's socio-cultural and professional environments.

The interview data were transcribed manually and analysed using thematic analysis to progressively identify patterns and emerging themes. Codes were generated from the data with the theoretical frameworks in mind, allowing for the integration of theoretical insights from the outset. These codes were then actively organised into broader themes. As broader themes were developed, they were revisited and refined through the lens of these guiding frameworks. This iterative process balanced insights from the data with theoretical concepts of CoP and the influence of learning experiences in CoPs on career development (especially self-efficacy) and career shocks, particularly during the post-study transition. This iterative movement between the data and the theory helped answer the research question and meet the research objectives. Ultimately, this approach facilitated the identification of key insights into career development and successful transitions, with findings emerging through a dynamic interaction between data and theory.

The analysis of transcripts followed Braun and Clarke's (2019, 2021) reflexive thematic analysis approach. Reflexive thematic analysis provides an interpretive means of analysing the data collected so that the overall report moves beyond merely describing the data. It explains how African business postgraduates employed in Ireland on work permit visa have developed their

knowledge and skills, particularly social and multicultural capital, and improved their self-efficacy to provide theoretically informed arguments as to how the data addresses the research question (Byrne, 2022). The analysis focuses on the different CoPs in which participants engaged at various phases of their learning journeys in Ireland that contributed to their knowledge and skills development and self-efficacy evolution, which, in turn, facilitated their career development. This reflexive thematic analysis approach, according to Nowell et al. (2017), enhances analytical rigour and transparency, strengthening the trustworthiness of the interpretive process. Reflexive thematic analysis enabled the researcher to synthesise three key aspects in the interpretive analysis of the data: first, the recurring patterns in the data as narrated by participants; second, the theoretical frameworks of SCCT and SLT, which guided the analysis; and third, the researcher's analytical ability to interpret participants' narratives, identify these patterns, and align them with the theoretical frameworks while remaining focused on the research questions. This approach emphasises the researcher's reflective, reflexive, and thoughtful engagement with the data throughout the analysis process (Braun & Clarke, 2019). Participants' profiles are presented in Appendix I, and details of the reflexive thematic analysis process are provided in Appendix II.

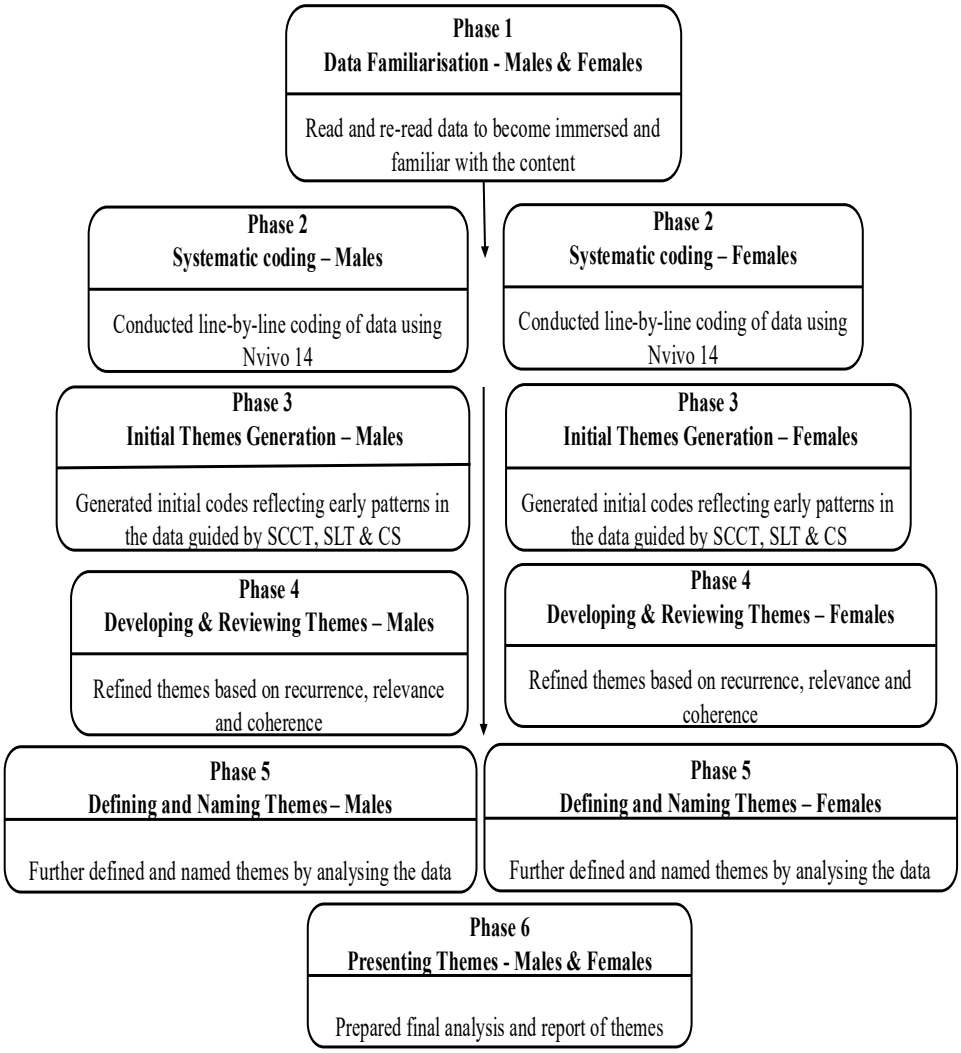


Figure 4: Thematic Analysis Process

3.6 Ethical Considerations in Research Participation

3.6.1 Informed Consent

Informed consent is a fundamental ethical principle that underpins the practice of qualitative research (Eungoo & Hwang, 2021). All individuals who participated in the study adhered to the principle of voluntary participation. Prior to their involvement in the study, participants were

informed about the purpose of the research, their rights as participants, and the voluntary nature of their participation (Corti et al., 2000). Participants were informed to the best possible extent concerning the nature of the study, which aligns with the ethical principle of informed consent, a foundational aspect of conducting qualitative research (Jefford & Moore, 2008).

As Richards and Schwartz (2002) highlight, the ethical guideline of informed consent ensures that participants willingly join the study with a full understanding of what their participation entails. Consent was obtained prospectively prior to participants engaging in the study, ensuring that they were well informed about the study's purpose, procedures, and any potential risks or benefits (Eungoo & Hwang, 2021). Only after this, arrangements were made for interviews, and participants were provided with the interview questions in advance to familiarise themselves with the content. The consent forms were presented in a manner that was accessible and comprehensible for participants. The form contained the participant's name, date, study title, and the participant's signature, along with a clear statement indicating the participant's full comprehension of the study details. Participants were also made aware of their right to withdraw from the research at any point without facing any negative consequences (Aluwihare-Samaranayake, 2012).

3.6.2 Confidentiality

In the study, participants' confidentiality was rigorously maintained. Although the researcher was aware of the participants' identities, strict confidentiality measures were implemented to create a safe environment for participants to disclose vital and sensitive information (Kaiser, 2009). Coded identifiers using generic labels like "participant 1" were used. Kang and Hwang (2021) emphasise that confidentiality in research involves not only securing data but also managing how it is shared and reported to avoid inadvertent disclosure. All data collected during interviews were carefully

handled to prevent any accidental or intentional exposure of personal information, and data files were securely stored to maintain privacy. Confidentiality assurance created a secure environment where participants felt comfortable sharing personal information relevant to the study. This careful management of confidential data was not just an ethical obligation but also crucial for protecting the rights and dignity of participants. By adhering to these practices, the researcher upheld high ethical standards, fostering trust and safeguarding participants' identities throughout the research process. This assurance is particularly important in qualitative research, as it fosters a trusting relationship between the researcher and participants, enabling more open and honest communication (Bell & Bryman, 2007).

3.6.3 Reflexivity and Positionality in Ethical Practice

Beyond the procedural ethics of informed consent and confidentiality, ethical research also requires attention to the researcher's reflexivity and positionality (Berger, 2015; Finlay, 2002). As discussed in Section 3.2.4, my position as an African postgraduate migrant in Ireland shaped both access to participants and the dynamics of data collection. While this insider perspective fostered rapport and openness, it also risked introducing assumptions or over-identification with participants. Reflexivity was therefore essential to ensure that participants' voices remained central, rather than filtered through my own assumptions (Finlay, 2002). To address this, reflexive strategies such as maintaining a research reflexive journal (see Appendix III) to document my reactions and decision-making during data collection and analysis, deliberately cross-checking emerging themes against participants' actual language to avoid imposing interpretations; and grounding interpretations in participants' accounts were adopted (Braun & Clarke, 2021). Integrating reflexivity into ethical practice sought to ensure transparency, minimise bias, and foreground participants' voices in the co-construction of knowledge. This highlights that ethics in

qualitative research extends beyond formal approval processes to include an ongoing reflexive commitment that safeguarded the integrity of participants' narratives and strengthened the credibility of the knowledge co-constructed throughout the study (Guillemin & Gillam, 2004; von Unger, 2021).

3.7 Method Justification

Given that this study explores the integration and transition processes of highly skilled business postgraduate migrants from the Global South, specifically Nigeria, Ghana, Kenya, and Tanzania, who have moved to Ireland for postgraduate education and career development, it followed methods adopted by scholars in similar research in answering the research question and achieving the research objectives. The research investigates how these migrants transition from the Global South to the Global North, with particular emphasis on the impact of their situated learning experiences on their career development in Ireland, the shocks they encounter, and the strategies they adopt to build resilience and self-efficacy. Furthermore, the study investigates the gender dynamics and barriers faced by these migrants, examining how they navigate the challenges encountered during their migration and transition. To gain insight into these complex experiences, the researcher adopts an abductive qualitative approach to data collection, enabling interaction between existing theories and participants' lived experiences. This approach allows for a robust understanding of the participants' journeys through flexible and guided inquiry, fostering the collection of rich data for a thorough thematic analysis. The study also investigates how skilled business postgraduates from the Global South participate and engage within CoPs to foster self-efficacy development while pursuing career goals and managing career shocks as they transition into professional roles in Ireland. It acknowledges the intricate, interconnected barriers these

migrants face as they move from their home environments to the Irish system and further assesses how their learning experiences contribute to their post-study career success.

In line with established methods in similar studies, this research adopts approaches employed by O'Connor and Crowley-Henry (2020) and Robertson (2011), who utilised semi-structured interviews to collect data on the transition experiences of skilled migrants from their home countries to host countries, as well as the experiences of international students transitioning into the workforce in Australia referred to as "student switchers." Goodwin (2019) also utilised semi-structured interviews to investigate how communities promote self-efficacy and career optimism in creative workers' career development. A broad body of research has also highlighted the value of qualitative data, particularly the use of in-depth interviews, in exploring how skilled migrants develop their knowledge, skills, and careers abroad. For example, Al Ariss and Syed (2011) investigated how skilled migrants from developing countries mobilised capital in pursuit of international careers. Arthur and Flynn (2011, 2013) focused on the career needs of international students as temporary immigrants, exploring their decision-making processes and transitions into permanent employment. Likewise, Blackmore et al. (2014) examined the employment pathways of international graduates from Australian universities in professions experiencing skill shortages, and Gribble et al. (2017) studied how international student connections contribute to the development of crucial employability skills in the Australian job market. Recently, Lam and Rui (2022) conducted semi-structured interviews to examine knowledge transfer from host to home countries among highly skilled African returnee migrants who studied and worked in developed economies, framed through a situated learning lens. In line with these existing studies, this research conducts in-depth interviews to understand how highly skilled international student migrants learn

through social interactions and participation in various CoPs within educational and workplace settings in Ireland, ultimately aiming to achieve successful post-study career outcomes.

SCCT serves as a crucial lens for understanding the career development of participants (see also Goodwin, 2019). SCCT posits that individuals' career choices and success are influenced by personal factors, environmental supports, barriers, and self-efficacy beliefs. This theory facilitates an exploration of how the participants' beliefs in their capabilities interact with the various opportunities and challenges they face in the Irish labour market, shedding light on their career trajectories as skilled migrants. Furthermore, CS addresses unexpected disruptions that can significantly impact an individual's career path. By incorporating CS, this research examines how skilled migrants experience and manage career shocks during their transitions, providing insights into their coping mechanisms and resilience in the face of challenges. Understanding these dynamics is vital for capturing the participants' experiences and the factors influencing their successful transition in career development within the Irish context comprehensively. Finally, the application of SLT is particularly suitable for this study, as it conceptualises knowledge development as a socially embedded process requiring active participation and interaction within the learning environment. Combining these methodological approaches and theoretical frameworks, this study aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of the experiences of highly skilled business postgraduate migrants from the Global South, offering valuable insights into their career development, integration processes, and the role of social and cultural interactions in their success.

3.8 Rationale for Nigeria's Dominance in the Study Sample of African Business Postgraduates in Ireland

Nigeria's dominance among the study participants in this research is rooted in several factors. Nigeria's status as Africa's most populous nation and largest economy makes it a focal point in understanding the dynamics of international student migration, particularly among highly skilled business postgraduates. According to the 2023 report by the Irish Higher Education Authority, within the African context, Nigeria stands out as the largest source of international students, contributing 2.2% of the total international student population in Ireland. More specifically, in business postgraduate programmes, Nigeria is even more dominant, representing 2.4% of the student body, while other African countries such as Ghana (0.2%), Kenya (0.3%), and Tanzania (0.1%) make up a much smaller proportion.

The dominant representation of Nigerian students in business postgraduate programmes in Ireland reflects broader migration trends, where Nigeria is recognised as one of the largest sources of international students. The projections from Lam et al. (2019), supported by data from the United Nations, Department of Economic and Social Affairs (2019, 2022), underscore Nigeria's critical role in the future of global migration, with its population expected to grow from 206 million in 2020 to 401 million by 2050, and further to 732 million by 2100.

Also, as the country with the highest population growth in sub-Saharan Africa, Nigeria's demographic shift aligns with the growing global demand for skilled professionals. The rapid increase in Nigeria's young, working-age population further drives the migration of skilled business postgraduates. Therefore, it is valuable to the realisation of the UN SDGs, Ireland's Strategy for Africa 2025, and Africa's Agenda 2063 to study the economic and social impacts of

the migration of Nigerian business postgraduates to Ireland on the sustainable development of Africa and Europe. Furthermore, a recent report by Campus France in 2016 revealed that Nigeria ranks second after Morocco in the international mobility of African students, with Europe accounting for 49% of their destinations. This is also reflected in the Nigeria Market Sentiments and Study Motivations Report (2022), which shows that nine out of every ten Nigerian students are seeking opportunities to study abroad. Additionally, reports from the ICEF Monitor (2021, 2022) show that Nigerian graduates are increasingly migrating to developed countries for postgraduate education and work experiences, with Ireland being one of the preferred destinations. Since the early 2000s, the continuously increasing rate of unemployment has caused a mass migration abroad of Nigerian graduates for postgraduate studies. The increasing number of Nigerian students migrating for higher education in the Global North is evidenced by the high proportion of Nigerian study participants in this research. With 30 out of 35 participants being Nigerian, this aligns with larger trends in skilled migration and reflects Nigeria's substantial presence in the international student body in Ireland.

The research design adopted in this study is illustrated below, providing a visual representation of the study's philosophical underpinnings, reasoning approach, data collection, analysis, and theoretical construct development.

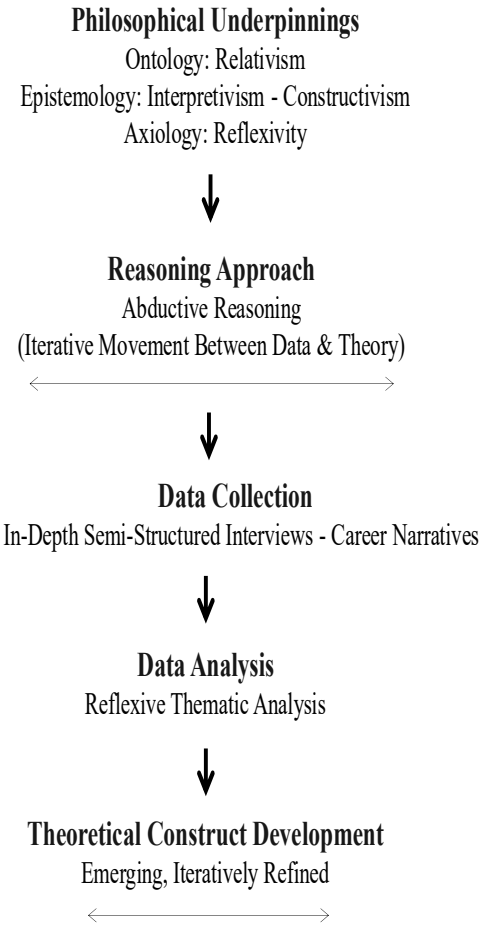


Figure 5. Research Design

3.9 Conclusion Summary

A systematic qualitative methodology was employed to address the research question and achieve the study's objectives. It is grounded in an interpretivist and constructivist research philosophy, which recognises that knowledge is socially constructed through experiences, interactions, and engagement within different contexts. This perspective is particularly relevant to understanding the career trajectories of highly skilled business postgraduate migrants from Nigeria, Ghana,

Kenya, and Tanzania as they transition from postgraduate education to employment in Ireland. The study is guided by SCCT, CS Theory, and SLT, all of which are rooted in constructivist thought. SCCT provides a framework for examining how self-efficacy, outcome expectations, and personal goals influence career development. However, SCCT alone does not fully capture the unpredictability of career transitions, which is why Career Shock Theory is incorporated to explore how migrants respond to unexpected disruptions in their professional journeys. SLT plays a critical role in understanding how migrants acquire and refine their skills through participation in CoPs, where learning occurs through social engagement, observation, and interaction in real-world professional environments. These theoretical lenses, firmly anchored in constructivist epistemology, allow for an in-depth exploration of how learning experiences, career shocks, and social networks shape career development and knowledge transfer.

To gain rich insights into these experiences, data were collected through in-depth, semi-structured interviews with 35 business postgraduates from Nigeria, Ghana, Kenya, and Tanzania. These individuals completed postgraduate business studies in Ireland and have been employed in international companies in Ireland for at least two years under a Stamp 1 visa (work permit status). The interviews, conducted via Zoom calls, explored participants' pre-migration experiences, study-year interactions in Irish institutions, and post-study career development. Purposive sampling was used to recruit participants via LinkedIn based on their educational and professional backgrounds to ensure alignment with the study's focus.

Strict ethical considerations were maintained, including informed consent and confidentiality, to uphold research integrity and minimise bias. The interview questions were carefully designed to align with the study's objectives, focusing on how situated learning experiences contribute to

knowledge acquisition, skill development, and career success, as well as how gender, race, and educational background intersect to shape career trajectories in the host country. Integrating SCCT, CS, and SLT within a constructivist epistemology and an interpretivist research paradigm, this study provides a nuanced understanding of skilled migration, career transition and development, and knowledge transfer in a globalised labour market. Through qualitative inquiry, it captures the complex interplay between learning, elements of career development, and contextual challenges, offering valuable insights into how highly skilled migrants navigate professional transitions and build sustainable careers.

4.0 Chapter Four: Presentation of Findings

4.1 Structure of the Findings

This chapter presents the findings generated through the thematic analysis of the interview data. The analysis is guided by the study's research questions and objectives, which serve as the framework for organising the presentation of results. The findings are thematically structured to reflect the participants' experiences and insights as they relate to the transition from education to employment and the development of career pathways within the Irish context.

Drawing on the theoretical lenses SCCT, SLT, and CS Theory, the analysis aims to highlight the key mechanisms, contextual influences, and learning experiences that shape the career development of highly skilled migrants from Nigeria, Ghana, Kenya, and Tanzania. The themes identified are not only reflective of participants' narratives but also indicate broader patterns of meaning that address the central concerns of the study.

While detailed thematic findings are presented in the sections that follow, this chapter offers a coherent account of how the data answers the research questions, foregrounding participants' voices and lived realities in a manner that connects empirical experience with theoretical insight. The findings are presented as a holistic narrative capturing the trajectory of participants' career development journey during the period studied, from leaving their home countries for postgraduate education to becoming professionals in the host country. This structure reflects the lived phases of transition as narrated by participants, from their initial motivations to their future intentions.

Home Country

- **Phase 1: Pre-Migration**

This phase captures participants' motivations, aspirations, and expectations prior to migration. It focuses on their rationale for choosing specific education pathways and Ireland as a destination, along with the goals they set at the beginning of their journey.

Host Country

- Phase 2: Education Experience

  This phase explores participants' initial adaptation to Ireland through academic learning, social integration, and early skill development. It highlights how engagement within the host country, primarily through the university environment, shaped their learning and career development journey.

- Phase 3: Post-Study Transition Experience

  This phase captures the critical liminal period following graduation, characterised by career uncertainty, extended job searches, unanticipated barriers, and significant informal learning. It reveals how participants navigated immigration constraints and systemic challenges.

- Phase 4: Professional Career Experience

  This phase details participants' eventual entry into professional spaces, their adaptation to workplace norms, and the development of self-efficacy, confidence, and professional identity in the host country.

- Phase 5: Future Plans and Knowledge Transfer

  This phase focuses on participants' long-term goals, including aspirations for citizenship, entrepreneurship, and career progression. It also covers the nature of knowledge transfer taking place.

4.2 Phase 1: Pre-Migration

This phase explores participants' motivations for pursuing international education as a migration strategy, with particular attention to their choice of Ireland as a host country. A consistent pattern emerged: participants strategically chose the education pathway as a dual-purpose route, which many described as a way to "kill two birds with one stone." Their primary goal was to gain an internationally recognised qualification while simultaneously using education as a platform to access global labour markets (De Haas, 2021; Leung, 2017; Wang & Lent, 2022). This dual goal aligns with the goal-setting construct within SCCT, which explains how individuals proactively shape their career trajectories by identifying and pursuing meaningful objectives. Participants regarded education not merely as a phase of personal development but as a calculated and strategic entry point into the international workforce. It also represented an alternative to direct skilled migration routes, which often involve more restrictive entry barriers.

Their decisions were underpinned by perceived and anticipated outcome expectations that, by studying in a Global North country such as Ireland, they would increase their chances of securing professional roles abroad and achieving upward mobility. These expectations reflected foresight, optimism, and a calculated belief in the potential returns on their investment. Furthermore, participants' narratives revealed a strong sense of self-efficacy. They displayed confidence in their ability to succeed academically and professionally in a new environment. This self-belief in their competence drove their decision to embark on an ambitious international journey.

4.2.1 Motivations for Emigrating to Ireland through the Education Pathway

For both male and female participants, the decision to migrate to Ireland through the education route was primarily shaped by a combination of linguistic, academic, professional, and systemic factors. Predominantly, the appeal of the opportunity to remain in the country after graduation through the post-study work visa, along with the English-speaking environment, emerged as a central driver. Participants across genders viewed this as facilitating academic participation and social integration, particularly compared to other non-English-speaking European destinations. The influence of education agents in promoting Ireland as a multinational hub offering international career opportunities also appeared as a significant and recurring theme. Many participants relied on promises made by these agents, with some describing how agents "practically laid out the whole plan," emphasising Ireland's welcoming visa system, globally recognised institutions, and work opportunities post-graduation. Job prospects were at the core of migration decisions. Participants described Ireland as offering genuine potential for employment after graduation, especially given the presence of multinational technology companies. These employers were viewed not only as potential workplaces but also as indicators of Ireland's dynamic economy. For most participants, the two-year post-study work visa was a powerful enabler, providing a realistic chance to transition into the labour market and build international work experience. Participants also perceived studying in Ireland as a pathway to broader international careers. The country was framed as a "launchpad" for global professional aspirations, with its internationally recognised degrees and location within the European Union offering long-term strategic value.

4.2.1.1 Stay-Back Opportunity through the Two-Year Post-Study Work Visa

Participants expressed that their ultimate goal was to remain in the host country and build their careers in an international, advanced economy. This goal fuelled persistence and resilience, particularly in navigating the uncertainties of migration and career transition. A dominant motivation for choosing Ireland as a study destination was the two-year post-study work visa, which was widely perceived as offering a strong return on investment (ROI) for the high cost of international education. Participants viewed the post-study visa not simply as an immigration advantage but as a crucial part of a longer-term career strategy that allowed them to remain, gain work experience, and potentially transition to permanent residency or citizenship (Grimm, 2019; Robertson, 2011). The goal construct in SCCT explains how individuals transform their self-efficacy beliefs and outcome expectations into intentional actions aimed at future career achievements (Tetteh et al., 2022). The finding that many participants were drawn to Ireland specifically because of the two-year post-study work visa supports prior research identifying tertiary (third-level) education pathways as a strategic mechanism for attracting skilled migrants (Chaloff & Lemaître, 2009; She & Wotherspoon, 2013). As observed in participants' narratives, the ability to gain work experience and recoup investment by transitioning to long-term residency were major decision-making factors. This finding reinforces the view that immigration and education policies are deeply interconnected in shaping skilled migration flows.

This motivation is situated within broader patterns identified by Prazeres (2013) and Wei (2013), who noted the growing global trend of pursuing international tertiary education, especially among students from the Global South. Participants' narratives reveal not only the desire for high-quality education, but also a strong focus on post-study employability potentials and settlement

opportunities, confirming that academic aspirations are often embedded within broader economic and migration strategies (Chen, 2006; Monk, 2012). Additionally, this finding underscores the core-periphery dynamics in global education systems (Macrander, 2017; Perkins & Neumayer, 2014). indicates that economic opportunity and migration infrastructure can be as influential as educational quality in shaping student choices. This finding also illustrates how countries in the Global North, such as Ireland, respond to skill shortages by strategically positioning international tertiary education as a rewarding migration pathway. By offering a two-year post-graduate visa, Ireland attracts highly skilled migrants, particularly from the Global South, who view this as a structured opportunity to gain work experience and transition into the host labour market. This aligns with broader global policy shifts, where states implement education-linked immigration routes to supplement domestic talent gaps (Ariss et al., 2012; Ziguras & Law, 2006). In this context, Ireland's post-study visa can be understood as mutually beneficial to the country and the international students, as it is not just as a student benefit, but as a deliberate state response to workforce needs and demographic pressures, further entangling the goals of international education with national economic strategy.

Ireland, as part of the Global North, represents a desirable destination not only because of its English-speaking environment and relatively short degree duration but also because it offers a structured post-study migration route, which is an increasingly decisive factor for students from the Global South. Furthermore, Wei (2013) emphasises that international students consider the economic status of destination countries when making study decisions. This is echoed by participants who framed Ireland's post-study visa as a way to gain ROI and participate in the host country's labour market. This indicates that economic opportunity and migration infrastructure can be as influential as educational quality in shaping student choices.

Additionally, in accordance with Choudaha's (2017) analysis of global international student mobility trends, this study also supports the notion that international students, particularly those from the Global South, increasingly view international education in the Global North as a pathway not merely for academic enrichment but also for career advancement and long-term integration into host-country labour markets. Choudaha's third wave (2013–2020) highlights a growing demand for career-oriented support among international students, reflecting a shift from earlier needs focused on financial or academic assistance. The motivations, experiences, and expectations articulated by participants in this study, including the desire for post-study work opportunities, employer sponsorship, and pathways to residency and citizenship, echo these evolving priorities.

"As an international student, I was actually looking for ROI for schooling. I just don't want to go to school and come back. I searched and I found out that I'd be done with your master's in 1 year and I'll get 2 years post-study visa. So, it looked like the ultimate ROI." – Participant 14 (F)

"It was those two factors actually that attracted me: the 2 years post-study work visa and the fact that there was a clear pathway, once you have your 2 years and a job with sponsorship, there was a clear pathway to citizenship." – Participant 33 (F)

"At the time the universities used to advertise the 2 year post-study visa, that's one of the other reasons why I chose Ireland." – Participant 6 (F)

"I think the 2 years post-study visa was one of the main attractions because I wanted to gain more experience in a foreign country. That was the only selling point really." – Participant 10 (M)

"I had to pick somewhere that at least you could stay back or give you the opportunity to stay back and earn whatever money that I'm putting back." – Participant 13 (M)

"Ireland was giving a 2 year postgraduate visa that gives you an opportunity to look for a job when you're done so that's what exactly encouraged me to come here." – Participant 34 (M)

Across participants, the post-study work visa was not viewed in isolation but as part of a broader strategic migration trajectory, aligning with long-term aspirations to stay, work, and eventually settle. The marketing of this visa by Irish institutions, though often vague on specifics, played a significant role in shaping pre-migration expectations and decisions.

4.2.1.2 English Speaking

Another strong motivating factor in participants' decision to choose Ireland as a study destination was the comfort and practicality of studying in an English-speaking country. This is because they believed moving from their English-speaking home countries to an English-speaking host country would ease both academic participation and day-to-day communication, reducing the cognitive and social stress associated with relocating to a new environment. Their confidence in their proficient ability to speak English proficiently is relatable to Bandura's (1997) self-efficacy construct in SCCT, where individuals assess their capability to perform tasks successfully, which in this case is navigating academic and professional settings in a familiar language (Chiswick & Miller, 2001). However, many participants did not anticipate the subtle challenges related to accents and cultural communication styles, which emerged as unexpected barriers during their integration process. For participants in this study, all of whom came from English-speaking countries in the Global South, Ireland's status as an English-speaking nation was a key factor in their decision-making process. This linguistic continuity provided a sense of comfort, enabling easier academic engagement and smoother day-to-day interactions in both educational and social settings. Participants frequently described how the ability to communicate fluently from the outset

helped reduce the psychological and cultural strain of international relocation and allowed them to focus on building career-relevant competencies. Most participants expressed reluctance or anxiety about learning a new language and described Ireland's English-speaking environment as a key differentiator when weighing study destinations:

"I think I saw it online that Ireland was the only English speaking in Europe. I want to go through the stress of writing English tests. So that was one of the reasons." – Participant 1 (M)

"I did not want to learn another language because I don't think I am that person. So, I had to go to somewhere that speaks English." – Participant 13 (M)

"I was looking at English speaking countries just because it was easier for me, I've never really been good at learning languages, even my own as well. So, I filtered out non-English speaking countries." – Participant 27 (M)

"I wanted to go to an English-speaking school. Because I didn't want to, I didn't want to mix being in a new environment with trying to learn a new language." – Participant 14 (F)

"If it wasn't for the English bit then I would have probably leaned towards Germany. But in Ireland they speak English. So English was definitely one of the selling points, like one of the main points as to why I moved here." – Participant 23 (F)

"I had done my research; Ireland was the only country that I felt language was not going to be a big deal for me. I don't think I can school in a country where I have to learn a new language because language is communication and is so important to me. Be clear, concise with my communication.

So, the last thing I want is to struggle in communicating with people or people understanding me. So, for that reason, language was also like a major thing." – Participant 32 (F)

These reflections reinforce the significance of language as both a practical and emotional consideration in migration decisions. Ireland's use of English emerged not only as a logistical advantage but also as a key part of the country's appeal in the global higher education landscape.

4.2.1.3 Presence of Technology Companies

Participants' narratives strongly reflect Ireland's position as a strategic destination for international students seeking not only quality education but also access to globally competitive enterprises. Ireland's reputation as a hub for multinational technology companies significantly influenced participants' study destination decisions, reinforcing research identifying Ireland as a global centre for top-ranking higher educational institutions and international firms (OECD, 1994; Teigland et al., 2021, 2022). This reflects positive outcome expectations, in other words, the belief that studying in Ireland would yield career-relevant benefits due to its technological ecosystem. For example, Participant 16 (F) explained, "I kind of like looked at the whole Ireland situation, and also the economy and I also realised that the big companies, they all have like their headquarters here in Ireland... so it kind of like made sense to actually choose Ireland over other countries." Similarly, Participant 15 (F), who initially planned to go to Australia, recounted, "Then someone told me to try a different agency… the guy told me oh, there's this country, it's called Ireland, there is a lot of, international tech companies in Ireland." Likewise, Participant 12 (M) noted, "I was a business analyst back home and from my research, I could see that Ireland was booming in terms of the technological sector." Others echoed this perspective. Participant 25 (M) remarked, "I knew that Ireland had a lot of tech giants, American tech giants," while Participant 13 (M) added, "many

of the headquarters of the big companies were here. LinkedIn, Apple." Participant 3 (M) recalled a conversation with a relative: "Ireland is opening up as the European capital of a lot of technology companies… pharmaceuticals, manufacturing, tech companies opening up here because of the tax breaks they get." Participant 4 (M) concluded, "There are jobs. They are tech companies that have headquarters here in Ireland… and you'd easily get a job when you're done."

These narratives illustrate how the perceived integration between Ireland's higher education and global enterprise sectors, particularly in the technology sector, serves as a critical motivator for Global South students. Ireland was not seen merely as an academic destination but as a platform for professional and long-term migration goals, shaped by both structural opportunities and socially construed expectations.

4.2.1.4 Education Agents

The influence of education travel agents was found to be significant in shaping students' destination choices through persuasive narratives about Ireland's job opportunities, thriving technological ecosystem, and favourable post-study pathways. While many participants initially lacked awareness of Ireland as a potential host country, agents played a critical role in constructing a compelling image tied to relatively affordable tuition fees, employability potential, post-study opportunities, and the country's status as an English-speaking hub with global enterprises. This reflects wider global mobility patterns and marketing mechanisms. The influence extended beyond destination choice. The agents' portrayal of seamless transitions from study to employment significantly shaped participants' outcome expectations, which are a key construct in SCCT. Many participants entered the Irish higher education system with strong beliefs that studying there would lead directly to employment. These beliefs were often reinforced by agents' assurances, which in

turn contributed to a heightened sense of self-efficacy regarding their ability to succeed in a global labour market (Bikos et al., 2021; Wang & Lent, 2022). This confidence was integral to their decision-making process and initial optimism about navigating the Irish labour market post-graduation.

Several participants had not considered Ireland until advised by agents. Participant 23 (F) shared, "I planned to go to Australia, I had never even heard of Ireland to be honest... And the agent told me, they speak English... they have good schools and there are jobs, all these tech companies are there. So, you're guaranteed, you'll get a job. The fees were a lot more affordable in Kenya shillings, and that was about 2 million compared to Australia, it was about like 7 million. That's how I moved here."

Affordability and access to post-study work rights were consistent selling points. Participant 21 (F) noted, "One agent said I should try Ireland… They will give 2 years after your master's, and they also give the benefit where a lot of companies… have their headquarters here." Participant 20 (F) also recalled how an agent helped pivot her focus from Canada: "I met an agent who spoke to me about offers in Dublin… the post-study visa… was one of the major things that attracted me."

In some cases, agents initiated contact, and their influence was pivotal in building assurance and framing Ireland as a legitimate, opportunity-filled destination. Participant 9 (M) said, "I filled a form online… I got a message from that agency… they really encouraged me… I was like, what is happening in Ireland? I only know them for Guinness... I didn't know so much." Similarly, Participant 24 (M) admitted, "I wanted to go to Canada… but my agent was like; I could go to Dublin… The agent told me… they have a similar set-up to the UK in terms of English speaking, 2 years post-study… that is fine." Participant 30 (F) simply stated, "My agent told me to come to

Ireland." These accounts demonstrate that agents do not simply facilitate logistics; they construct meaning around host destinations. For some, this influence shaped long-term life plans. Participant 5 (M) explained, "A travel agent essentially sold Ireland to me with the 2 years graduate visa… and the fact that all the big companies are moving their headquarters to Ireland because the UK was going to leave the EU. So, it made sense… there will be a lot of opportunities."

4.3 Phases 2–5: Migration

Upon arriving in the host country, participants' narratives reveal that they did not exist in isolation. Instead, they actively engaged with a variety of social learning spaces throughout different stages of their educational and professional development in Ireland. These spaces served as critical building blocks that supported their learning, adaptation, and evolving sense of professional identity. According to Lave & Wenger's (1991) SLT, these social spaces are CoPs, that is, groups of individuals who share a concern or passion for something they do and learn to do it better through regular interaction, collaboration, and knowledge exchange (Wenger, 2011). Participants' journeys illustrate a trajectory from peripheral participation as newcomers to more central involvement as confident professionals, supported by their engagement in CoPs across academic, transitional, and professional domains.

4.3.1 CoPs

Drawing on SCCT and SLT**,** the data show that the careers of highly skilled business postgraduate migrants from Nigeria, Ghana, Kenya, and Tanzania develop as they navigate transitions from education to job search, and ultimately to full-time professional employment in Ireland. This developmental trajectory is shaped through participation in various social learning spaces,

interpreted as CoP. From a SCCT perspective, learning experiences play a pivotal role in enhancing skills, building competence, and fostering self-efficacy, which are critical factors in transitioning from education to employment (Lent et al., 1999; Paolini, 2015). Meanwhile, SLT highlights the importance of social interaction and collaboration within CoPs (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Pg Hj Besar, 2018), where learning is not merely the acquisition of knowledge but an evolving process of becoming part of a community with shared goals. Drawing on SLT (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 1998, 2011), the data reveals that participants' career development unfolds through engagement in three interconnected yet distinct CoPs. These CoPs reflect Lave & Wenger's core dimensions of mutual engagement, joint enterprise, and shared repertoire, and are grounded in the lived experiences of participants.

4.3.1.1 First Learning Space

As revealed in the data, participants' learning and career development journey begins as they engage and interact within the university community with students (learners) from multicultural backgrounds who share a passion for obtaining an internationally recognised master's degree in the business field. This marks their first and initial learning space. This learning community emerged through participants' formal enrolment in postgraduate business programmes in Irish higher education institutions. This CoP was institutionally defined, with clear goals, established structures, and repeated opportunities for peer interaction and collaborative learning. All participants were embedded in classroom environments where knowledge-sharing and mutual engagement were facilitated through group assignments, presentations, and peer-led discussions. Participants were not simply co-present in classrooms; they built working relationships through sustained collaboration and problem-solving. As Participant 25 (M) explained:

"They encouraged a lot of team building through groups, mixed teams for assignments with individuals from different cultural and racial backgrounds. It made me a better team player, which I think is important when working in any business setting."

Similarly, Participant 22 (F) reflected on how structured multicultural groups fostered meaningful collaboration:

"Group assignments were designed to mix nationalities… It pushed me to collaborate with others, understand their perspectives, and improve my communication skills."

Participants collectively engaged in navigating Irish academic expectations while meeting the rigorous demands of their programmes. This shared enterprise extended beyond completing assignments to mastering culturally and academically unfamiliar ways of working. As Participant 9 (M) recalled:

"We shared responsibilities on real-world projects… which taught me technical skills like web design and also how to work with people from different backgrounds." The emphasis was not only on finishing projects but on collectively adapting to and succeeding in the host country's academic culture.

While their ultimate goals were individually held, participants narrated that they regularly interacted with peers to exchange knowledge, offer support, and adapt to the demands of the Irish academic system. These peer interactions, both formal (in group assignments) and informal (through social conversations and shared problem-solving), suggest elements of mutual engagement, particularly in navigating academic and cultural challenges. This CoP functioned both in person and online, depending on the time (e.g. during COVID-19, it functioned online) and

the nature of the learning activity. Participants described engaging in physical classroom collaboration, group project meetings, and online interactions with shared slides via tools such as Zoom, WhatsApp, Microsoft Teams, and Google Meet. Participant 15 (F) explained:

"During the lockdown, we met mostly on WhatsApp and Zoom… sharing slides, doing voice notes… We still helped each other."

Although this CoP is not formally labelled or institutionally organised as such, participants' accounts point to a loosely connected, experience-based community in which knowledge and encouragement are shared. Their shared focus on academic success within a foreign system reflects a form of collaborative effort, shaped less by institutional coordination and more by a collective desire to succeed in a common learning environment. Evidence from participants' narratives indicates that this first learning space functioned as a CoP, thus referred to as the Education CoP. In line with Lave and Wenger's (1991), the Education CoP provided a clear site for legitimate peripheral participation, especially for international students as newcomers adjusting to unfamiliar academic and sociocultural norms. Participants entered as relative novices to the expectations of academic communication, teamwork, and professional conduct in the Irish context. Over time, they reported building foundational self-efficacy through exposure to new practices, peer collaboration, and performance feedback from instructors. A shared repertoire of academic strategies, communication norms, and practical tips began to form within this peer group, contributing to participants' growing self-confidence and skill development. This emergent learning community laid a foundation for future adaptation and professional engagement. As Participant 16 (F) noted:

"Working in different teams for projects helped me learn to adapt to different ways of thinking and communicating."

This repertoire included culturally attuned communication norms and problem-solving approaches suited to multicultural teams. These resources persisted beyond individual projects, enabling quicker and more confident collaboration in future work. Through this combination of mutual engagement, joint enterprise, and a growing shared repertoire, the Education CoP provided a site for legitimate peripheral participation, particularly for international students as newcomers to Irish academic and sociocultural norms.

Table 1

Representative Data Evidence of Education CoP

Participant	Gender	Representative Quote	CoP Features		
			Mutual Engagement	Joint Enterprise	Shared Repertoire
9	M	"We shared responsibilities on real-world projects… which taught me technical skills like web design and also how	Shared responsibility in projects requiring technical and interpersonal skills	Delivering real-world projects, mastering academic and cultural expectations	Technical skills, collaborative working strategies, intercultural teamwork

		to work with people from different backgrounds."			
15	F	"During the lockdown, we met mostly on WhatsApp and Zoom… sharing slides, doing voice notes… We still helped each other."	Sustained virtual collaboration under remote conditions	Completing assignments remotely during COVID-19 restrictions	Use of virtual platforms (WhatsApp, Zoom), cooperative habits, knowledge sharing
16	F	"Working in different teams for projects helped me learn to adapt to different ways of thinking and communicating."	Engaging in diverse team interactions requiring flexibility	Adapting to multicultural teamwork demands	Adaptive communication styles, problem-solving approaches, team dynamics
25	M	"They encouraged a lot of team building by creating groups, mixed teams for assignments with	Collaborative multicultural group work encouraging team-building	Completing mixed-nationality assignments, developing	Teamwork practices, intercultural communication

		individuals from different cultural and racial backgrounds. It made me a better team player, which I think is important when working in any business setting."	and interpersonal skills	teamwork skills applicable in business	skills, problem-solving methods
21	M	"Working in a group with classmates from India, Brazil, Ireland… we had to navigate accents, different ways of thinking. It forced me to listen better, to express myself more clearly."	Active, face-to-face collaboration in multicultural teams requiring adaptation to linguistic and cultural differences	Co-producing solutions to case studies and assignments while accommodating diverse perspectives.	Development of inclusive communication practice, and negotiation of meaning strategies.
22	F	"Group assignments were designed to mix nationalities… It pushed me to	Cross-cultural collaboration in mixed-	Shared goal of academic success through	Communication norms, perspective-taking,

		collaborate with others, understand their perspectives, and improve my communication skills."	nationality groups	group assignments.	negotiation of meaning.
15	F	"During the lockdown, we met mostly on WhatsApp and Zoom… sharing slides, doing voice notes… We still helped each other."	Sustained online interaction and peer support despite lack of physical contact	Joint responsibility for progressing and completing shared academic tasks in a remote setting.	Mastery of virtual communication tools (WhatsApp, Zoom) and cooperative online work habits that could be reapplied in later contexts.
3	M	"We had to analyse a company case and present as a team. Everyone had different strengths, so we divided the	Reciprocal engagement through coordinated teamwork and	Collaborative completion of a complex academic deliverable, case	Established practice of task-based role allocation, peer-to-peer skill transfer, and

		work… Someone good at data, someone at presenting. We learned from each other."	recognition of individual expertise	analysis and presentation.	combining complementary abilities.
8	F	"In one of our module assignments, the group work made us share ideas constantly. Sometimes we argued, but we always came back to the brief. I learned to value different opinions and stay focused on the task."	Ongoing interaction sustained through both agreement and disagreement, underpinned by mutual commitment to the group	Collective commitment to fulfilling the assignment brief despite interpersonal and cultural differences.	Shared norms for conflict resolution, consensus building, and goal-focused collaboration.

4.3.1.2 Second Learning Space

In the pursuit to remain and work in the host country, which has been a central goal shaping participants' decision to study abroad from the inception of their migration journey, a new and

unexpected community of learning emerged after graduation. This community emerged as a loosely connected, unstructured, informal learning space made up of international postgraduate migrants, borne out of the reality of their current circumstance of being by themselves, left to figure out their own path post-graduation. With institutional support from universities no longer available, participants described relying on peer networks, informal relationships, and shared resources to navigate the unfamiliar and often exclusionary landscape of the Irish post-study job market. This community is not predefined or formally organised; rather, it arises for the individuals by necessity, shaped by shared uncertainties such as visa limitations. It operated primarily through online platforms like WhatsApp, LinkedIn, and occasionally through in-person interactions, for example, peer meetups and gatherings. Members exchanged job leads, visa information, emotional support, and practical advice for navigating Irish work systems. While each participant experienced this phase differently, the data reveal a common concern about how to transition from student to recognised professional in a context where pathways are unclear. This learning phase is referred to in this study as a "transition CoP" and shows that individuals' shared concerns foster mutual engagement, as participants exchange job leads, offer emotional support, interpret visa and employment policies together, and share strategies for overcoming rejection and discrimination. While each participant navigated their own version of the transition period, a collective concern soon began to bind them: how to shift from student to legitimate professional in a system where the rules were hidden, inconsistent, or exclusionary. This common concern formed the basis for mutual engagement. Participant 25 (M) reflected that after discovering the effectiveness of LinkedIn referrals, he felt compelled to "help the next person," creating a chain of reciprocal support that kept knowledge circulating in the group. Similarly, Participant 22 (F) described being added to a WhatsApp group where visa rules were decoded and job sponsorship possibilities

openly discussed, a space she said "kept [her] from feeling lost." Participant 9 (M) recalled how the group provided not just information but direction, with peers advising on which employers to target and how to present oneself as a credible candidate. For Participant 15 (F), the trust and generosity were "unexpected but essential," as she received detailed CV feedback from people she had never met in person. Participant 16 (M) recounted how mock interview sessions organised in the group boosted his confidence and sharpened his job search strategies.

Through this ongoing engagement, a joint enterprise began to emerge. As Participant 22 (F) put it, "the mission was securing post-study employment in Ireland despite systemic obstacles. We would literally sit down on calls and break down what the visa rules meant, line by line, because it wasn't clear anywhere." This shared mission was visible in members working together to interpret sponsorship regulations and in participants' efforts to identify high-potential employers. It was also evident in efforts to identify high-potential employers, as Participant 9 (M) explained: "people would tell you, this company sponsored my friend, apply there, avoid this one, they don't select non-EU candidates." It shows how learning occurred through direct engagement with others who had faced the same hurdles. Over time, a shared repertoire began to form through these interactions, such as knowledge of specific employer expectations, techniques for tailoring CVs, or informal "rules" for navigating the job search as a migrant. Although loosely organised, this CoP played a critical role in participants' adaptive learning and career persistence. It represented a period of trial-and-error learning, identity negotiation, and self-efficacy development in response to career shocks and systemic barriers.

Given that the study cohort comprises only individuals who successfully transitioned, the phase between graduating from university and securing a permanent professional job in the business field

in the host country is unique in the narratives of every participant. The journey they experienced in this liminal stage to learn how to achieve their ultimate goal did not occur through a book or formal teaching but through interactions, engagement, asking questions, reaching out, and joining groups of people who shared similar identities in the new environment. This represents a unique form of learning that is both fundamental and crucial in this study. The Transition CoP in this study emerged as a striking and theoretically significant finding that is distinct from conventional CoP concepts in SLT because it developed not within institutions but outside them.

Least expected from the standpoint of existing theory, this stage became the most critical means through which participants learned to navigate the shift from newcomers to professionals in the host country. Whereas situated learning theory and prior CoP literature often locate such developmental processes within formal institutions, either in academic environments or professional workplaces (Fox, 1997; Goodwin, 2019; Hotho et al., 2014; Janson et al., 2004; Jugdev & Mathur, 2013; Pg Hj Besar, 2018), this study shows that, in contexts where skilled migrants face structural barriers and marginalisation, learning can instead be anchored in non-institutionalised, self-driven participatory learning spaces. All participants migrated to Ireland, expecting that their prior professional experience, combined with a Master's qualification, would allow a seamless transition into business practice. In reality, the post-study period presented substantial systemic, informational, and discriminatory obstacles. In the absence of targeted institutional support, participants forged their own peer-driven, adaptive, and highly collaborative learning environment, that is, the Transition CoP.

These individuals represent a minority of international student migrants who succeeded in a system in which they were marginalised. The Transition CoP was neither planned nor formally

recognised; however, it marked a pivotal phase in their endeavour as an informal yet powerful community of practice that offered learning, support, and career guidance in the absence of formal structures. This Transition CoP represents a distinctive form of post-migration learning. It is both adaptive and collective. It highlights how marginalised yet highly motivated individuals generated a new learning system from the ground up. It challenges assumptions about where and how career development occurs in skilled migration. Thus, it extends SLT by demonstrating that CoPs can also be informal, emergent, and necessity-driven, playing a decisive role in shaping professional integration.

Table 2

Representative Data Evidence of Transition CoP

Participant	Gender	Representative Quote	CoP Features		
			Mutual Engagement	Joint Enterprise	Shared Repertoire
10	M	"We had a WhatsApp group… people would post job links, someone would say, 'Avoid that one, they don't sponsor', or 'This recruiter is helpful'. That's how I learned which	Peer-guided navigation of the labour market	Securing visa-compliant employment.	Knowledge of recruiters, sponsoring companies, visa timelines.

		companies were realistic."			
15	F	"Someone I'd never met before sat with me on Zoom and went line by line through my CV until it was tight."	Peer feedback and mentoring despite lack of formal connections	Common goal of preparing competitive applications to secure jobs.	CV templates, tailoring techniques, and application best practices.
20	F	"Nobody tells you clearly how the Stamp 1G works or how to apply for critical skills. I learned everything from previous postgraduate student migrants and friends who had gone through it."	System navigation, informal mentoring	Transition to work and visa status.	Application processes, CV tailoring and interview preparation
22	F	"We would literally sit down on calls and break down what the visa rules meant, line	Collaborative interpretation of complex visa	Shared mission to navigate visa and sponsorship	Understanding of sponsorship policies, visa timelines, and

		by line, because it wasn't clear anywhere."	regulations in WhatsApp groups	challenges for post-study employment.	practical guidance.
25	M	"When I found out that LinkedIn referrals actually worked, I started referring others too. We sort of built a chain… someone helped me, I helped another person."	Reciprocity and peer support through LinkedIn referrals	Collective goal of securing permanent jobs through professional networking.	Referral culture, strategic job search language, and leveraging LinkedIn connections.
4	M	"I joined a WhatsApp group where we shared which companies were actually sponsoring… it felt like a lifeline… I even helped others with their CVs based on what worked for me."	Ongoing online peer interaction	Mutual goal of finding work permit visa sponsors.	CV templates, company lists, peer mentoring.

16	F	"We did mock interviews where they grilled me harder than the real ones; that's what made me ready."	Interactive practice and confidence building through mock interviews	Collective mission to improve interview skills for better job outcomes.	Interview strategies, question handling techniques, and confidence-building exercises.
18	F	"I joined a WhatsApp group called Home4All, where members shared information about companies that were actually sponsoring… it felt like a lifeline. People would post job links, give feedback on CVs, and even do mock interviews. I wouldn't have known	Ongoing peer interaction and emotional or practical support	Shared goal of finding sponsored employment in a challenging system.	Access to job lists, CV feedback, and interview practice, all emerging from the group's activities and shared experience.

		where to start without that group."			

4.3.1.3 Third Learning Space

The third learning space becomes visible once participants secure permanent employment and begin engaging as recognised professionals within formal organisational settings. This phase marks a transition from the uncertainty of the post-study period to a more stable form of participation in structured, institutional work environments. This space is referred to in this study as the Professional CoP. As participants enter these spaces, they begin to interact regularly with colleagues, clients, and other professional groups within and beyond their organisations. It functioned through on-the-job collaboration, cross-functional teamwork, and mentorship, both in person and virtually, depending on the sector.

For Participant 1 (M), this meant learning "from mistakes, gaining experience from senior members, managers, and everything from colleagues," highlighting the importance of daily professional interactions in shaping workplace competence. Participant 12 (M) described how "every job that I have done in Ireland has prepared me for this moment… I have experience from at least 5 sectors," illustrating how varied work histories enriched current professional performance. Similarly, Participant 18 (F) found her role "groundbreaking" and praised her "awesome" team and "amazing" manager for the steep learning curve and support provided.

For some, engagement in the Professional CoP also meant immersion in inclusive organisational cultures. Participant 2 (F) noted that her company "encourages inclusion" and that she had "not

outrightly experienced" workplace discrimination, showing how organisational values shaped learning and participation. In leadership contexts, Participant 6 (F) explained how her HR position enabled her to "set the pace" for workplace culture while also "learning from them in terms of how things are done," showing a reciprocal exchange between individual agency and organisational norms.

Through work-based collaboration, collegial mentorship, team projects, and cross-functional interactions, they developed mutual engagement in the expectations, language, and norms of professional practice. The joint enterprise in this CoP centred on fulfilling organisational responsibilities, contributing to business goals, and navigating professional growth within the host country's labour market. Participants began to consolidate and expand upon their prior learning, drawing from both academic and transitional experiences while adapting to the specific demands, routines, and unwritten rules of their workplaces. Over time, a shared repertoire emerged, including industry-specific language, digital tools, behavioural norms, and context-specific understandings of professional conduct shaped by Irish organisational culture. This repertoire was not static but continually refined through participation and interaction. The data suggest that this is the stage where participants began to develop a more stable sense of self-efficacy and professional identity. Through continued engagement, they shifted from being perceived and perceiving themselves as novices in the host country to being recognised as competent, contributing professionals in their field. This transition reflected not only a milestone in employment but also a deeper integration into the host country's professional landscape.

Table 3

Representative Data Evidence of Professional CoP

Participant	Gender	Representative Quote	CoP Features		
			Mutual Engagement	Joint Enterprise	Shared Repertoire
1	M	"I learned from mistakes, gained experience from senior members, managers, and everything from colleagues. I am gaining experience in my workplace."	Ongoing workplace interaction with colleagues and managers	Building skills and knowledge to progress professionally	Practical lessons from mistakes, mentorship input, and workplace processes
2	F	"They try to encourage inclusion… I've not outrightly experienced that type of barrier at the workplace."	Inclusion-focused engagement in workplace culture	Achieving equal participation and professional growth	Inclusive communication practices, cross-cultural understanding
6	F	"I sit on the leadership team… I get to set the pace… I'm also learning	Reciprocal learning with leadership peers	Shaping and sustaining an inclusive	Leadership strategies, HR professional practices, and

		from them in terms of how things are done."		workplace culture	cultural awareness
12	M	"Every job that I have done in Ireland has prepared me for this moment… I have experience from at least 5 sectors… it has really helped my career."	Learning from diverse roles and sectoral contexts	Advancing to a specialised role with broad expertise	Sector-specific knowledge, adaptable problem-solving skills
15	F	"It was more like job experience, much more than what I… I just improved in like taking on more responsibility, mentoring, escalations, mid-level management… the longer you stay, the more responsibilities you take."	Ongoing participation in workplace practices	Skill & competence improvement, role mastery.	Workplace norms, management practices, mentoring roles.

18	F	"It's been groundbreaking… I have learned so much; my team has been awesome. Also, my manager is amazing."	Collaboration and support from the team and manager	Excelling in a mid-senior role through team-based learning	Professional competencies, role-specific expertise
32	F	"My director told me, 'You remind me of a younger me.' That encouragement stayed with me… I developed more confidence, writing, public speaking, analytical skills… It was gradual, through each job."	Mentorship and personal development	Self-efficacy and skill development.	Performance narratives, feedback interpretation.

These identified CoPs are not abstract theoretical labels but are identifiable in the narratives of participants. They act as mechanisms through which learning, adaptation, and professional identity formation are socially situated and temporally sequenced. Participants' journey through these

CoPs reflects a dynamic, nonlinear process of career development from the Global South to the Global North. This journey is embedded in social interaction, contextual challenge, and evolving participation within and across learning communities. Together, these CoPs function not as external constructs but as mechanisms through which learning, adaptation, and professional identity formation occur. Participants' movement through these communities reflects a dynamic process of socially situated learning across time and space from the Global South to the Global North. The findings suggest that their career development was not an isolated or linear process but rather a socially constructed journey shaped by dynamic participation in learning communities across different stages of integration.

Having outlined the three learning spaces in which participants engaged, the following data structure illustrates how these learning experiences translated into confidence building. Table 4 shows the progression of data analysis, moving from detailed first-order codes, through clustered theoretical categories, to the aggregate theme of Confidence (Self-Efficacy) Development.

Table 4

Analytic Progression of Data: Confidence (Self-Efficacy) Development

First Order Codes	Theoretical Categories	Aggregate Theme
Becoming comfortable over time and "coming out of shell"	Peripheral participation, teamwork, cultural collaboration	Confidence (Self-Efficacy) Development

Teamwork experience improved confidence, tolerance, and communication Learning to manage diverse personalities and collaborate across cultures	Adjustment and collaborative learning	
Exposure to multicultural peers and observing confidence traits Presentations, class discussions, interactive sessions boosted self-expression Lecturer openness and encouragement to ask questions	Observing multicultural peers' confidence behaviours Vicarious learning and mastery accomplishments Learning through performance and social modelling	
Knowledge acquisition and structured course learning raised belief in self Carrying on self-belief to workplace: speaking up in meetings, interviews, tasks	Mastery experiences Transfer of mastery experience into career growth Social persuasion	

Peer and mentor support reinforced confidence building Greater self-belief in ability to achieve personal career goals	Transfer of mastery experience into career growth	

4.3.2 Confidence (Self-Efficacy) Development

Confidence building emerged as a crucial aspect of skilled postgraduate migrants' career development as they progressed from education, through job searching, and into full-time permanent employment in Ireland. The data also indicated that through their engagement in these CoPs, participants gradually built confidence shaped by their learning experiences in each community. Confidence building through participants' learning experiences aligns with SCCT, which proposes that learning experiences shape career development through self-efficacy, outcome expectation, and an individual's goals (Appling et al., 2022; Lent et al., 1994, 1999; Schaub & Tokar, 2005; Tetteh et al., 2022). This evolving sense of confidence was closely tied to their development of self-efficacy as they progressed through each CoP. In other words, the CoPs served as fundamental learning mechanisms through which participants developed their careers and transitioned from education to professional life, moving from their home countries to Ireland. Confidence developed gradually and was shaped by learning experiences within three interconnected CoPs: Education, Transition, and Professional. Their confidence was interpreted as self-efficacy (see also Lent et al., 1999, 2000; Valbusa et al., 2025) shaped by their learning experiences in their career development journey. Evidence of self-efficacy, as conceptualised in

SCCT, was strongly reflected in participants' narratives of career development in the host country. The gradual evolution of confidence through participants' learning experiences within and across the Education, Transition, and Professional CoP was found to significantly shape their career development as they moved from postgraduate students to emerging professionals in Ireland. This confidence, evidenced through participants' growing belief in their ability to navigate complex tasks, adapt to new environments, and achieve career goals, was interpreted through the theoretical lens of self-efficacy, a central construct in SCCT. In the context of career development, self-efficacy refers to individuals' beliefs in their capability to perform tasks successfully and achieve desired outcomes (Bandura, 1977, 1986; Lent et al., 1994; Wang & Lent, 2022; Low et al., 2025).

Participants demonstrated and reflected on their confidence levels at various phases of their journey, often linking growth in confidence to specific learning and adaptation experiences. While confidence proved to be a valuable resource throughout the journey, participants' narratives revealed that its development was neither linear nor consistently upward. Many experienced significant fluctuations, particularly in the Transition CoP, where repeated rejections, uncertainty, and systemic barriers led to stalled and declining confidence. This period, described as particularly disruptive and emotionally challenging, marked a critical turning point in their career trajectories.

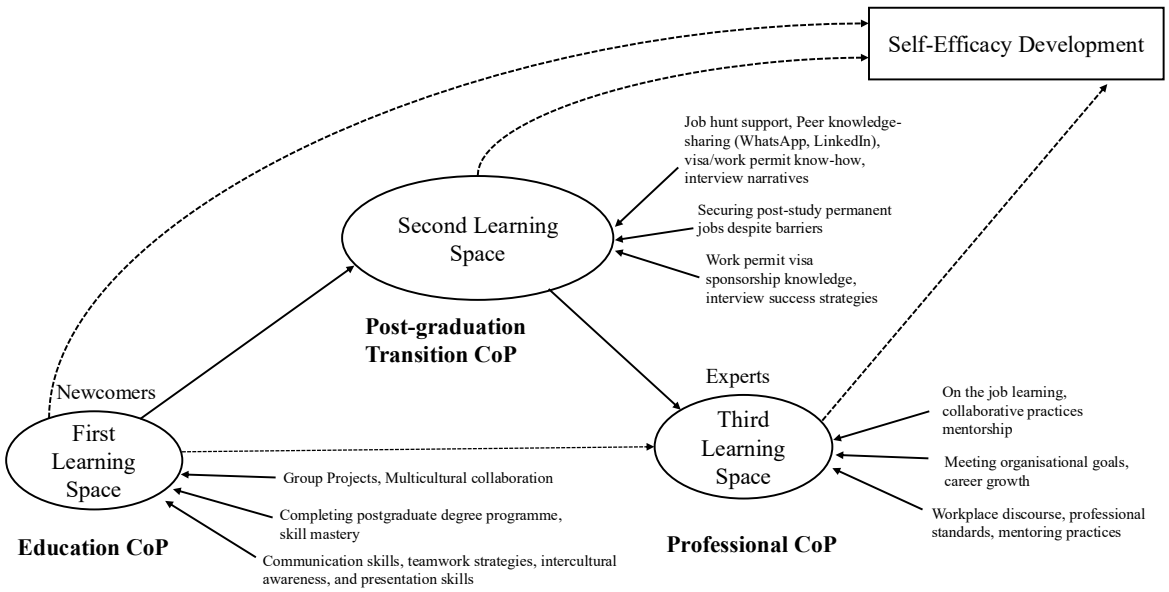


Figure 6. CoP Formations and Functions

The conceptual framework introduced in Chapter 2 (Figure 1) provided the foundation for analysing how self-efficacy, outcome expectations, and goals (SCCT) interact with learning processes (SLT), and how this process can be disrupted by career shocks. It also highlighted the role of resilience in enabling a rebound in self-efficacy and overcoming such disruptions in shaping the career development of skilled postgraduate migrants. As the findings unfolded, it became clear that this framework not only guided the analysis but also evolved in light of the data. Specifically, the findings highlighted that career development is best understood as occurring across three interconnected learning spaces (Figure 5): the Education CoP, where participants first build intercultural and academic competencies; the Transition CoP, where post-study uncertainties and shocks test their resilience and self-efficacy; and the Professional CoP, where they consolidate their identities as experts through workplace learning and mentoring. This progression shows how the initial conceptual framework developed into a more dynamic understanding of the migrant

journey. While the model anticipated the role of shocks and resilience, the findings demonstrate the centrality of the Transition CoP as the pivotal site where career shocks are encountered, resilience is mobilised through peer learning, and self-efficacy is rebuilt. Thus, the learning spaces framework represents an evolved and deeper extension of the conceptual foundation, firmly grounded in participants' lived experiences.

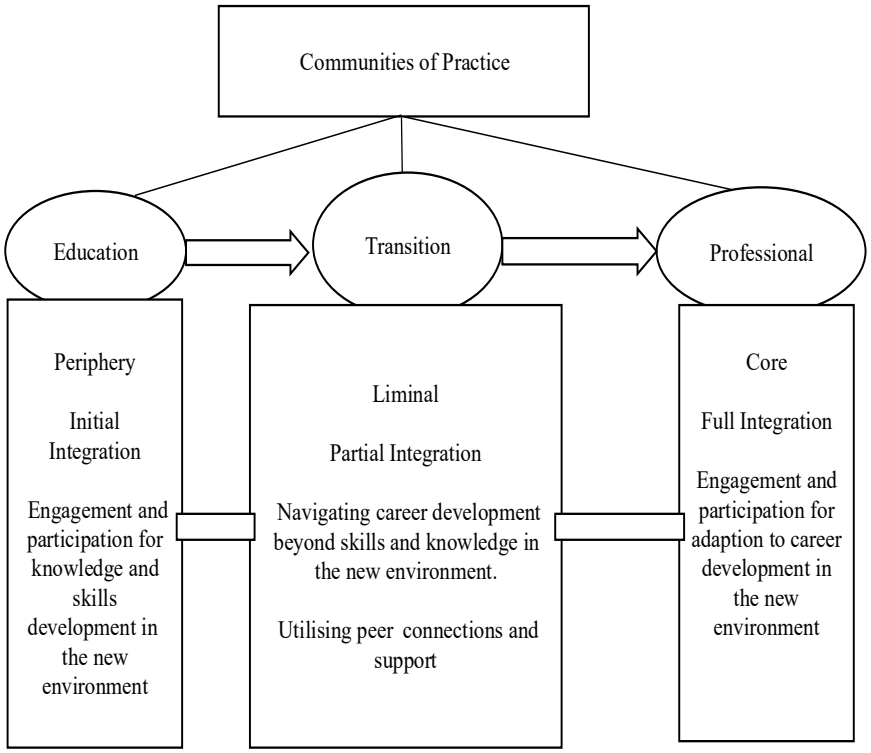


Figure 7. The CoPs That Facilitate Career Development from Education to Professionalism

4.4 Phase 2: Education CoP – Early Stage Self-Efficacy Development through Foundational Cognitive and Multicultural Skills

The Education CoP marked the participants' first learning space, giving them exposure to formal learning and multicultural interactions in Ireland. For many, this was a transformative space that fostered not only academic skills but also essential interpersonal and cultural competencies. The average time spent in the Education CoP was approximately 12 months, corresponding with the duration of most one-year master's programmes. Despite limited institutional career guidance, the collaborative and multicultural dynamics of the classroom provided rich opportunities for skill building, laying a critical foundation for participants' transition into professional environments.

The education community of practice was not only a site for acquiring knowledge but also offered individuals the opportunity to recognise their abilities, thus assuring their self-confidence in their capacity to navigate unfamiliar academic and cultural terrains. Self-efficacy, as SCCT underscores, evolves through mastery experiences, vicarious learning, social persuasion, and affective states (Bandura, 1977; Lent et al., 1994). For these individuals, the acquisition of cognitive, interpersonal, and multicultural skills functioned as the primary channel through which their early confidence was nurtured. Within this community, they began learning how to navigate diversity, negotiate group dynamics, and develop an array of transferable skills, including writing and research, communication, patience, and multicultural awareness.

Table 5

Analytic Progression of Data – Building Foundational Cognitive and Multicultural Skills

First Order Codes	Theoretical Categories	Aggregate Theme

Developing presentation skill Strengthening communication skill Enhancing critical thinking and problem-solving Improving research and analytical skill Gaining interpersonal relationship skills	Cultivating cognitive and interpersonal skills Mastery experiences through vicarious learning	Foundational Cognitive and Multicultural Skills
Learning patience in cross-cultural collaboration Managing group conflicts and diverse temperaments and behaviours	Collaborative and participatory learning Making meaning from cultural identities	

Embracing diversity and developing cultural intelligence Building teamwork across linguistic and cultural differences Developing self-confidence through mastery experiences in solving complex task with peers in groups		

4.4.1 Skills Shaping Early-Stage Self-Efficacy Development

The skills developed in the Education CoP, which underpinned participants' early-stage self-efficacy, were primarily categorised as (i) cognitive and interpersonal skills, and (ii) multicultural and collaborative competencies. These skills were foundational to participants' ability to adapt, communicate, and integrate effectively within the multicultural and diverse host context. Participants consistently described how group assignments, classroom debates, and collaborative projects with peers from diverse backgrounds exposed them to different cultural norms, communication styles, and team dynamics. The data reveal that cross-cultural awareness, effective

teamwork, and collaboration are critical skills for business graduates navigating the complexities of the 21st-century globalised workplace. Situated learning in international education provided a unique platform for participants to engage in authentic, multicultural teamwork, fostering the ability to navigate cultural differences, develop mutual understanding, and contribute meaningfully in diverse professional environments (Alshare & Sewailem, 2018; Butler & Zander, 2007; Welch & Welch, 2015).

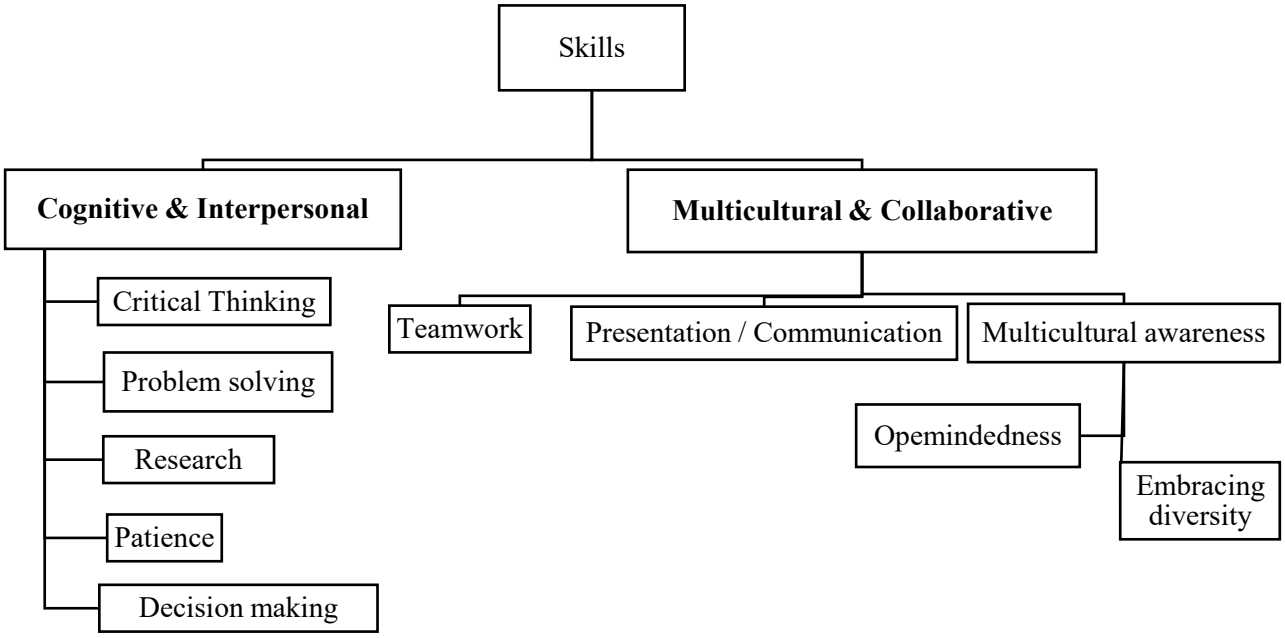


Figure 8. Key Skills Developed by Participants During the Postgraduate Transition – Cognitive and Interpersonal and Multicultural and Collaborative Competencies

Participants consistently emphasised the development of communication, presentation, teamwork, and multicultural collaboration skills through which their self-efficacy developed. For example, participants described how teamwork required them to adapt communication styles, manage cultural nuances, and exercise patience, consequently strengthening their self-belief to succeed in a multicultural new environment. These experiences were particularly shaped by group assignments and class discussions that required interaction across cultural lines. This allowed them to first acquire and practise knowledge within these structured social contexts before participating confidently in external, real-world settings. The participants' learning trajectories reflect this process, where academic engagement served as an essential stage in preparing for more complex and less structured professional environments (Pg Hj Besar, 2018). Here, they engaged in learning that was not isolated from context but deeply tied to social participation. SLT posits that students construct meaning by linking academic content with their lived experiences, enhancing both learning effectiveness and personal engagement. This process includes not only cognitive acquisition but also emotional adaptation and identity formation (Pederson, 2012).

Participant 1 (M) recalled, "I learned… different cultures… we had Indians, we had Brazilians… we can interact with each other… share ideas… and I get to know about more cultures and more countries." Similarly, Participant 4 (M) noted how group work with classmates from India, China, and Ghana helped them "learn a lot about their cultures and also learn how to interact," despite occasional language-related challenges.

Participant 14 (F) highlighted how cultural nuances shaped communication effectiveness. Despite speaking English, she was surprised by how unshared cultural cues could lead to misunderstandings and tension: "Someone you might speak in English language with… but

because there are cultural nuances lost… that communication becomes ineffective." She reflected on how indirect communication styles clashed with more direct ones in multicultural group work, leading to misinterpretation and frustration. These multicultural encounters often pushed participants to reflect on and adjust their own behaviours. Participant 9 (M), for instance, described a cultural shock when his assertiveness was misread: "I had to learn that our tone appears to be aggressive… I'm not aggressive… I learned to manage my tone… our assertiveness is being considered rude… people are very sensitive here." Participant 19 (M) spoke more generally about learning to navigate different temperaments: "You will develop patience when you're working with people like that." Participant 30 (F) echoed this sentiment, saying, "It was a lot, but you just have to be patient… that's one thing I took away from it: patience, teamwork, time management." Participant 18 (F) provided a particularly reflective account of how these cultural exposures reshaped her mindset. Coming from a mono-cultural environment in Nigeria, she was initially struck by the confidence and outspokenness of classmates from Europe and India. She noted that while Nigerian culture often discourages speaking out as "disrespectful," she learned from peers who asked questions freely and actively challenged lecturers. She admired their confidence and collaborative nature, remarking that such experiences helped her "learn that life is very dynamic… you have to be able to switch and be open to changes." Participant 6 (F) reinforced the value of this exposure, explaining how group diversity required her to adjust communication styles across age and experience levels: "There were people fresh out of school… and others who were directors… and it was important to know how to manage each person." She described how this multicultural learning environment expanded her perspective: "If I was thinking 80% before, I started thinking 120… there's just so many things that could happen."

These reflections highlight how participants developed not only academic capabilities but also emotional and social resilience, which are skills critical for future integration into diverse work environments. As Participant 15 (F) put it: “The biggest part of my learning was the multiculturalism… it just opened my eyes. Diversity is great because everyone brings different perspectives on problem-solving.” Participant 13 (M) reinforced this by stating she deliberately selected diverse group members “with the mindset that in the work life, it was going to be that diverse… so the earlier I could cope within that circumstance, the better for me.” Notably, female participants more frequently mentioned the development of time management skills. Participant 30 (F), for instance, highlighted how group work required “creating time… your time management, everything was there,” a theme absent in males’ narratives. This potentially suggests a gendered difference in how certain competencies are recognised or internalised.

Initial adjustment to the Irish academic environment also posed a challenge. Participant 11 (F) described struggling to understand lecturers during the early weeks: “Most people… just pretend as if they hear what the lecturer is saying, but they don't understand.” However, over time, many adapted and gained confidence. The same participant later reflected: “At the beginning… I just observed… but as time went by, we became friends, and I became comfortable… and then built my confidence.” Peer-led learning emerged as an essential support mechanism during this period. Participant 8 (F) recounted forming a reading group: “We came together… to help each other because most of these lecturers just do their thing and leave… it was from those conversations I learned about internships.” These informal peer spaces not only facilitated academic success but also enabled participants to access career-related insights that institutions often failed to provide.

Indeed, institutional support for post-study career development was widely described as limited and generic. Participant 9 (M) remarked, “The school… wasn’t assisting in getting you that required role. There’s an office for career advice… they can help with CVs… but the actual hands-on support wasn’t there.” Participant 8 agreed, stating, “There was no support… the max they did was help us with CVs and LinkedIn profiles.” Participant 2 (F) described career fairs as superficial: “Little to no support… just a career fair where a company employee talks to you briefly… and that’s it.”

While participants did encounter challenges such as understanding lecturers’ accents or adjusting to new academic expectations, peer-led learning spaces played a compensatory role. These peer practices embody SCCT’s proposition (Lent et al., 1994) that learning experiences shape individuals’ self-efficacy and ultimately career development. Interpreted data in this study revealed that the impact of the learning experiences of the participants in the Education CoP was gradual and described as follows.

4.4.2 Self-Efficacy Evolution in Education CoP

In the Education CoP, confidence was initially foundational, as participants began adjusting to a new academic system and life in Ireland. Over time, this evolved into emerging confidence, fostered by collaborative learning with peers, engagement in multicultural classrooms, and guided support from lecturers. Participants also built a sense of capability through continuous assessments and positive reinforcement from institutional structures. By the time they approached the end of their studies, many had reached the recognised stage of self-efficacy where they felt confident in their ability to complete academic tasks and had internalised their progress. However, this confidence was mostly situated in the academic space. Participants often mentioned attending

generic CV workshops offered by their colleges, but these provided limited practical preparation for navigating the competitive and nuanced Irish job market. They came to realise that while helpful, the workshops lacked detailed insights into what employers in Ireland actually expected. This gap became more apparent in the next CoP.

4.4.1.1 Foundation Self-Efficacy

In the initial stage of the Education CoP, participants demonstrated a foundational level of belief in their abilities to perform well in a new multicultural academic setting and as they adjusted to a broader cultural context in Ireland. This phase was marked by unfamiliarity, observation, and the cognitive load of adapting to unfamiliar teaching and learning methods, accents, academic referencing, and cultural expectations.

"At first, it was hard to even speak in class. I kept comparing myself to others, especially those used to the system here. I wasn't sure if I could cope, but I just kept going." Participant 25 (M)

"Everything was different, the style of writing, the group work, even just how to email a lecturer. It made me feel small at the beginning." Participant 19 (M)

This stage reflects the early learning experiences that shape initial self-efficacy (Lent et al., 1999; Paolini, 2015). These participants engaged in the process of "learning to learn" in a new context, laying the groundwork for more advanced career development competencies later.

Bandura emphasised that self-efficacy is built gradually through mastery experiences, which at this stage included small academic wins such as adjusting to interacting and collaborating with culturally diverse groups and learning to have an open mind.

4.4.1.2 Emerging Self-Efficacy

As participants became gradually familiar with the new academic learning environment, their confidence began to emerge through regular engagement with academic tasks and peer collaboration. Multicultural classrooms played a significant role, offering participants the chance to develop intercultural competence, adapt their communication styles, and learn from diverse perspectives. Continuous assessments, constructive feedback, and supportive academic staff further nurtured this emerging confidence.

"I started enjoying presentations. Before, I was terrified. But when we had to do them often, I realised I could actually speak up, and people listened." – Participant 11 (F)

"Having classmates from different countries was so helpful. We were all learning together. I saw that I wasn't alone in feeling lost sometimes." – Participant 3 (M)

"One of my lecturers always gave detailed feedback. Even when I didn't do well, I knew what to improve. That really boosted my belief in myself." – Participant 31 (F)

This resonates with SCCT's emphasis on vicarious learning and social persuasion (Lent et al., 1994), which contribute to the strengthening of self-efficacy. In this stage, participants began to internalise competence not just through academic performance but also through collaborative and situated learning practices (Schaub & Tokar, 2005; Tetteh et al., 2022). Their experiences reflect that effective learning environments play a key role in nurturing self-efficacy.

4.4.1.3 Recognised Self-Efficacy

By the end of their academic programmes, many participants had reached a stage of recognised confidence. They felt capable of completing advanced academic tasks, managing their workloads, and producing high-quality work. They had, in effect, developed academic self-efficacy: a belief in their ability to succeed in their studies and complete tasks independently and proficiently.

"Looking back, I surprised myself. I was getting distinctions and even helping others. I felt like I had grown so much." Participant 33 (F)

"I used to be so unsure, but towards the end, I could handle group projects, presentations, everything. I had confidence in my skills." – Participant 11 (F)

However, this recognised confidence remained largely situated within the academic domain. Participants frequently noted that, despite their academic growth, they felt underprepared for the realities of the Irish labour market. Generic CV and interview workshops offered by institutions, while helpful, lacked contextual specificity and failed to bridge the gap between education and employment.

"The workshops in school helped, but they were too general. It didn't prepare us for the kind of rejections or expectations we later faced." Participant 23 (F)

"They said write a CV, but they didn't tell you how Irish employers think, or what matters beyond the paper. That part was missing." Participant 35 (M)

This reinforces Lindley's (2005) argument that while self-efficacy may flourish in one domain (e.g. academia), it does not automatically transfer across contexts without targeted support. It also

reflects the conceptual distinction in SCCT between confidence in performing well under ideal conditions versus overcoming structural barriers or unfamiliar demands (Lent et al., 2000). Although academic self-efficacy had been demonstrated, participants encountered new uncertainties in the transition to employment after they left the education CoP. The uncertainties, which are most evident in the Transition CoP and conceptualised as career shocks, are explored further in the next phase. This analysis examines how participants' self-efficacy evolved in response to these shocks, and how they managed or navigated them in ways shaped by their emerging sense of agency and confidence. Their confidence was rooted in mastery experiences (Bandura, 1977), built during academic success and the interactive learning processes in Ireland. It also reflects high self-belief stemming from a perceived transferability of skills from school to the workplace (Lent et al., 1999; Paolini, 2015).

4.5 Phase 3: Transition CoP: Mid-Stage Self-Efficacy Development through Informal Learning and Demonstrating Resilience in Overcoming Post-Study Shocks

Although SLT has been predominantly applied to structured and formal settings within academic or classroom-based environments (Fox, 1997; Fuller et al., 2005; Hodgkinson-Williams et al., 2008; Pg Hj Besar, 2018; Tight, 2004), and in some cases organisational or workplace settings (Cox, 2013; Welch & Welch, 2015; Goodwin, 2019), data analysis revealed a previously undocumented yet highly consequential learning space: the Transition or Liminal CoP. The Transition CoP emerged as a second and the most crucial learning space, which marked a pivotal phase in participants' career development journeys. This informal and unstructured CoP occurs after graduation, during the post-study visa period, when participants are no longer embedded in institutional settings but are not yet integrated into the professional workforce. In this liminal

phase, participants found themselves largely on their own, navigating the complexities of the Irish labour market with limited or no institutional guidance. While they had exited the formal Education CoP and had not yet fully entered the Professional CoP, they remained actively engaged in learning, albeit through informal and experiential means. The Transition CoP, therefore, represents a space of necessity, created by the absence of structured pathways but fuelled by the hope of professional recognition and career integration.

Despite its informality, the learning that took place in this CoP was described by participants as among the most impactful of their entire journey. Learning in this phase was deeply social, situated in real-life struggles, and driven by active participation in a community bound not by formal structures but by shared challenges and goals. Participants consistently highlighted the abrupt end of university support after graduation, which left them in what one described as "a kind of vacuum." In response, they formed or gravitated toward informal peer migrant networks that enabled them to continue developing skills and strategies essential for entering the professional world.

As Participant 14 (F) explained, "After graduation, there was a kind of vacuum. You don't belong anywhere… you just wake up and keep applying. It was very lonely." The lack of formal institutional pathways or guidance during this phase forced many to turn to informal networks, personal reflection, and trial-and-error learning to navigate their career trajectories. Institutional neglect remained a consistent theme. Participant 8 (F) described feeling abandoned: "Once we graduated, the university just forgot about us. There was no follow-up, no guidance." Career services were described as transactional rather than strategic. Participant 2 (F) lamented, "They helped me with my CV, but not with where or how to apply. It felt very basic." Several participants

mentioned turning to online forums, YouTube videos to learn skills in demand, and to migrant WhatsApp groups to learn job seeking and interview strategies with their graduate visa status. This space was where they encountered the most significant challenges and many unanticipated disruptions to their plans, interpreted as career shocks.

Participants described how their expectations of a smooth transition from education to professional employment in Ireland were often met with harsh realities. These included barriers such as lack of local experience, limited networks, visa-related restrictions, and implicit biases based on race, nationality, or accent. Many expressed that they were unaware of these complexities until they faced them directly. Participants described being unprepared for the structural and hidden challenges that shaped their transition into the Irish labour market. Many arrived with the belief that completing a master's degree would lead quickly to professional employment, especially in multinational companies. Instead, they encountered visa constraints, limited networks, and the devaluation of foreign work experience. Participant 23 (F) said she had envisioned a straightforward path from graduation to success in a top tech company. “Getting a job in my head, I thought would be instant... it had been marketed to me that oh, there's all these big tech companies here... So, I knew, I'm going to finish, maybe go work for Google, make my millions... So that was the idea I had in my head.” Participant 12 (M) also expected a quick transition, only to be met with persistent rejection. “When I was coming here... the moment I finish my master's degree, I will start applying for jobs... I wanted to get a job as a business analyst... but I tried and tried... it was impossible.” Participant 25 (M) shared a similar experience of disillusionment. “I thought that immediately after my master's, I will land a very good, nice job... but then after my master's, reality set in... I didn’t work as a student... After graduation, I started working in Mr. Price as a retail store assistant.” Participant 7 (F) explained that although she secured a job within a few months, it was

not what she had studied or hoped for. “I got a job in March or April... but it was customer service... most people could do that. I basically did customer support on my grad visa for 2 years... I wouldn’t come to Ireland, do a master’s and expect to be 2 years plus on customer support.”

For many, customer service roles became the default entry point into the Irish workforce, not because of personal preference but due to structural limitations and the rejection of foreign experience. These roles offered minimal alignment with their qualifications but provided at least some local experience and income during the post-study period. Participant 3 (M) said he was unemployed for four months before landing his first customer service job. “From October to February, I wasn’t doing much, just trying to get a job. Then I got this customer service job I was doing remotely for about a month, and then I got this offer.” Participant 25 (M), who had held ambitions of working in tech, also started in customer service during the pandemic. “I worked for TELUS International... during the COVID period... as a customer support analyst for Coinbase.” Participant 15 (F) explained that despite years of experience back home, she had to start over. “I started work as a customer service... I had 6 years’ experience in Nigeria and a master’s, but it didn’t matter... I had to start from scratch... It was a way to get my foot into the Irish organisation.” Participant 16 (F) described how she began in customer support before transitioning into a graduate programme. “After my master’s I started working with TELUS as a customer service operator... then I worked for Accenture... and then I got a graduate role with VHI. So, I’ve done rotations in HR, finance, and now I’m a business analyst.” Participant 2 (F) said she got a customer support job quickly after graduating but soon realised its limitations. “After my master’s, I did get a job almost immediately which was a customer support role. That’s not exactly difficult to get... But I figured out that customer service is not what I want to do, and I can’t get my stamp with customer service.”

In the Transition CoP, participants initially approached job applications with strategies shaped by their home country experiences and the basic career guidance provided during their university studies. Most participants described this support and guidance as generic, consisting of CV workshops, LinkedIn tutorials, and one-off career talks. Although some described it as helpful for orientation, it lacked the nuanced, context-specific knowledge needed to secure meaningful employment in Ireland. Participant 11 (F) said her university support did not go far enough: "They told us about writing CVs, LinkedIn, things like that, but nobody really tells you what happens after. How do you deal with rejection? Where do you actually look for jobs? How do you get people to even notice your application?" However, they soon discovered that the Irish job market demanded far more nuanced and contextualised approaches. The generic advice they had received, while helpful at a basic level, did not prepare them for the complexities of securing professional roles in Ireland. Repeated rejections highlighted this gap and prompted a shift in their thinking. They began to realise that the actual process of transitioning into the professional workforce required deeper, context-specific knowledge that was not taught in universities. In response, they actively sought out migrant peers who had successfully navigated this transition. Through these peer connections, they learned about key tactics such as the importance of referrals, targeted upskilling, and contract roles as essential steps toward securing their desired positions. These peer-led insights were consistently described as more practical and valuable than university career services. Support from peer-skilled migrants, especially those with similar identities who had successfully transitioned into business roles, was highlighted as essential. As job rejections mounted, many realised they needed new strategies tailored to the Irish labour market. Participant 3 (M) described this turning point and how he leaned on informal networks to fill the gap: "We relied on each other… someone would say, 'Hey, try this company, they're open to hiring non-EU

graduates.' That's how we survived." These informal peer-led spaces, such as WhatsApp groups, alumni forums, and migrant communities, became key sources of practical guidance. Participant 16 (M) explained how he changed his job search approach based on peer advice: "I did a lot of asking; I didn't do it on my own… I would not just apply for a job if I did not have any referral in the company, because it goes a long way."

Referrals and peer coaching became survival tools. Participant 11 (F) shared how her friends stepped in directly to support her application efforts: "I have friends who helped me with my CV, applied for me." These peer interactions not only offered practical strategies but also became emotional lifelines. Participant 17 (F) reflected on how hearing others' experiences helped her cope: "I kept getting rejection emails, and it was hard. But then my friend said she got 50 rejections before getting one job. That gave me hope." For some, the growing number of rejections began to erode confidence. Participant 22 (M) recalled how self-doubt crept in: "You start doubting yourself… you wonder, 'Am I not good enough?' But you just have to keep pushing."

To counter this, many began to reframe rejection and develop career resilience. Participant 11 (F) explained: "I realised I had to manage my emotions. I told myself, 'This is just a phase.' I started treating job applications as practice, not personal failure." Others adopted short-term contract roles as strategic stepping stones. Participant 21 (F) recounted how her six-week customer support role, although far from ideal, paved the way for her next move: "I was working as a customer support team in a call centre… it kind of set the pace for my future role and my career. It was good, but I didn't really enjoy it. I was there for like 6 weeks before moving to my dream job." Participant 26 (F) similarly used a contract position at a major Irish bank as a foot in the door but found its limitations frustrating: "I joined AIB in May 2022 and I worked as a contract staff… my contract

was for 6 months. I didn't want to continue renewing it, the reason is because they were not willing to sponsor me." These experiences reflect a collective shift among participants from relying on institutional pathways to navigating job entry through peer learning, referrals, emotional adaptation, and short-term compromises. In doing so, they began developing the kind of situated, practical knowledge grounded in experience, identity, and the migrant peer community that universities had not provided.

4.5.1 Barriers Encountered in Transitioning from Education to Professionalism

Several key themes emerged that highlight the systemic barriers participants encountered during their transition from education to professional employment in Ireland. These challenges are best understood through the lens of Career Shock Theory, which emphasises that individuals often face unpredictable and uncontrollable events that significantly impact their career development (Akkermans et al., 2018, 2021). While SCCT assumes that individuals are agentic and capable of influencing their career outcomes through self-efficacy, goals, and outcome expectations, this study reveals that external shocks and structural constraints can disrupt that sense of control, particularly for highly skilled migrants navigating unfamiliar systems in the host country. As such, SCCT's emphasis on personal agency does not fully account for the unforeseen, disruptive events that shape career trajectories in increasingly complex and dynamic global labour markets.

Career shocks, defined as disruptive, often unexpected events that significantly alter the course of one's career, require individuals to engage in a process of sense-making and adaptation (Akkermans et al., 2018; Akkermans et al., 2021; Bright et al., 2005; Seibert et al., 2013). Yet, this adaptive process is often underexplored in traditional career development models. Recent research argues that the modern career environment is no longer linear or predictable but rather marked by uncertainty and volatility (Akkermans et al., 2021), which was echoed in the lived experiences of

participants in this study. The barriers faced by participants are outlined in the following sections, illustrating how career shocks interacted with systemic factors such as immigration status restrictions, employer biases, and racialised labour market dynamics, discounting home country experiences to create complex challenges during the transition from education to professionalism.

Table 6

Analytic Progression of Data – Barriers Encountered in Transitioning from Education to Professionalism

First order Codes	Theoretical Categories	Aggregate Themes
Contextual Barriers		
Visa restrictions as barriers Employers filtering candidates based on work visa sponsorship needs Recruiters'/employers' lack of knowledge about visa processes Being considered less fit than Irish/EU/EEA candidates due to visa status	Perceived structural barriers and opportunity constraints Contextual influences shape career development by undermining access and defining opportunity structure Identity-based exclusion and restricted access to professional practice	Immigration Status

Restricted access to work opportunities due to visa status Roles explicitly restricted to EU nationals, disadvantaging non-EU candidates		
Work experience from African home country not considered equal to European experience Recruiters requiring Irish/European experience even for entry-level jobs Starting afresh emotionally difficult, humiliating, and disempowering compared with status at home Starting over in customer service despite years of professional work experience	Mismatch between expectations of transferability and host-country requirements Structural resetting of career stage regardless of prior expertise Institutional barriers to entry-level professional pathways	Undervalued Home-Country Work Experience

Employers' notions of migrants as "fresh graduates" with no professional experience/history Lack of recognition despite transferable skills; devalued below Irish/European peers		
Starting from lower-level or survival jobs despite advanced degrees to gain host-country experience Struggles to gain first "Irish work experience" to be considered employable Applications and interviews repeatedly rejected due to lack of Irish experience	Career sense-making as an adaptive response to resurge declining self-efficacy External shocks intensifying barriers (COVID-19) Psychological disruption and recalibration	Limited Work Experience in Host Country

Systemic restriction of entry into job market until local practice is demonstrated COVID-19 and structural disruptions compounding barriers Emotional toll of repeated rejections, frustration, and "starting all over"		
Cultural Barriers		
Being "a step behind" in job opportunities due to being Black and immigrant Opportunities more accessible to white counterparts despite equal competence Companies reluctant to hire Black candidates; recruiters questioning English ability despite fluency	Systemic racial barriers beyond individual control unexpectedly restricting access to opportunities Cultural bias, stereotyping, and systemic gatekeeping Policy-driven systemic exclusion resulting in ineligibility	Racial Identity and Name-Based Discrimination

Racial marginalisation: subtle but persistent workplace exclusion Anti-Black sentiments by recruiters Using middle or Western names in CVs and LinkedIn to avoid bias Applications ignored with African names but acknowledged when "Anglicised"	Identity tweak: rethinking identity to fit within context to overcome shock	
Recruiters finding it difficult to participants accent during interviews perceived avoidance of non-native English speakers due to accent strain Feeling excluded, dismissed, or judged in recruitment due to accent	Uncontrollable communication shock Adaptive coping and vicarious learning	Accent and Communication Shock

Misunderstood expressions, perceived rudeness in tone Gradual adjustment with exposure and persistence		
Shock		
Moving from familiar to unfamiliar workspaces Expectation of fast professional entry due to master's degree or prior experience far from the reality of finding employment Mismatch between pre-migration career plans and migration-lived reality of career development Survival mindset – "life happens"	Unpredicted events disrupting career plans Recalibrating career plans and demonstrating resilience	Shock from Mismatched Expectations to Reality

Persistence despite repeated setbacks		

4.5.1.1 Immigration Status

A major barrier encountered by participants during their transition from education to employment in Ireland was their immigration status, specifically the limitations and misunderstandings surrounding the Stamp 1G (graduate work visa). Despite their qualifications and interview performance, many found that once their visa status was revealed, employers became reluctant to proceed. This issue consistently affected their employment experiences, influencing both access to opportunities and the quality of their early professional engagements. Immigration status or visa-related restrictions represent a significant barrier (Domínguez et al., 2022; Syed, 2008), constituting a persistent and deeply impactful challenge. Many participants reported that once their immigration status was revealed, previously positive interviews turned abruptly negative. Employers often demonstrated little understanding of the Stamp 1G visa and mistakenly assumed that hiring migrants required complex sponsorship arrangements. Participant 15 (F) captured this experience poignantly: “It was a very emotionally draining process… You’re doing so well at interviews until it gets to the point of your immigration status, and everything just changes.”

The challenges related to immigration status, as mentioned, included employers’ lack of understanding of the graduate work visa, companies’ unwillingness to sponsor, and delays in processing times. Several participants described how many Irish employers lacked even a basic understanding of visa types such as Stamp 1G or of the sponsorship process. As a result, qualified candidates were often dismissed or filtered out of recruitment processes. Participants found

themselves in the unexpected position of having to educate hiring managers and HR departments about legal entitlements associated with Stamp 1G. This lack of institutional knowledge not only created administrative friction but also amplified migrants' vulnerability in already precarious job searches. Participant 13 (M) noted: "Some HR didn't even understand what Stamp 1G meant… We had to be the ones telling them how it works, what documents are needed." This process was described as burdensome.

Participant 21 (F), for instance, recounted a painful episode of exclusion despite being qualified: "They were like, 'We would love you to join our company.' Then I mentioned sponsorship, and they sent a rejection immediately. A week later, my Irish colleague from my previous team, who doesn't even have a bachelor's degree, got the same role." In a subsequent interview, she described how silence about sponsorship requirements became a survival strategy in interviews: "My manager never knew about sponsorship. If I had said I needed sponsorship, and there was someone else who didn't, she would have gone for that person. So, I kept quiet."

In some cases, participants went to great lengths to explain procedures, only to face resistance or apathy from employers. Participant 31 (F) described being dismissed despite having the qualifications and initiative to navigate the process: "I started the conversation with them about sponsorship… and they were just giving me different terms. HR said my role didn't qualify, and my manager had no clue… I was the one educating both of them." Even when employers were open to sponsoring, participants had to assume the responsibility of managing the entire process, from documentation to coordination. Participant 6 (F) reflected: "I am the first person my company is sponsoring… I'm the one educating my manager: you need to do this, this is what's required. They're happy to have me, but it's still me doing the legwork."

The limited two-year duration of Stamp 1G also created a sense of urgency in transitioning. Participants described a "countdown pressure" that intensified anxiety and shaped job-seeking decisions. Participant 31 (F) said: "You have time counting. You have just two years to find that company that is willing to do it." Some reported missing opportunities altogether due to delays in visa renewals. This highlights the significant role immigration status plays in shaping the challenges encountered by migrant professionals in the host country (Rodriguez & Mearns, 2012). Participant 29 (F) shared: "I couldn't take up the role because my Stamp 1G had expired and I was still trying to renew it. I lost that role." Participant 3 (M) echoed this, noting that the slow pace of immigration processes leads not only to lost chances for migrants but also to missed talent for employers: "It's not the fastest of processes… a lot of people have missed opportunities, and even companies are missing those people." Beyond bureaucratic hurdles, some participants perceived the interaction between immigration status, race, and nationality as an additional layer of discrimination. Participant 6 (F) observed: "We still have companies in Ireland that have never hired a Black person or immigrant… even if you're more qualified, if you need a visa, they'll train the other person instead."

Several participants also highlighted how algorithmic filters embedded in HR software systems excluded applicants based on visa or nationality criteria before their CVs were even reviewed. Participant 12 (M), who had worked on such systems, explained: "If you don't fit the EEA or sponsorship criteria, your application goes straight to the bin." For many participants, the entire experience generated a profound sense of emotional fatigue, stalled and declining self-efficacy, and professional liminality. Participant 20 (F) summed up the lingering confusion and frustration: "I think most companies do not want to sponsor… I don't know why. The explanation has never made sense to me." Several participants also reflected on how their visa status complicated their

job search. Participant 23 (F) observed that not having Stamp 4 (a work permit closely linked to long-term residency and eventual citizenship) or an Irish/European passport placed her "at a disadvantage."

The narratives underscore how legal and structural exclusions were not experienced in isolation but were deeply gendered and racialised. The mismatch between national policy, employer knowledge, and lived migrant experience created a layered systemic barrier that participants had to navigate alone, often at great personal and professional cost.

4.5.1.2 Racial Identity and Name-Based Discrimination

Participants described how their racial identity, combined with their indigenous names, often posed barriers to employment and social inclusion in Ireland. Many were shocked to discover that their names, which are deeply tied to their cultural identity, became obstacles in their job search. Despite anticipating some challenges as newcomers, they did not expect that something as fundamental as their name would significantly hinder their employment prospects. In response, several participants opted to use non-indigenous or Anglicised names, that is, names that sounded more familiar to Irish recruiters, in an effort to navigate the recruitment process more smoothly. This experience illustrates how names can function as a form of career shock: an unexpected and disruptive event that prompts individuals to reassess and adapt their strategies in a new environment (Akkermans, et al., 2021). Such identity negotiations, while pragmatic, also had implications for participants' self-efficacy, as they were forced to alter aspects of their identity to align with perceived host-country norms. Additionally, many participants believed that being Black and migrant placed them at a disadvantage in recruitment contexts where employers were often perceived to favour Irish and other European applicants. These findings reinforce previous

research on name- and race-based discrimination in foreign labour markets (Pennesi, 2016; Tuppat & Gerhards, 2021; Walsh & Yakhnich, 2021).

Participant 2 (F) reflected: “Automatically, being Black, being an immigrant already puts us a step behind… the first people they will consider is Irish… then Europeans… then us.” Participant 31 (F) similarly noted that opportunities routinely extended to white counterparts were withheld from her. Others, like Participant 8 (F), described how rare it was to see Black professionals in key organisational roles: “It is a miracle that I am in the HR space.”

In response to these systemic barriers, several participants adopted strategic coping mechanisms. A prominent tactic was the selective use of English or Western names on CVs, LinkedIn profiles, or in job applications, which was not to erase their identity but to conceal their indigenous names in an effort to avoid discriminatory filtering. Participant 1 (M) explained: “You won’t see Segun on my LinkedIn. You’ll see Michael. That’s my middle name… it makes it easier for people to pronounce.” Similarly, Participant 19 (M) recounted: “We tested it; you apply for a job with your real name and hear nothing. Apply again with an English name, and you get a reply. It’s not rocket science.”

Some went further, even adjusting racial categories in applications. Participant 2 (F) shared: “When I’m applying for jobs, I pick ‘White’… I used the name Elizabeth, which isn’t even on my passport, just to be sure they would actually review my CV.” Accent bias also emerged as a concern. Participant 29 (F) noted: “Sometimes when I’m talking to a recruiter, I feel like they hear my accent, and it plays a role in the rejection.” Participant 9 (M) described more subtle forms of bias, such as shifts in recruiters’ or employers’ behaviour upon hearing their accent, suggesting

that accent functioned as a racialised marker that shaped interactions and possibly outcomes: “Just hearing your accent, and their behaviour changes.”

These strategies of name and identity concealment highlight the additional emotional labour required to access equal opportunities. Rather than rejecting their identities, participants were temporarily masking them to navigate what they perceived as an unequal system. Participant 35 (F) reflected: “I do think being Black and from another country makes it harder. People see it before they see your skills.”

4.5.1.3 Undervalued Home Country Work Experience

A recurring frustration among participants was the consistent undervaluing of their professional experience gained in their home countries. Participants commonly reported that their professional experience from their home countries was either unrecognised or actively discounted in the Irish labour market. Despite having fundamental to substantial years of work experience and often holding roles prior to migrating, many found themselves forced to begin their careers in Ireland at entry-level positions far below their qualifications and expectations. Their prior achievements were frequently dismissed or ignored by employers and recruitment agents, leaving participants feeling as though they had to “start all over again.” These accounts echo findings from prior research on skilled migrants, which has consistently identified the devaluation of foreign-acquired human capital as a major constraint in host-country labour markets (Crowley-Henry et al., 2018; Farashah & Blomquist, 2022; Guo & Al Ariss, 2015; Joy et al., 2020; Lovanirina Ramboarison-Lalao et al., 2012). From the perspective of SCCT, these encounters reflect a significant mismatch between outcome expectations and actual experiences. Participants had initially believed that their investment in international education, coupled with their prior work history, would translate into

upward mobility and access to professional roles in Ireland. However, this belief was challenged upon encountering systemic and perceptual barriers in the host labour market. The realisation that the outcomes they had envisioned were not unfolding as expected prompted a re-evaluation of their initial assumptions. Yet, despite these disappointments, participants remained firmly focused on their broader goal of becoming successful business professionals in Ireland. This perseverance exemplifies SCCT's emphasis on goal setting as a motivational force, demonstrating how individuals continue to pursue meaningful career aspirations and devise coping strategies even in the face of barriers (Domínguez et al., 2022; Lindley, 2005). Moreover, their ongoing efforts to re-establish professional credibility and gain relevant experience in the host context indicate a dynamic interplay between self-efficacy beliefs, adaptive coping, and revised outcome expectations.

Participant 15 (F), for example, described the disheartening experience of restarting her career from scratch despite holding a master's degree and six years of experience in Nigeria: "It was really difficult to find a job regardless. And a lot of times, our job experience from Nigeria is not taken into account. So it doesn't matter what you did in Nigeria... it was like you're starting all over again. I had to start with customer service and then moved my way up." This sentiment was echoed by Participant 2 (F), who explained that employers appeared to dismiss Nigerian professional credentials in favour of European experience: "When you are applying for a job here, what they want to see is your European experience. If all your experiences were just Nigerian… they won't give you that job. Even for customer service, it was like that." The perceived need to obtain "Irish experience" before being seen as employable was repeatedly highlighted. Participant 22 (F) noted that even with a master's degree earned in Ireland, her managerial background in Nigeria was not recognised: "It wasn't obviously a suitable job for my qualification… Even if you were a manager

from Nigeria, they don't believe you. Even though you have a master's in Ireland, they still do not believe you."

This devaluation led to feelings of stagnation and underachievement, particularly for those who had held senior roles prior to migration. Participant 23 (F), who previously worked for five years in banking in Kenya, now holds a position which she described as typically filled by school leavers: "The job I'm currently working in… the qualification level is like Leaving Cert. I thought with a master's degree and six years' experience at the bank, I expected to be at least at a managerial level. So, I'm not very happy with where I am right now."

Several participants expressed frustration at being treated as if they lacked professional history altogether. Participant 31 (F) observed: "Once they hear that you came here for a master's, it's more like, 'Oh, you are just fresh out of school.' But no, you have had previous work experience before you came here… They put you on the same level as a fresh-out-of-college person in Ireland, which is not the case." Others, like Participant 6 (F), reflected on the comparative career progression of peers who remained in their home countries: "Not everyone is acknowledging what you are bringing from back home. If I were to place myself at par with my colleagues who stayed back home, I should have been a partner or a very, very senior associate." For some, the devaluation was more subtle but still deeply felt. Participant 10 (M) recounted how, despite being a top performer in his team, he was overlooked for recognition due to perceived lesser experience: "My manager said those guys had way more experience than I do… I'm achieving similar things to them in this company. It's a testimony to my brilliance… but I felt judged because… your experience in Nigeria doesn't count as much as someone who had work experience in Europe."

A distinction was also made between transferable skills and perceived local knowledge. Participant 12 (M), for instance, described how certain roles, such as business analyst, were seen as context dependent, requiring Irish experience: "As a business analyst, they want to see experience here in Ireland… for a data analyst, it's different. But for a business analyst, they always look for that Irish experience." Participant 34 (M) reinforced this, expressing confusion at recruiters' insistence on Irish experience for roles where prior international experience had proven fully transferable: "To be honest… I didn't see any reason why they would have been looking for that. The skills I had before as a business analyst, which I developed in Ghana, are transferable. And those are the same skills I use in my day-to-day duty."

Collectively, these accounts illustrate how participants' professional identities and prior accomplishments were routinely dismissed within the host labour market. This systemic undervaluing not only delayed career progression but also contributed to dwindling self-efficacy during the post-graduation phase, reinforcing the critical role and the need for supportive learning environments in the informal transition CoP.

4.5.1.4 Limited Work Experience in the Host Country

In addition to the devaluation of their home-country work experience, participants encountered a compounding barrier: the lack of recognised Irish work experience. This posed a significant hurdle to accessing roles aligned with their qualifications, particularly during the post-study transition period. Across the narratives, participants expressed frustration with the paradoxical requirement of "Irish experience" as a prerequisite for securing even entry-level positions, despite having postgraduate degrees and substantial experience elsewhere. For many, the absence of local

experience led to extended periods of unemployment, frequent rejections, and, consequently, downward occupational mobility.

“I struggled for a very long time to get the kind of job that I wanted… I started applying for jobs as a business analyst. For the first six months, I didn't even get any callback… They always look for that Irish experience. So that's what made it very difficult for me. I realised I wasn't getting any jobs here because I didn't have the experience.”

Participant 5 (M) echoed this reality, highlighting a disconnect between expectations and the actual hiring landscape:

“I had to change my plan over and over… because what I then experienced was that a lot of recruiters here expect you to have Irish experience on your CV. They are more comfortable hiring someone who has Irish experience.”

Others took any available job just to “get a foot in the door.” Participant 25 (M), despite holding a master’s degree, accepted a store assistant role:

“You could imagine a master's degree holder working as a store assistant, but I didn't mind. I just needed to start from somewhere… I later realised that sometimes it is not only about your master’s. You need to have some kind of work experience in Europe.”

This sentiment was also shared by Participant 3 (M), who reflected on the limited value of international experience in the host labour market:

“One thing I understood when I first arrived was that no matter how experienced you are outside the shores of Ireland, you will not get a job very easily if you do not have Irish experience.”

Participant 22 (F) succinctly captured the widespread perception:

"It's very difficult to get that first Ireland experience… Even if you were a manager from Nigeria, and you have a master's in Ireland, it still doesn't add up."

The structural challenges associated with securing that first job were intensified by external factors such as the COVID-19 pandemic. Participant 31 (F), who migrated during this period, recalled the frustration of repeated rejections, limited job availability, and barriers to government support:

"For literally almost a year and a half, I didn't get a job… at least back at home, I had a job paying me monthly. Those first one and a half years were really challenging… You need 3 years of work experience for an entry-level position. I'm like, it is an entry role… why do you need 3 years' experience for that?"

This account highlights the intersectional barriers that extend beyond experience alone, where nationality, race, and immigration status compound exclusion. Even when qualifications and performance were on par or superior, Irish experience remained the decisive factor.

Collectively, these accounts reveal how limited access to recognised work experience in the host country served as a critical career shock during the transition phase. This lack of access undermined participants' self-efficacy and often forced them into roles well below their competencies. These experiences prompted their response to seek support systems within the informal Transition CoP, where peer advice, local networking, and targeted upskilling helped participants regain momentum and begin rebuilding their professional identities in the host country.

4.5.1.5 Accent and Communication

Participants frequently identified accent- and communication-related challenges in both academic and professional interactions in Ireland. While English was the shared language, their Nigerian, Ghanaian, Kenyan, or Tanzanian accents often stood out in interactions with others in Ireland's multicultural and predominantly Irish work and study environments. These linguistic dynamics required ongoing adaptation, strategic communication, and emotional resilience. For several participants, becoming familiar with different local accents while also being understood when speaking in their own was a persistent struggle. Participant 26 (F) explained how her Nigerian accent made it difficult to engage effectively with Irish team leads and project managers. She described resorting to recording meetings on her phone so she could replay and better understand what was said: "With my Nigerian accent… it is not working. So that was another thing for them with me… I had to personally put my other phone on record and record this meeting. So, I can go back and replay them and understand these things." Similarly, Participant 28 (F) spoke about the need to constantly moderate her speech, not just its pace but also her overall delivery, to avoid being dismissed or misunderstood. Her experience highlights not only linguistic complexity but also the emotional impact of not being met with reciprocal effort or patience: "I've had to learn how to talk slowly… just so they understand me… One time, someone even said, 'Can you pass the phone to someone else who can speak to me clearly?' That was totally unnecessary."

The emotional strain of these experiences was echoed by Participant 13 (M) in his account of his early days in Ireland. He described an active strategy of listening to local radio in order to attune his ears to the Irish accent, which was a method devised to deal with his discomfort at constantly being asked to repeat himself: "I had difficulty understanding the accents… The solution was

listening to radio… Galway FM… as long as they were talking, I was all listening… I hated it when they always told me 'Sorry, come again.'" Participants therefore had to develop dual competencies: learning to decode unfamiliar accents while modifying their own speech to be better understood. Participant 19 (M) recalled how the first week of class was particularly difficult because of the pace at which he had to adapt: "My first week in class in DBS was a struggle because I was struggling to get the accent… but for some weird reasons, it just became normal."

In collaborative settings, such as group projects or workplace meetings, communication challenges could sometimes compromise participation and outcomes. Participant 10 (M) recounted how such difficulties contributed to an unsuccessful group project: "It was quite a struggle to communicate with them and complete projects with them. And we basically failed in completing our project." The process of "accent negotiation" was ongoing and complex. It was not only about being understood but also about being taken seriously and professionally. Many participants described consciously slowing down their speech, avoiding idiomatic expressions, and becoming more attentive listeners. Participant 5 (M) described this adjustment period when working with culturally diverse teams: "Working with people from other cultures, it was kind of strange… I had to first understand and get used to the way that they spoke."

Across these narratives, participants were not questioning their fluency or competence in English. Rather, they were navigating the layered social and cultural meanings attached to how they sounded. Their accents became markers of difference that were constantly negotiated, shaping how they were perceived, included, and heard. These accounts reveal that accent and communication challenges were not merely about comprehension; they were deeply tied to participants'

experiences of access, belonging, and legitimacy in Irish educational and professional environments.

4.5.2 Shock from Mismatched Expectations to Reality

A recurring theme in participants' narratives was the stark dissonance between their optimistic pre-arrival expectations and the sobering realities they encountered upon transitioning from education to employment. This disjuncture often triggered a jarring psychological and professional adjustment process, which CS refers to as a disruption that is external to the individual, unplanned, and influential enough to initiate a deliberate career sense-making process (Akkermans et al., 2018, 2021). For many participants, the triggering event was the realisation that their international postgraduate qualifications, even when paired with years of prior professional experience, did not lead to the anticipated upward career mobility in Ireland's corporate or tech sectors. Instead, they encountered structural opacity, labour market saturation, employer disinterest in non-EU candidates, and visa-linked constraints. This mismatch between expectation and outcome aligns with Blokker et al.'s (2019) emphasis on the role of contextual disruptions in shaping career pathways and development trajectories.

The initial sense-making phase, which is an integral component of CS, was evident in participants' reflective accounts. For example, Participant 12 (M) shared his recalibration:

"When I was coming here, I had planned that the moment I finish my master's degree, I would start applying for jobs… I wanted to get a job as a business analyst in one of the top tech companies here, but I've now realised that it's not as easy as it seems… I always tell people now, if you're not going to do a core tech course here, don't bother because it's difficult."

Similarly, Participant 25 (M) described a sharp re-evaluation of his imagined career path:

"I thought that immediately after my master's, I would land a very good, nice job… probably in a tech company… but after my master's, reality set in… I didn't work as a student… So, I started working in Mr. Price… maybe I was being naive… Now I'm being realistic."

Such moments of disillusionment are consistent with Hirschi's (2010) findings that unanticipated obstacles during transitions can derail young professionals' career plans and diminish their confidence. In this study, career shocks were often shaped by overly optimistic institutional narratives, including university marketing materials and alumni success stories that portrayed Ireland as a land of seamless opportunity.

Participant 4 (M) noted:

"That was my expectation based off what they sold to me… you'd easily get a job… even getting to the stage of an interview didn't happen. I had to change my approach… tweak my CV… and I ended up in customer service."

These shocks often led to a critical reassessment not only of career strategies but also of personal efficacy. While many participants entered Ireland with strong beliefs in their own capability, often reinforced by academic success and prior work experience, these beliefs were tested as they encountered rejection, underemployment, or systemic inertia. Participant 9 (M), for instance, recalled:

"Perception is different from reality… coming here is not Eldorado… I didn't expect to be doing warehouse, kitchen porter, all those belittling manual handling jobs… That was crazy."

Even those who had selected degrees believed to be aligned with the Irish labour market experienced similar career shocks. Participant 5 (M) summarised this gap between promise and reality:

“Nobody told me it wasn't as straightforward… Getting a job in Ireland wasn't as straightforward as I thought… they sold us the dream… that before you finish school, you’ll get a job. That was definitely false.”

Female participants also described professional disillusionment, compounded by stalled progression and misaligned job roles. Participant 23 (F) reflected:

“With a master's degree, with almost six years’ experience… I expected to be at least at a managerial level… it is a bit disappointing. I’m not very happy with where I am right now… Now I work with high school graduates… not a good feeling.”

Participant 28 (F) similarly shared:

“I had to settle for something that will give me a work permit.”

These findings resonate with De Vos and Van der Heijden's (2015) view of career development as a nonlinear, contextually embedded process, one that is influenced as much by systemic structures and unplanned disruptions as by personal ambition. In this context, self-efficacy emerges as a crucial mediating factor in how individuals respond to career shocks.

Similar to the findings of Ali and Mehreen (2022) and Ahmad and Nasir (2023), participants’ narratives suggested that self-efficacy influences how individuals respond to career shocks with adaptive, forward-looking behaviours such as networking, skill-building, and re-strategising.

Rather than being paralysed by disappointment, these individuals appeared to leverage informal CoP to restore their self-efficacy, which enabled them to reinterpret disruptive experiences as opportunities for growth and recalibration. Some participants described adjusting their expectations, modifying their job search tactics, or seeking new pathways when initial plans fell through. While career disruptions were widespread across the cohort, participants who expressed a stronger sense of self-belief were more inclined to engage actively with uncertainty and maintain a sense of agency in navigating their career trajectories. For example, Participant 4 (M), despite initial disillusionment, described refining his job search tactics and eventually shifting sectors. However, for others, repeated failures and systemic barriers gradually eroded their confidence. Participant 7 (F) observed:

"I wouldn't come to Ireland to do a master's and expect to be two years plus in customer support."

Participant 8 (F) added:

"Most of my peers… that was what was sold to us… coming here to find the total opposite. It was very disappointing… and a little bit of a setback."

These accounts confirm that career shocks are not isolated, one-time events but unfold cumulatively, undermining not only career aspirations but also psychological well-being. Participants spoke of stress, anxiety, depression, and diminished self-worth, particularly when facing protracted unemployment, underemployment, or identity dissonance in low-status roles.

In line with Akkermans et al. (2021) and Baruch (2004), this study illustrates that career development in the modern era is increasingly characterised by complexity, fluidity, and unpredictability, particularly for internationally mobile professionals. The shocks described by

participants were not merely personal setbacks but pointed to deeper structural inequities embedded within host-country labour markets. Participants' narratives reveal that while self-efficacy plays a critical role in navigating such disruptions, it is not static. Rather, self-efficacy is continually shaped, challenged, and either reinforced or eroded through ongoing encounters with systemic barriers, professional disappointments, and shifting career landscapes.

4.5.3 Psychological States

The psychological states of depression, pressure, stress, frustration, and lack of belonging reflect the emotional strain embedded in the transition from education to employment. These affective experiences, explained through SCCT and its extended career self-management model (Lent et al., 2017), acknowledge the role of negative affect in shaping self-efficacy, outcome expectations, and career-related behaviour. SCCT posits that emotional states, especially those triggered by environmental barriers or repeated failure experiences, can directly influence individuals' self-efficacy, career motivation, persistence, and well-being (Hackett, 1995; Lent et al., 1994, 2017; Lent & Brown, 2008). Participants' encounters with repeated job rejections, immigration status challenges, underemployment, and subtle or overt discrimination not only disrupted their career progression but also resulted in psychological responses akin to what SCCT terms "negative affective outcomes."

4.5.3.1 Depression

Depression was a recurring theme, particularly among participants who felt stuck in prolonged liminality or repeated rejection. For some, the feeling of depression stemmed primarily from the inability to secure pathways to permanence, regardless of their financial stability. Participant 12

(M) reflected: “It was very tough. It was very, very… let me use the word depressing... I was no longer living my life. All I was thinking of was… a plan B, because I might decide to leave Ireland.” This sense of loss and stagnation, despite having skills and qualifications, weighed heavily on participants. Participant 13 added: “The amount of rejection that you would get… it can be depressing a lot,” while Participant 30 (F) described a moment of crisis: “I knew I slipped into depression once. If you don’t have friends to support you… it is a whole lot in this country.” The emotional toll was not merely episodic; it was compounded by uncertainty and the repeated deferral of stability.

4.5.3.2 Frustration

For many, frustration stemmed from the dissonance between their past and present professional realities. Participant 12 (M), who had previously held a well-established life in Nigeria, shared: “Coming to Ireland, it was almost like starting all over again… my standard of living really, really dropped… it was very, very frustrating.” Several participants found themselves applying for roles far beneath their skill levels or receiving no recognition for their years of experience in their home countries. Participant 14 (F), with seven years of experience in Nigeria, found herself forced to settle for a manufacturing job because “they're not really looking at your experiences… it was so frustrating trying to find jobs… it didn’t seem like your skills were transferable.” For many, the rejection felt less about ability and more about being unseen and undervalued.

4.5.3.3 No Sense of Belonging

Handley et al. (2006) argued that participation and, hence, learning within a CoP involves a sense of belonging (or a desire to belong), mutual understanding, and a “progression” along a trajectory towards full participation. However, several participants described a profound disconnection from

Irish society, one rooted in how their identities were perceived and received. For Participant 32 (F), moving to Ireland brought a heightened awareness of racial difference: “I feel like that became… the first thing people see when they see me… I became more conscious of that part of my existence.” This loss of invisibility led to a deeper reflection on identity and belonging. Participant 6 (F) expressed a persistent feeling of exclusion: “Even if I stay here for 30 years, I will never fully be able to call this place home… some people will just never fully accept.” The emotional weight of being perpetually “othered” contributed to a sense of alienation and exhaustion.

4.5.3.4 Pressure

The pressure to secure employment to maintain legal status was immense and constant. Several participants spoke of how visa restrictions, layoffs, and sponsorship hurdles created psychological strain. Participant 34 (M) described “emotional and psychological pressure… even when you go for job interviews… you're under pressure… to say what you think they want to hear.” This pressure was intensified for those supporting spouses or family members. Participant 18 (F) shared: “Every day I was like… what if I lose this job? Where do I want to start from?” The stress of navigating Ireland’s immigration and employment systems was not only logistical but also deeply emotional, affecting sleep, well-being, and decision-making.

Yet, amidst these psychosocial challenges, participants demonstrated remarkable resilience. They navigated barriers by activating informal channels, particularly through peer and alumni referrals that helped bypass rigid recruitment filters. Others accepted contract or customer service roles not as endpoints but as footholds to gain Irish experience, stabilise income, and rebuild professional confidence. Moreover, upskilling emerged as a deliberate strategy, as participants enrolled in new

training programmes or acquired certifications to realign their profiles with employer expectations.

Despite the negative affective states triggered by career shocks, participants' narratives revealed a striking pattern of persistence. Many continued to seek opportunities, apply for jobs, network, and strategise their next steps even when circumstances were demoralising. This persistence supports Seibert et al.'s (2016) argument that resilience is a critical factor in successfully navigating career shocks (see also Bimrose & Hearne, 2012; Kossek & Perrigino, 2016). Furthermore, London's (1983) conceptualisation of resilience as resistance to career disruption in a less-than-optimal environment is evident in these narratives. His view that self-efficacy, risk-taking, and interdependence are central components of CR is illustrated through the evolution of participants' self-efficacy (confidence) at different phases of their learning and career development journeys. This underscores the foundational role of self-efficacy in enabling individuals to confidently persist through career adversity. Their resilience developed through continuous interaction with their environment, particularly in times of uncertainty, as evidenced by their adaptive learning capabilities (Gu & Day, 2013; Mansfield et al., 2012). Likewise, this finding supports Mishra and McDonald's (2017) argument that CR is fundamentally rooted in individual career development rather than organisational interests. They described resilience as an ongoing developmental process through which individuals persist, adapt, and thrive despite career challenges, transitions, and disruptions. More recently, Branicki et al.'s (2019) and Tokbaeva and Achtenhagen (2021) highlighted that resilience manifests in everyday career navigation as a deliberate, lifelong process of strengthening self-confidence, skills, and competencies, underpinned by hope, realistic optimism, and support networks. This was evident in participants' lived experiences in Ireland. Consistent with previous studies (Abdullahi et al., 2024; Akkermans et al., 2014; London, 1983;

Lyons et al., 2015), this study found self-efficacy to be a key driver of career resilience. Participants' demonstration of resilience in the stories, expressed through persistent job applications, creative survival strategies, and continued learning despite repeated rejections, reflects this interplay. Their capacity to keep striving amid uncertainty points to the evolving, experiential, and socially influenced nature of career resilience, built on a foundation of self-belief and adaptive engagement.

4.5.4 Resilience

Amid the volatility, uncertainty, complexity, and ambiguity of the post-study transition period, resilience emerged as a defining feature of participants' experiences. It served as a critical driver of successful navigation through systemic barriers, career shocks, and labour market challenges. Participants showed determination and focus in pursuing their transition goals despite numerous rejections and structural limitations. For many, resilience was not an abstract trait but a daily practice applied in the face of constant rejection. Participant 11 (F) noted: "I kept applying. It was challenging. I knew there was going to be a way it could be difficult. And that was what kept me through." Her hope for a breakthrough fostered psychological preparedness for the process. Likewise, Participant 15 (F) reflected on the internal transformation that accompanied the struggle: "My experience has made me a more self-aware person… I've learned consistency and resilience." Others described resilience through culturally grounded understandings of perseverance. Participant 26 (F), for instance, drew strength from what she called "the Nigerian spirit," explaining, "even in the face of adversities, we are like, don't give up." Her story illustrated how resilience was energised by cultural narratives of endurance and communal pride. Her account of applying for "more than 99 jobs on LinkedIn" before securing a position revealed the sheer effort required to overcome structural barriers.

A common thread across interviews was the tension between the intensity of effort and the uncertainty of outcomes. Participant 30 (F) illustrated this ambiguity, stating: "For the Bank of America, I can't remember when I applied on LinkedIn. I don't know, seriously… I just kept applying… You have to work like a horse. I am telling you the truth." The metaphor of "working like a horse" captured the emotional and physical strain of the job search. Participant 32 (F) echoed this, estimating that she submitted "maybe 150 applications" and completed *"4 interviews" before securing a role. For her, the job search became a disciplined routine: "Apply! Apply! Apply! Don't get tired of applying."*

Several participants developed coping strategies such as setting clear filters for opportunities. Participant 24 (M) described how he refined his approach by asking upfront about sponsorship: "If they are not sponsoring, I just move ahead. This is not what I am looking for… That kind of helped me to streamline my process and make it much more effective." This pragmatic focus helped reduce emotional burnout and sustain motivation throughout the long period of uncertainty. For others, resilience combined emotional control, assertiveness, and persistence. Participant 13 (M) recalled: "There are many things that shocked my system… I thought I had sized myself up mentally… I had hundreds of versions of my CV… My mindset was that I only needed 1 job… Just 1 person to tell me yes." His deliberate strategy and unwavering belief in success demonstrated resilience not only as persistence but as active self-management. Participant 31 (F) similarly described coping with repeated rejection and systemic barriers, including being denied part-time roles during COVID, by remaining focused on long-term goals: "It was not for the faint-hearted. You just have to keep going. Especially if you know where you are heading."

Some narratives also revealed the fragility that often coexists with resilience. Participant 6 (F) initially trusted promises of sponsorship from her employer, only to face uncertainty as her visa deadline approached. She eventually took control, asserting: “Being the kind of person I am… I’m not going to waste my time anymore. I’m going to start looking for another job.” Her story illustrated how resilience sometimes requires pivoting and protecting long-term goals through decisive action. Finally, Participant 8 (F) explained how she coped with racial exclusion and professional gatekeeping: “You have to keep reading, keep making research, asking questions… My mindset was, you either tell me yes or no, you can't kill me.” Her statement revealed how resilience extended beyond persistence in employment; it was also about claiming professional identity and visibility in underrepresented spaces. Across these narratives, resilience appeared not as a fixed trait but as a situated practice shaped by context, culture, gender, and visa status. It was a necessary form of survival within a system that demanded relentless effort without guaranteed outcomes. Through the Transition CoP, participants developed and strengthened this resilience, enabling them to navigate career liminality with purpose and, ultimately, success. These narratives reflect career resilience through deliberate self-development and collective contribution (Abdullahi et al., 2024; Tokbaeva & Achtenhagen, 2021).

4.5.4.1 Contract Roles

Contract roles emerged as a double-edged aspect of participants’ post-study careers. Although often taken reluctantly, these roles offered temporary lifelines, providing Irish work experience, access to networks, and, in some cases, pathways to permanent employment or visa sponsorship. However, they were also linked to emotional strain, visa insecurity, and a sense of underachievement. Participants navigated these roles not only as job seekers but as strategic planners, weighing short-term compromises against long-term career and migration goals. Several

accepted contract positions below their skill levels or aspirations. Participant 11 (F) explained that her contract role was financially disappointing but strategically unavoidable: “I got a job, a contract role, not something I would have, because the pay was so bad, but I just wanted experience.” Her contract ended just before her visa expired, prompting a desperate step: “I actually bought my one-way ticket to Nigeria... but in October... they extended visas automatically... I was able to renew my visa.”

Despite eventually finding another position, her story illustrated the precarious nature of contract work and the fine line between staying and leaving. Similarly, Participant 8 (F) obtained a contract with Accenture, but its limitations weighed heavily: “Because it was a contract role, and I couldn't use the contract role to do my work permit, I kept on applying for HR roles.” In such cases, contract employment served as a temporary fix rather than a career milestone, often accompanied by continued job searching and lingering dissatisfaction.

For others, contract roles represented high-stakes opportunities to prove themselves and secure long-term employment. Participant 30 (F), who received a six-month contract with Bank of America, described her determination to convert the opportunity into permanence: “I worked my butt off. I never took a leave... I wanted to prove myself so bad... my manager spoke to me in November, and he was like, do I want to stay back? And I was like, yes... the bank sponsored me... they paid for my critical skills visa.” This account underscores how contract roles could serve as launchpads when coupled with perseverance, consistent performance, and an employer’s willingness to sponsor.

Participant 32 (F) had a similar experience. Initially contracted through a consultancy firm, she strategically delayed her Stamp 1 application until close to her visa expiry to maximise sponsorship

chances: “That was a good move... the company I was contracted to decided to internalise some of the contractors... I just happened to be one of the people they internalised.” Her strategic patience and timing paid off, transforming a temporary contract into a permanent position. For some participants, contract roles acted as transitional platforms that bridged education and full-time employment. Participant 19 (M) described how his first job at AIB was a non-permanent support analyst role, which enabled him to build experience and later transition to a cybersecurity position: “Upon completing a data analytics course, I got my first job with AIB... it wasn’t part-time actually, it was just a contract role. And from there, I got another job with Integrity360 as a cybersecurity analyst.” This incremental progress through contract roles illustrates how participants leveraged every available opportunity to build sector-specific experience and credibility.

Others viewed contract roles as frustrating necessities – essential for gaining “Irish experience” but insufficient to guarantee career progression or legal stability. Participant 12 (M) shared: “I got a contract role as a business analyst with Commission for Communication Regulation (COMREG)... a one-year contract role will still not sponsor you... it gave me that Irish experience that I’ve always been looking for.” he finally secured sponsorship. His story highlights the bittersweet nature of contract work: valuable for CV-building, yet often structurally limited in achieving long-term goals.

4.5.4.2 Referrals

Referral was identified as a crucial informal mechanism through which participants accessed limited employment opportunities during their transition from education to work in Ireland. While formal applications often produced few results, referrals conferred legitimacy, opened doors, and

granted access to otherwise closed professional spaces. Participants came to regard referrals not only as a practical tactic but also as a necessary countermeasure to systemic exclusion. Participant 25 (M) attributed his employment success directly to a friend's support: "It was actually a friend of mine who referred me to the Accenture job." Although seemingly simple, this act carried significant weight. In a context where cold applications often led to silence, referrals acted as powerful endorsements of skills and reliability.

Several participants reflected on how they learned to navigate this informal but vital landscape. Participant 19 (M) explained how his growing community shared knowledge about strategic networking: "They will get you an interview through referrals… Mr. Ope (a highly skilled migrant from Nigeria who has been working in the professional space in Ireland for some years) also taught us … Look for someone who works in the company… If your credentials are good enough, the person will be willing to refer you." His account was echoed by Participant 16 (F), who adopted a deliberate, tactical approach to referral-seeking: "I did a lot of asking… LinkedIn was very good. If I want to apply to a company, I'll go on LinkedIn and check if I even see a Black person in that company… I had a format of a message that I already kept in my notes that I just sent to people." Her method illustrates how gendered and racialised experiences shaped her approach, using visible indicators of shared identity as entry points.

Participant 20 (F) described how networking allowed her to transition smoothly into a role where she had been guided by the person referring her: "He already worked in the team I was going to… We just did that run-down, talked about the things he used to do… So, I think that makes the interview easier, unlike when you just apply to a random company." The referral offered not only access but also insider preparation, which strengthened her confidence and performance. This

peer-based support revealed strong communal solidarity. Participant 9 (M), who had been referred by another international student, emphasised the wider system of assistance: “There is a wealth of information that goes around… to upskilling certificates, to relevant courses, to referrals… It’s a very good support system… The odds are against us; the system is skewed against us… power of referrals.”

Similarly, Participant 23 (F) secured her job through a friend in Tanzania who shared an opportunity circulated by CPL Recruitment: “She said I could be interested. So that’s how I got it.” Participants described referrals as deeply embedded in their community practices. Participant 22 (F) offered a candid view: “I had a job in my company recently, it was 3 roles, and all 3 roles were taken up by referrals… People applying from outside won’t get a call back… So, you can never undermine the power of referral.” In this environment, job access often depended on personal networks. Participant 15 (F) relied on her established contacts: “I just leaned on my existing contacts… because that usually works way better than you just out of the blue just submitting a CV.” Others realised that applying without a referral rarely led anywhere. Participant 3 (M) summed it up succinctly: “You can never underestimate the power of referral.” Although some were initially sceptical, they adapted as they recognised the importance of these informal systems. Participant 21 (F) admitted: “I did not really believe in it, but then, sometimes it worked in me having been shortlisted… My friend referred me; she spoke to her manager.” The referral system, though informal, functioned as an unwritten rule that participants had to understand and use strategically to compete effectively.

4.5.4.3 Upskilling

For most participants, the formal qualifications earned through Irish postgraduate education proved insufficient to secure jobs aligned with their career goals. Confronted with repeated rejections, stalled applications, or roles that failed to meet visa criteria, they turned to informal upskilling as a deliberate and strategic response. This self-directed learning became a vital means of enhancing employability, rebuilding confidence, and adapting to a labour market where access was unevenly distributed. Participant 11 (F) described how starting ACCA training became a turning point: "In 2019, I was still working as a catering assistant, I couldn't get any corporate job… So, I decided to register for ACCA… I knew like, oh, I could apply for account assistant roles… I realised there is a visa for accounting students… So, I registered… and in November, I got an account assistant role." Her narrative reveals how upskilling operated both as a practical career move and as an immigration-aware decision. Awareness of the Stamp 1A visa category informed her choices and unlocked a tangible transition path. Many shared similar experiences. Participant 14 (F) described how completing a short project management course gave her professional vocabulary and legitimacy: "Project management is just like a high-level administrator… So, you find out that these are things you're doing… but in the project management space, it has names, and it has some tools… I could draw on the knowledge… to say, oh, I did this this way and use those terminologies." This process of identifying and naming transferable skills became a way for participants to legitimise prior experiences and present themselves as competent professionals in new contexts.

For some, upskilling also became a means of breaking free from underemployment. Participant 4 (M), who initially accepted a customer service role out of necessity, shared how dissatisfaction

prompted him to change course: “That job was not going to help my immigration status… career-wise, it wasn’t what I wanted… So that was when I decided, see bro, you need to upskill… That was when I started business analysis training… did a few interviews… and then I got the job that I’m currently doing.” The sense of urgency, coupled with limited time on the Stamp 1G visa, spurred many into action. Upskilling was not an optional enhancement; it became a survival strategy. Participant 2 (F) illustrated this vividly, embracing numerous free and low-cost certifications to increase her competitiveness: “Towards the end of my Stamp 1G… I started learning project management… my first interview was about the Business Analyst role, and I got that job immediately… I was just taking training: LinkedIn courses, Google Analytics, digital marketing analytics… I did an HR course… courses that I know I don’t have to pay for, and I can add to my CV… because of the name of where I got them from.”

Others combined learning with targeted job-seeking strategies. Participant 5 (M) enrolled in a structured business analysis programme that provided both training and project experience, as well as CV support: “As part of completing the program, I got one of the instructors to help edit my CV… he added some experiences there… it was very easy to say I worked with him… and that was how I got a job as a business analyst.” These actions demonstrate how participants not only gained technical expertise but also learned to position themselves as credible candidates in a competitive market that demanded both skill and narrative coherence.

Upskilling was also communal. Participant 9 (M) observed that within his network, there was an expectation to pursue certifications and maintain visibility: “The focus was equipping yourself with certifications… to add spice to my digital marketing degree… and increase your activity on LinkedIn.” Similarly, Participant 26 (F) shared how multiple certifications, including CAPM, Lean

Six Sigma, and Scrum Master, became part of her tactical armour in an increasingly competitive environment. Together, these accounts reveal a deeper insight: upskilling was not merely a process of learning but a means of reclaiming control. Participants actively decoded the rules of a system that did not initially recognise them, transforming learning into a form of career agency and resistance. Their efforts to upskill represent a vital expression of resilience and adaptation in a transitional period characterised by uncertainty, barriers, and systemic inertia.

4.5.5 Self-Efficacy Evolution in the Transition CoP

The Transition CoP marked a significant shift from academic learning to the realities of the job market. Initially, participants carried forward the confidence developed during their studies, displaying advancing self-efficacy. However, repeated job rejections – often influenced by immigration status, perceived racial identity, or limited Irish or European work experience – led many to experience stagnation and, at times, a decline in confidence. This phase was emotionally intense, with several participants reporting stress, anxiety, and feelings of inadequacy. Initially, they relied on guidance received from school or career services, applying for jobs using familiar methods, which proved insufficient for achieving success. Their repeated failures triggered a re-evaluation of approach.

Consequently, they began to seek support through informal yet crucial networks such as peers on LinkedIn, alumni, diaspora communities on WhatsApp (for example, Home4all), and mentors. These connections exposed them to insider strategies, including tailoring CVs beyond standard templates, leveraging referrals, and preparing specifically for company- and role-aligned interviews. Through this process, participants remained determined and resilient, which led to a

resurgence in self-efficacy. They developed a stronger awareness of the unwritten rules of job access in Ireland and began to feel more equipped to navigate them.

Participants' confidence, interpreted through the SCCT framework of self-efficacy, fluctuated visibly during this stage. The narratives below show how self-efficacy evolved through five transitional phases.

Advancing Self-Efficacy

At the beginning of the transition phase, participants entered the job market with optimism and enthusiasm, believing that the competence gained through their postgraduate education would naturally lead to meaningful employment. Their self-efficacy was high, supported by recent academic success, previous work experience, and the structured learning environments they had successfully completed. This early confidence reflected the "recognised self-efficacy" stage from the Education CoP, now extended into their new career-seeking context. Many participants felt ready and capable, having developed both technical and soft skills such as communication, teamwork, and presentation, which they believed would give them an advantage.

"One very important thing is that after my master's degree… the structure of the course, the knowledge that I had gathered, increased my confidence level. I felt like I was ready to conquer the world after that course, because it really broadened my knowledge and taught me about many things in different areas of the world." Participant 12 (M)

Others explained how academic experiences in Ireland, particularly interactive and collaborative assignments, enhanced their self-belief. For some, it was the first time they had studied in

environments that valued their contributions, strengthening their confidence as emerging professionals.

“One thing I will say that's peculiar for me will be my confidence boost… I used to be like one of those shy students, but studying at Griffith, having to do presentations for assignments and courses, really gave me a confidence boost. It helped me connect to people more.” – Participant 20 (F)

This academic confidence shaped how participants approached the job market. Several believed their educational achievements, international exposure, and prior internships would make them attractive to Irish employers.

“I thought with my distinction and the internships I did back home, I’d get something quickly. I believed I was ready.” – Participant 29 (F)

“I had applied for like 30 jobs before graduation. I thought it was only a matter of time before I landed something decent.” – Participant 34 (M)

This early phase demonstrated strong self-efficacy built from prior mastery experiences. Participants believed in their ability to influence outcomes in the job market and felt mentally prepared to succeed. However, as the transition unfolded, this confidence was tested by structural barriers and career shocks, setting the stage for the next phases in their evolving self-efficacy journey.

However, this confidence was soon tested as reality diverged sharply from expectations.

Stalled Self-Efficacy

As participants progressed through the post-study period and confronted the Irish labour market, many began to experience repeated rejections or, worse, complete silence from potential employers. Despite maintaining active job-seeking efforts and applying what they had learned from the Education CoP, their applications yielded little to no feedback. Their initial optimism began to erode as they encountered a mismatch between effort and outcome. The cumulative effect was a plateau in self-efficacy; their belief in their ability to influence job outcomes weakened despite ongoing effort.

"I was applying every day, following everything we were taught in school, but I only got rejection emails and in some cases no reply." – Participant 19 (M).

Participants said they were unsure whether the issue lay with their CVs, their accents, their visa status, or their cultural fit, creating ambiguity that intensified their stress.

"It was like hitting a wall. I didn't know if it was my CV, my visa, or something else. That not knowing was the hardest part." – Participant 28 (F).

From an SCCT perspective, this phase illustrates the fragility of self-efficacy when mastery experiences are absent or ambiguous. Bandura (1977, 1997) highlighted that self-efficacy is most strongly influenced by personal accomplishments. When individuals experience success, confidence strengthens; when success is elusive or failure is repeated without clear explanation, self-efficacy begins to decline. In this case, continuous rejections and the absence of feedback compounded participants' uncertainty, making it difficult to interpret their performance accurately or identify where to adjust.

Declining Self-Efficacy

As job search efforts continued to be unfruitful, most participants demonstrated declining confidence and emotional distress. The lack of success, coupled with watching EU peers secure employment, led to growing self-doubt and a diminished sense of professional worth. This stage was marked by heightened emotional responses, including anxiety, shame, and despair.

“I started thinking maybe I wasn’t good enough, or maybe I chose the wrong country. It made me anxious every day.” – Participant 31 (F).

“I was watching my classmates from other places get jobs, and I kept wondering what was wrong with me. It hurt.” – Participant 6 (F).

“I kept telling myself I wish I hadn’t left Nigeria, maybe I was better off. Deep down, I started questioning if I was even employable here. I kind of hated my life in Ireland. Why? Because when I was in Nigeria, I was living quite a good life. I had a nice job, I had a nice apartment, had a nice car... life was good. Not perfect, but good. I think I left Nigeria at the age of 26. For a 25-year-old man, I was doing very okay. So, coming to Ireland, it was almost like starting all over again. My standard of living really dropped. And it was a bit frustrating. Because when you know where you were coming from... trying to adapt to those changes... it was a very, very difficult transition. I felt like I wasn't where I was supposed to be. You know, when you make a decision to travel and leave your life behind, you now start telling yourself, I think I made the wrong decision.” Participant 12 (M).

“My visa status just felt like a jinx… Even when I felt qualified, I doubted myself before I even applied.” Participant 9 (M).

Self-efficacy, as theorised in SCCT, is shaped not only by performance outcomes but also by emotional and physiological cues. Bandura argued that people draw from internal mood states as indirect sources of efficacy information. In this stage, the emotional burden of rejection, combined with observing peers – often with more locally familiar backgrounds – who succeeded more easily, compounded participants' sense of alienation and futility. However, for many, this stage, though demoralising, created the conditions for a strategic pivot to overcome the shock encountered. Rather than withdraw, some participants began to seek alternative ways of navigating the labour market. This shift initiated the next phase: determination to rebuild self-efficacy through informal networks.

Determined Self-Efficacy

Amid emotional uncertainty and career liminality, many participants displayed a form of self-efficacy rooted not in achievement but in determination. This determined self-efficacy phase, defined here as the belief in one's capacity to keep striving even in the absence of tangible results, was often the only internal resource available when external validation was lacking. Participants spoke of feeling stuck, doubting their migration decisions, and questioning their employability. Yet, they did not give up. Instead, they drew on internal resolve and made calculated efforts to stay active in their job searches and self-development. For many, self-efficacy was not a fixed trait but an evolving force shaped through sustained struggle and inner conviction. In the absence of external affirmation, what emerged was a determined self-efficacy driven by a focus on career goals – a resilient belief in one's ability to endure, persist, and ultimately succeed despite adversity. This form of self-efficacy was especially visible during prolonged unemployment, repeated rejections, or the invisibility of job-seeking efforts.

Participant 26 (F), for instance, described her determination to succeed, drawing on what she called "the Nigerian spirit," explaining:

"Even in the face of adversities, we are like, don't give up."

Her statement reflects the internalisation of cultural and communal narratives of perseverance. This belief in personal and collective resilience sustained her job search, especially during periods when external feedback was discouraging or absent. Her persistence aligns with Bandura's conceptualisation of self-efficacy as a source of motivated action, even under pressure or stress.

Similarly, Participant 13 (M) shared the mental strategies he used to stay focused amid multiple career shocks:

"There are many things that shocked my system… I thought I had sized myself up mentally… I had hundreds of versions of my CV… My mindset was that I only needed 1 job… Just 1 person to tell me yes."

Despite prolonged uncertainty and constant revisions to his application strategy, he maintained faith in a potential breakthrough. His determined mindset, anchored in the conviction that a single opportunity could transform his trajectory, demonstrates the goal-oriented and agentic nature of self-efficacy. His persistence illustrates what London (1983) described as a core component of career resilience: the capacity to resist career disruption through self-belief and reduced dependency on immediate success or external validation.

Participant 31 (F) likewise reflected on her experience of extended rejection during COVID-19, when even part-time work was scarce due to visa restrictions and economic shutdowns. She shared:

"It was not for the faint-hearted. You just have to keep going. Especially if you know where you are heading."

Her emphasis on clarity of purpose as a motivational anchor reflects what Tokbaeva and Achtenhagen (2021) described as a key aspect of career resilience: sustaining hope, optimism, and forward vision. Despite external conditions that could have easily undermined her confidence, she continued to pursue her long-term goals. This perseverance represents a behavioural manifestation of determined self-efficacy – taking meaningful action despite repeated obstacles, emotional strain, or social exclusion.

Across these accounts, self-efficacy emerged not merely as confidence in ability but as an active belief in one's capacity to endure and adapt. As Kuntz et al. (2017) argue, career resilience involves commitment to learning and proactive strategies, particularly in adverse contexts. Likewise, Akkermans et al. (2014) and Lyons et al. (2015) found that high self-efficacy is strongly associated with adaptability and sustained career engagement during uncertainty. These participants demonstrated how self-efficacy fuels career resilience not only through feelings of control but through persistent effort, hope, and strategic action. Their narratives reflect the deliberate management of one's psychological resources to keep moving forward even when external validation is absent. Determined self-efficacy thus forms the foundation for later recovery and career advancement, what this study identifies as resurging self-efficacy.

Resurging Self-Efficacy

Amid emotional and psychological lows, many participants began actively seeking new coping strategies and learning avenues. They turned to vibrant peer-led spaces such as LinkedIn and WhatsApp groups (Home4All). These spaces fostered practical knowledge exchange, mentorship,

and social persuasion, offering tailored advice and insights into the job market. This peer engagement provided access to insider knowledge, including how to tailor CVs beyond standard formats, align applications to specific company cultures, and leverage referrals.

A common turning point was the decision to stop repeating ineffective job-seeking strategies and instead pursue new, adaptive pathways. For Participant 12 (M), this moment of reflection marked a significant shift:

"The thing is… if a wise person does one thing and it doesn't work, you try alternatives… When I realised, I wasn't getting jobs here because I didn't have the experience, I started to look for… anything I could do… I didn't even want to get paid at the time. Luckily, I found someone who has a small company… I supported projects… and I could put that on my CV… That experience led to the first contract role… which then led to the job I have currently."

This quote illustrates the role of personal mastery experiences through voluntary engagement in unpaid work, enabling him to demonstrate competence that later led to paid opportunities. Such mastery experiences are widely documented as the most powerful source of self-efficacy (Bandura, 1997; Bandura, 1977; Lent et al., 1999). The participant's self-directed pivot also reveals cognitive flexibility and a capacity to reinterpret his circumstances, both of which facilitate the resurgence of self-efficacy.

For others, the reawakening of confidence was catalysed by observing peers succeed and drawing motivation from their progress, that is, vicarious learning. Participant 18 (F) described a turning point that arose from witnessing the success stories of other migrants in the Home4All network:

"This is not enjoyment. This is survival... The goal is to find your footprint in this country… The communities you surround yourself with are very important… If you are in a group where everyone is just complaining, you will complain… I heard two people's stories… and I told my friend, stop talking to people whose things are not working well for them. That mindset has helped me improve till today."

Here, observing others succeed under similar conditions acted as a motivational model, enabling the participant to visualise her own potential and reassess her ability to progress. This aligns with Bandura's (1986) assertion that observing successful peers, especially those perceived as similar, can significantly elevate self-efficacy.

Beyond observation, social persuasion played a pivotal role in reigniting confidence. Participants frequently reached out to strangers and acquaintances on LinkedIn for referrals, encouragement, and tailored advice, thus receiving credible, targeted feedback. Participant 16 (F) developed an organised and repeatable method of professional engagement through LinkedIn:

"If I want to apply to a company, I go on LinkedIn… If I even see a Black person in that company, I'll reach out and ask if they can refer me… I had a format of a message in my notes that I sent to people… And being in groups like Home4All… they have suggestions and helpful tips for different job opportunities."

These actions reflected an intentional use of verbal persuasion but, more importantly, signalled the development of agency and strategic communication skills. Such social influences, especially when perceived as credible and attainable, reshape beliefs about one's own capability (Bandura, 1986; Barnard et al., 2008).

Emotional regulation and positive reframing also emerged as tools participants used to manage earlier emotional lows. Participant 3 (M) illustrated this in his reflection on maintaining professional connections and drawing strength from prior affiliations:

"LinkedIn is a very good resource… I reached out to a former supplier… And then my university alumni… we tried to build a learning platform… people can reach out asking who can support with this information… Even my classmates from school here have been very supportive."

Such platforms mitigated the isolating emotional toll of career liminality and enabled participants to reinterpret setbacks not as personal failings but as systemic challenges to be navigated collectively. The emotional and physiological state source of self-efficacy (Bandura, 1977; Kavanagh & Bower, 1985) is particularly relevant here, as participants described emotional uplift through community interaction and purpose-driven action.

4.6 Phase 4: Professional CoP: Integration, Contribution, and Career Progression in Formal Workplace Settings

A third key learning space identified in this study was the Professional CoP. This was the space participants had aimed to reach from the beginning of their journey, as their goal was to remain in the country and work after graduation. It represents the point at which they became active members of formal business organisations in Ireland, engaging with professional colleagues, workplace cultures, and industry practices. In this phase, participants were no longer preparing for work; they were doing the work, learning to develop their career through real-world participation (Goodwin, 2019; Welch & Welch, 2015), and further developing their professional identities (Lave &Wenger, 1991). The Professional CoP marked a critical phase in participants' career development, where

they transitioned from learners to recognised contributors in structured, multicultural work environments. This space was defined by formal organisational contexts in which participants integrated their prior learning, adapted to workplace norms, contributed meaningfully to teams, and began pursuing long-term career advancement. In this phase, participants experienced a sense of legitimacy and validation as skilled professionals. Participants consistently emphasised how experiences in their education and transition phases equipped them with foundational capabilities, especially in communication and intercultural collaboration, that became indispensable in their professional contexts. These skills were not only transferable but also expanded through daily practice. Participant 8 (F) reflected, "Working with people from different races, different colours, different backgrounds… working with them has really shaped me into who I am today in my workplace. Right now, I work globally… APAC, EMEA, LATAM… So, working with different people while I was in college has made me understand how people from different regions would relate to you. So now coming into the real-life space, I'm not surprised, or I don't perceive them wrongly anymore." Others expressed similar sentiments. Participant 11 (F) explained how professional work required active engagement: "Working as part of a team… there are meetings, and you have to put your inputs. Usually, me, me, me, I could just sit down and listen and look. But I have to talk. So, I learned to interact." These workplace settings encouraged participants to develop competencies beyond those acquired in school or informal transitions. Participant 34 (M) noted, "Communication and presentation skills… I still find them most valuable because I use them in my day-to-day life at work." Participant 35 (F) added that multiculturalism demanded emotional intelligence and openness: "I'm working with Indians, Italians, Irish people… So that whole language barrier and learning to be accommodating… learning how to listen to their opinions… it has really helped in my career."

Integration into Irish workplaces was also characterised by subtle yet meaningful adaptation. Participants described learning to navigate team dynamics, managerial expectations, and workplace hierarchies through both formal structures and informal mentorship. Participant 24 (M) reflected on this dynamic: "Most of my colleagues are multinational, multicultural… everywhere I have worked has been the case." Participant 3 (M) described the process as "a learning experience every day… there's always support from your colleagues, or you provide support." Some, like Participant 31 (F), spoke of personal growth through professional responsibilities: "I work with a firm that is more global… I have developed my people management skills. I'm a team leader. I have more responsibilities… I wouldn't say I'm the same person of 3 or 4 years ago. I have definitely improved." This phase also revealed a pattern of upward mobility and ambition. Participant 25 (M) described a fast-moving career journey across companies and cities, culminating in promotion: "I got hired… and became a program manager… that's where I am." Others, like Participant 6 (F), described having direct influence in shaping workplace culture: "I sit on the leadership team… it's up to me to build the culture. I'm influencing and coaching, but I'm also learning from them." For some female participants, professional inclusion was deeply affirming. Participant 26 (F) recalled, "AIB appreciates diversity and inclusiveness… So, you see people wear some kind of costume, and I'm like, what's going on? Are we having a party? I'm glad I was able to experience that." Participant 14 (F) valued supportive leadership: "They make you comfortable to make mistakes. You're not afraid to own up and learn."

Several participants noted how their identities, especially as women and Black migrants, shaped their workplace experiences. For some, identity served as a perceived advantage. Participant 15 (F) reflected: "I like to look at the positive side of things and say I got my current job because of my race and my gender… it might have worked against me at some point, but it has worked for

me as well." Participant 17 (F) added, "A lot of companies are doing diversity and inclusion… maybe one of the reasons I actually got the job is my race and my gender." However, these experiences were not universally positive. Participant 21 (F) expressed concern about tokenism: "They just wanted to put her there for diversity and inclusion… but then, they frustrated her life there." Despite these complexities, participants largely viewed the Professional CoP as a space of growth, achievement, and future orientation. They felt a sense of fulfilment from being seen and heard, yet many also expressed a desire for continued progress. Participant 1 (M) admitted, "I feel like I should be doing more… I feel like I should be earning more… I'm not where I'm supposed to be." Similarly, Participant 14 (F) noted, "I wouldn't say I'm comfortable, but I'd love to be doing better… especially with the constraint of the work permit, and that's not something I can control." Ultimately, the Professional CoP was not seen as a final destination but rather a platform for ongoing development. It was a space where prior learning was consolidated and professional identities were solidified. Having gained a foothold in the Irish labour market, participants were able to confidently envisage and articulate their long-term career goals. Participants' ability to contribute meaningfully, learn continuously, and navigate complex organisational landscapes signalled both their integration into the Irish workforce and their evolving aspirations beyond it.

4.6.1 Self-Efficacy Evolution in the Professional CoP

Following the resurgence of self-efficacy during the Transition CoP, participants entered the Professional CoP with renewed confidence and a deeper awareness of how to navigate the Irish labour market. Initially, they experienced a stabilising phase, where their confidence became more grounded as they secured employment and began applying previously acquired skills in real-world work contexts. This phase was marked by growing professional assurance and adaptive learning,

particularly in areas such as communication, collaboration in multicultural teams, and understanding workplace norms. As participants accumulated experience and received validation through positive feedback and workplace success, many transitioned into the *established* phase of confidence. Here, their self-efficacy was reinforced by tangible achievements, increased autonomy, and expanding professional networks. They began to take on more responsibility, advocate for themselves, and identify long-term career trajectories. Eventually, several participants entered the *flourishing* phase, characterised by proactive goal setting, strategic career advancement planning, and a strong sense of agency. In this stage, confidence evolved beyond personal success to include an outward-looking orientation. Participants became active contributors to the broader ecosystem of support, engaging in reciprocal knowledge sharing. They mentored newer migrants in the Transition and Education CoPs, offering practical insights and encouragement grounded in their own experiences of overcoming systemic and situational barriers. This development marked a transformation from recipients of support to providers, highlighting the cyclical and communal nature of learning and confidence building within and across CoPs. These stages reflect how learning and identity evolve within CoPs (Farnsworth et al., 2016; Wenger, 1998) and how self-efficacy is continually reinforced through performance accomplishments and social validation (Bandura, 1986, 1997; Lent et al., 1994, 2017).

Stabilising Self-Efficacy

The stabilising phase marked the transition from career liminality to legitimate participation in the workforce. Participants described this period as affirming and relieving, as they applied their previously acquired skills from the Education and Transition CoPs in new workplace contexts. Initial employment offered structure, stability, and a foundation for their evolving competencies.

Confidence began to take root through routine performance, adaptation to multicultural environments, and peer interactions.

Participant 9 (M) reflected on how his confidence gradually stabilised after entering a structured work environment:

"Once I started the role, it took a few weeks, but I realised I actually knew what I was doing. I wasn't just someone looking for work anymore, I was contributing."

Participant 22 (F) similarly shared:

"It was like breathing out. The first few weeks were hard, but I could finally show I had value. My team started depending on me, and that made me feel like I belonged."

As new business postgraduates gained exposure to workplace routines, norms, and peer support, they began to participate more fully in the Professional CoP, moving from peripheral to the core practice (Lave & Wenger, 1991). This stage corresponds to early performance accomplishments and verbal persuasion, which help consolidate self-belief after a period of uncertainty (Lent et al., 1994).

Established Self-Efficacy

As participants gained work experience and began receiving validation for their contributions, they demonstrated improved self-efficacy, progressing beyond stabilisation to establishment. This new phase was characterised by increased autonomy, stronger professional identity, and a growing capacity to influence their work environments. Participants were no longer preoccupied with merely performing adequately or proving their right to belong; instead, they were actively shaping

their roles and seeing themselves as integral, competent contributors within their professional communities. Participants reported handling projects independently, being trusted with decision-making, and influencing team practices. These experiences reinforced their professional identity and deepened their sense of agency.

Participant 27 (F) reflected on how her ability to lead and challenge ideas evolved through experience:

"Now, I can lead meetings, push back when something doesn't make sense, and suggest improvements. That confidence didn't come overnight; it came from doing and being trusted."

Participant 12 (M) also described a shift from passive execution to proactive influence:

"Before, I was just trying to keep the job. Now, I feel like I have a say. I'm not just doing what I'm told; rather, I'm shaping the work."

For Participant 5 (M), confidence strengthened not only through individual performance but also through social learning within a supportive network of peers and mentors (Goodwin, 2019), suggesting what Wenger (1998) described as a deeply embedded CoP:

"It was just a mix… manager being supportive, my mentor being supportive, and also my friends… we were kind of facing the same challenges… from time to time we advise ourselves, we talk to ourselves… we all had mentors, we all had managers that were supportive… it was a mixture of all of these things that helped improve my confidence."

Participant 20 (F) highlighted a transformation in workplace behaviour, shifting from silence to assertiveness as a key marker of established self-efficacy:

"Instead of being the co-worker that just sits at the back… I am no longer like that… if I have an issue at work, I voice out. I do not keep quiet. I think that helped me when I started the job."

Here, participants not only gained trust in their abilities but also leveraged that confidence to speak up, advocate for themselves, and contribute ideas, which are key indicators of professional maturity and embeddedness within the Professional CoP.

This stage was underpinned by self-efficacy strengthened through mastery experiences, especially when individuals were able to observe the results of their efforts. Workplace feedback, increased responsibility, and growing autonomy all contributed to a deeper belief in their capabilities. According to Situated Learning Theory, this movement from legitimate peripheral participation to full participation reflects a growing professional identity as participants internalised the practices and values of their professional community.

Flourishing Self-Efficacy

In the final phase of self-efficacy development within the Professional CoP, several participants progressed beyond personal validation to flourishing self-efficacy. This stage was marked by strategic career advancement, proactive leadership, and a strong sense of social responsibility. At this point, self-efficacy was not only internal or situational; it became generative and outward-facing. Participants actively sought to mentor others, give back to their communities, and shape ecosystems that supported newer migrants navigating similar challenges. This flourishing phase reflects Bandura's (1997) notion of self-regulation and forethought, in which individuals not only believe in their competencies but also envision and plan future achievements while enabling others to do the same. These individuals operated with a strong sense of agency and purpose, driven not

only by personal career goals but also by a broader commitment to shared success within their migrant communities.

Notably, some participants became not only recipients of support but also architects of support systems. Participant 5 (M), for example, moved from peer learning to community building:

“We were just a group of friends… I created the WhatsApp group in 2019… to share learnings from interviews and experiences generally in Ireland. It has now moved from a group of friends to a community of professionals and postgraduate students that offer advice on how to navigate the Irish society better.”

This initiative aligns with Wenger's (1998) concept of legitimate peripheral participation evolving into full participation, where those once learning from the CoP now shape it, sustain it, and widen its reach.

Similarly, Participant 17 (F) described taking on leadership roles and using her platform to support inclusion:

“I now lead on DEI initiatives at work. I mentor interns and I’m also part of a network that supports international students to prepare for graduate roles. I remember how hard it was, and I just want to make it easier for someone else.”

Participant 14 (M) reflected on a growing sense of purpose that transcended personal gain:

“The goal is no longer just to survive or even just to succeed, it’s about creating room for others. That’s how we move forward as a community.”

This flourishing phase illustrates the cyclical and communal nature of self-efficacy development, where earlier struggles become resources for others, and the migrant journey becomes one not only of survival but of sustained, purposeful contribution**.** Flourishing self-efficacy reflects the level of the career development journey where participants began setting and pursuing ambitious goals, engaging in intentional career planning, and extending support to peers. This evolution demonstrates how self-efficacy is not static but cumulative and socially embedded. The shift from individual confidence to collective contribution illustrates the cyclical nature of learning within CoPs, where former newcomers become mentors and culture carriers, sustaining the community's growth. The flourishing self-efficacy phase reflects a confluence of self-efficacy**,** outcome expectations**,** and goal setting, leading to proactive and confident career behaviour (Lent et al., 2017; Tetteh et al., 2022). These participants did not just adapt to the host system, they began transforming their spaces of work and practice.

The evolution of self-efficacy within the Professional CoP demonstrates a cyclical, socially embedded learning process (Farnsworth et al., 2016; Wenger, 1998), moving from survival to strategic influence. As participants transitioned from receiving to providing support, they illustrated how confidence, identity, and agency are co-constructed within professional communities and sustained through reciprocal learning.

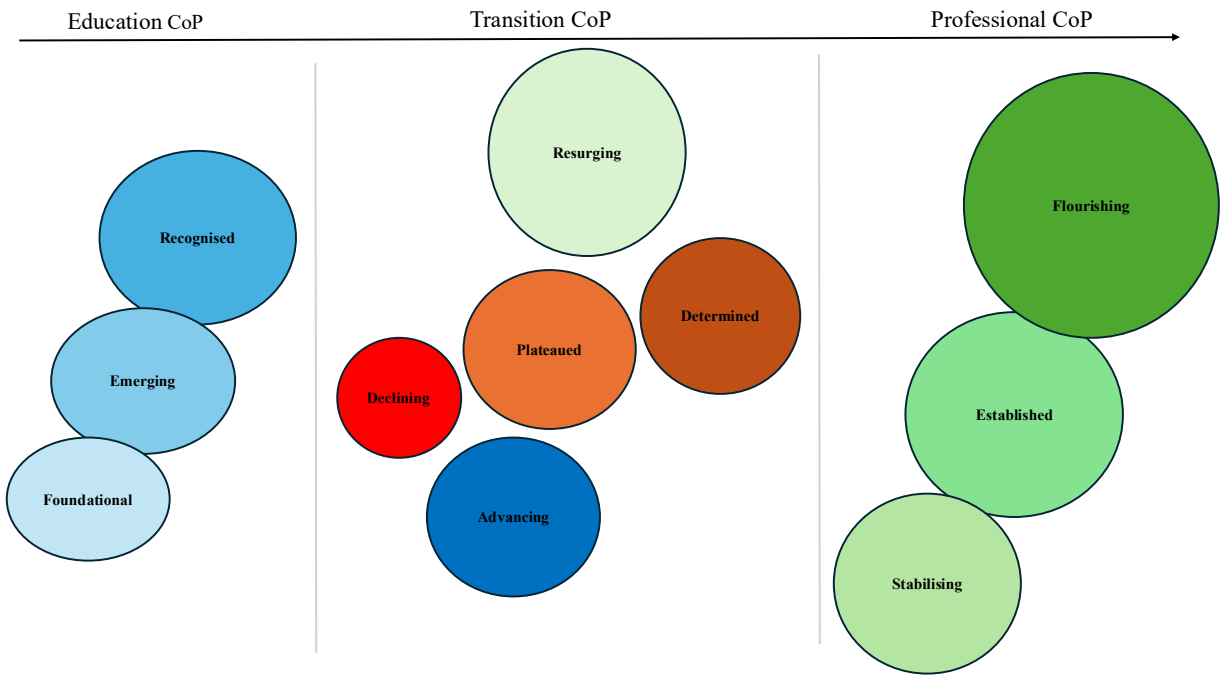


Figure 9. Stages of self-efficacy development (confidence in one's abilities) across different CoPs: Education, Transition, and Professional

In the original conceptual framework (Figure 1), self-efficacy was positioned as a central construct within SCCT, but it had not yet been understood as evolving through lived experiences of disruption and recovery. The findings, as illustrated in Figure 8, extend this by showing that self-efficacy develops dynamically through participants' interactions with career shocks and the resilience fostered particularly within the Transition CoP. When shocks were encountered, self-efficacy declined, leading participants to doubt their ability to progress. However, peer support in the Transition CoP provided emotional support, shared strategies, and collective knowledge, which enabled resilience and helped restore confidence. Thus, building on the conceptual framework, Figure 8 demonstrates that self-efficacy is not fixed but continually shaped and reshaped through

the interplay of shocks, resilience, and communal learning. This progression deepens understanding of career development in migration contexts, showing how CoPs function as critical spaces where self-efficacy is rebuilt and strengthened.

4.7 Phase 5: Knowledge Transfer and Future Career Plans

This phase examines how participants envisioned transferring and applying the knowledge, skills, and experiences they gained through their educational and professional engagements in Ireland. It highlights a shift in their career outlook from personal adaptation within the host context to broader aspirations for transnational contribution. Participants described various forms of knowledge sharing and mentoring within Ireland and across borders, reflecting an emerging sense of responsibility to guide others and contribute to development in their home countries. The findings also reveal participants' long-term entrepreneurial ambitions, often linked to achieving immigration stability and the intention to use Irish-acquired expertise for future ventures. Table 7 presents the analytic progression of data for this phase, illustrating how participants' accounts of mentoring, guidance, and entrepreneurship were developed into the theoretical categories of distanciated knowledge transfer and knowledge recycling within CoPs. These categories together form the aggregate theme of Knowledge Transfer and Future Career Plans.

Table 7

Analytic Progression of Data – Knowledge Transfer and Future Career Plans

First-Order Codes	Theoretical Categories	Aggregate Theme

Mentoring and advising of prospective African student migrants before arrival Guiding peers in Ireland via WhatsApp groups, LinkedIn, and CV reviews/mock interviews Sharing migration pitfalls and adaptation mechanisms to ease newcomers' transition from study to professional life in Ireland	Distanciated (Boundary-spanning) Knowledge Transfer Situated knowledge sharing	Knowledge Recycling within the CoPs
Intention to establish businesses in home country leveraging Irish-acquired skills Aspiration to return home and use international exposure for national development	Knowledge-driven entrepreneurial intention Entrepreneurial (business) knowledge mobility	Long-term entrepreneurial intention in home country

Career ambition to influence business policy at home using acquired knowledge Career plans to return to the home country after securing Irish citizenship, transitioning from "9 to 5 job" to entrepreneurship		

4.7.1 Knowledge Recycling within the CoPs

There was no evidence of direct business domain-specific knowledge transfer from Ireland to participants' home countries while they remained in the host context. Instead, knowledge engagement with the home country was found to be informal (Amin, 2002; Williams, 2007a), limited, and mostly oriented towards future entrepreneurial aspirations. Participants did not describe any structured or active transfer of business or industry-specific knowledge to their countries of origin. Rather than business expertise, the knowledge shared was largely centred on migration experiences and strategies for navigating the Irish education and employment systems. This positioned participants as expert contributors within migrant-facing CoPs, where the recipients of their guidance were primarily current and aspiring postgraduate student migrants.

Several participants described using informal platforms such as WhatsApp groups to mentor others, offering practical advice on academic choices, scholarship opportunities, and career

strategies. Participant 23 (F) shared, “I have been advising the people that are trying to move here,” while Participant 28 (F) added, “I try to create awareness about opportunities… scholarships, work experience… if I know anybody is interested, I will tell them about Ireland, I will help them.”

This informal knowledge sharing extended beyond national affiliations and reflected a broader ethic of transnational solidarity among these African migrants. Participant 5 (M) explained, “I mentor people… I have helped them from the stage where they were planning… to now coming to Ireland or settling down and having different roles… sharing is caring.” Despite their engagement within migrant peer networks in Ireland, many participants voiced frustration at the lack of formal mechanisms to facilitate wider knowledge transfer to their home countries. Participant 32 (F) stated, “If I had a platform… to teach aspiring business analysts on how to navigate their careers… I would definitely go for it,” while Participant 16 (F) expressed a desire to “help business owners… after gaining my own skills here and applying them.”

Data also showed that as participants progressed into more advanced stages of self-efficacy within the Professional CoP, they became more confident and intentional in supporting newer migrants. Their expertise, shaped by their own educational and employment journeys in Ireland, positioned them as valuable knowledge brokers (Delmestri & Walgenbach, 2005; Raghuram, 2013) within migrant communities in the host country, although direct business knowledge engagement with their home countries remained minimal. In sum, current knowledge transfer to the home country was informal and indirect, focused more on education pathway migration insights than business or technical knowledge.

4.7.2 Long-term Entrepreneurial Intention in Home Country

Although no participant reported current involvement in business knowledge transfer to their home country, several spoke about future intentions to do so through entrepreneurship. These ambitions were often tied to personal milestones, especially the acquisition of Irish citizenship. Participant 2 (F) explained, "Once I have my citizenship… I don't mind moving back… and I have businesses back home." Others envisioned transferring elements of Irish work culture. Participant 23 (F) shared, "I'd want to transfer a bit of that friendly work environment… to have great workers… that's one thing I for sure would want to take back," while Participant 9 (M) remarked, "It has exposed me to a lot of opportunities that I can replicate back home… to develop the business I plan to have."

Participants' strong entrepreneurial aspirations and long-term commitment to giving back suggest that business knowledge transfer may be significantly activated in the future, contingent on a more stable immigration status that confers stability and access to greater opportunity in the host country. From an SCCT perspective, knowledge transfer by these highly skilled postgraduate migrants, particularly the intention to contribute to home countries after achieving secure immigration status, can be understood as a goal-directed, agentic behaviour influenced by self-efficacy beliefs, outcome expectations, and contextual supports and barriers (Brown & Lent, 2013; Lent et al., 1994, 2017; Tetteh et al., 2022).

Participants' evolving self-efficacy, built through successful mastery experiences in their host country workplaces and academic settings, enhanced their belief in their capacity to generate value for their home communities. This internal motivation was further shaped by their outcome expectations, specifically the belief that contributing back home would create impact as their own

way of giving back from a position of greater stability. From the SLT perspective, knowledge transfer or sharing by participants can be seen as embedded in CoPs (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 2000) in both the host and potential home contexts. Knowledge is not merely acquired abstractly but emerges through participation, interaction, and negotiation of meaning within these social settings. As participants moved from legitimate peripheral participation in Irish education and workplaces towards full participation, they gained access to tacit and explicit forms of professional and contextual knowledge. Over time, this embodied knowledge became recontextualised and repurposed for imagined or planned contributions to their countries of origin, often through virtual means or long-term professional engagements. Their intentions reflected distanciated knowledge transfer, aligning with the idea that knowledge is socially situated but can still be effectively transmitted across borders when individuals are deeply embedded in both the source and potential recipient contexts.

This hybrid interpretation shows that participants' motivation and capacity for knowledge transfer were simultaneously:

- informed by personal belief systems and career agency (SCCT), and
- constructed through situated experiences within overlapping CoPs (SLT) in Ireland.

4.8 Gender Dynamics

Surprisingly, the data revealed no discernible gender differences in the overall learning experiences of Nigerian, Ghanaian, Kenyan, and Tanzanian business postgraduates in Ireland. Both male and female participants faced similar challenges and growth paths as they transitioned from newcomers to recognised professionals. This finding highlights the shared nature of learning

experiences and integration challenges among skilled migrants, underscoring the universality of the obstacles encountered during professional integration. While male and female participants generally shared similar career development trajectories in Ireland, subtle gendered perceptions emerged in how they interpreted their experiences, particularly regarding immigration status and professional integration. These differences were not pronounced but offered insight into how male and female migrants differently made sense of their transitions from education to employment in the host country.

Female participants more frequently than males reported immigration-related career barriers, particularly employer misconceptions about visa types and unwillingness to sponsor work permits. Ten of the twenty-one women raised concerns about employers' limited understanding of the 1G graduate visa scheme or outright unwillingness to engage with sponsorship processes, compared with only two of the fourteen men.

Participant 14 (F) recounted an instance where the recruiter clearly lacked awareness: "Your CV says something like 1G, what does that mean? I said, it means I'll need work sponsorship… you can either pay for it, or I can pay, and you just give me the document. He was like, oh yeah, that's fine. I think we can do that." Other accounts were less positive.

Participant 15 (F) described the emotional toll of repeated misunderstandings: "It was a very emotionally draining process… a lot of times they don't understand what the postgraduate visa is… you're having to explain to them during interviews. It's just like 80% of employers do not know what it is at all." Participant 21 (F) went further, noting how ignorance could affect hiring decisions: "If I had mentioned I needed sponsorship, and someone else didn't, they'd have gone

for that person. I kept quiet about it. Later, my manager still didn't understand it… Most people don't even know what stamp 1 is."

This lack of awareness often led participants to suppress visa information out of fear that transparency would jeopardise job offers. Participant 30 (F) articulated a widespread frustration: "Most companies are now aware we can sponsor ourselves… but they are unwilling to pay the €1,000 associated with sponsorship. They need to be educated that we can actually sponsor ourselves." Participant 22 (F), who conducted her own mini study during her thesis, captured the systemic nature of this issue: "The companies are very ignorant… anytime they hear about immigration status, their brain just goes to the law. They don't want to offend the law or take any risks. So, they just avoid the person altogether."

Both male and female participants expressed concern over employers' reluctance to provide sponsorship, though again this theme was raised more frequently by women. Participant 18 (F) reflected: "When I was looking for a job that would sponsor my visa, it was very difficult… I feel like it's not that companies don't know. The moment you say 'sponsor,' it sounds like they'll be responsible for your stay. It scares employers." Participant 20 (F) echoed this ambiguity: "I don't understand why companies do not want to sponsor migrants. The explanation has never made sense to me." Participant 8 (F) offered a more pragmatic interpretation: "Sometimes it's expensive for these organisations… they might not want to go through the stress of paying so much money for someone they're not sure will pass probation."

In contrast, fewer male participants raised concerns about visa misunderstandings, and when they did, the tone often suggested a frustrating but temporary hurdle rather than a systemic or emotionally draining experience.

Participant 13 (M) recalled: “Many HR people didn’t understand what stamp 1G is… You had to educate them. But because it was coming from you, they’d take it with a pinch of salt like you were desperate.” Participant 27 (M) similarly observed: “Eventually the topic of what stamp I’m on came up… I’d explain I can work without sponsorship, but maybe they just didn’t know about 1G.” These male accounts, though reflective of similar structural issues, appeared less emotionally charged and were mentioned less frequently, suggesting a subtle gendered variation in how immigration-related challenges were experienced and internalised.

Additionally, female participants often perceived a greater sense of inclusion and diversity within the professional community compared with their male counterparts. They described workplace environments that actively promoted inclusivity, enabling them to contribute meaningfully to diverse perspectives, as they felt recognised and included as valued members of multicultural teams. Participant 2 (F) shared: “At my workplace, I've not outrightly experienced discrimination such that maybe I deserve something, and then because I'm a Black immigrant, they told me, ‘Oh, no, you cannot get this.’ My workplace frowns against racism and encourages inclusion.” Participant 6 (F) similarly reflected: “Now, because I sit on the leadership team in my workplace, I influence and coach people, because prior to me joining, everybody in leadership was Irish. Now, I’m getting them to think in a different way. But I’m also learning from them in terms of how things are done, how we speak to people, and all of that.”

Both male and female participants revealed a stark contrast between their expectations of transitioning from postgraduate education to professional work and the realities they encountered upon arriving in Ireland, which created a profound career shock. Many were motivated by the promises of travel agents who marketed Ireland as an English-speaking country with reputable

universities, abundant tech jobs, and clear post-study pathways to long-term employment and residency. Participants envisioned that earning a master's degree would lead seamlessly to stable, well-paid roles in high-demand sectors. However, upon arrival, these expectations were quickly disrupted. Participants encountered unforeseen barriers, including complex immigration policies, the undervaluation of their foreign qualifications and experience, and the difficulty of breaking into professional roles. These experiences forced them to reassess their career trajectories and adapt to an unfamiliar and often exclusionary professional environment.

Participant 23 (F) shared: "I went to an agent… he told me, 'Oh, there's this country, it's called Ireland… they have good schools and there are jobs, all these tech companies are there. So, you're guaranteed, you'll get a job… Ireland is just the best country.' I thought… I'm going to finish, maybe go work for Google, make my millions… But I'm not where I thought I would be. With a master's degree and almost six years' experience at the bank, I expected to be at least at a managerial level… It was a very tough time for me. But I had to do what I had to do to survive." Participant 7 (F) added: "I made the choice to come to Ireland because of the advice from my travel agents… I wouldn't come to Ireland to do a master's and expect to be two years plus on customer support." Participant 33 (F) similarly reflected: "Based on what my agent sold to me, I envisioned that immediately after my master's, I would land my desired job and boom, start building my career… That was my plan, but life happened."

Male participants echoed these sentiments. Participant 1 (M) explained: "I thought, when I finish my master's in management, I'm going to be a manager of a company… which was very far from it… that wasn't the journey at all." Participant 12 (M) shared: "The moment I finish my master's degree, I will start applying for jobs. I wanted to get a job as a business analyst in one of the top

tech firms here, but I tried and tried over and over again... That's not what happened." Participant 25 (M) said: "I thought that immediately after my master's, I will land a very good, nice job, you know, probably in a tech company... but then after my master's, reality set in. You could imagine a master's degree holder working as a store assistant." Participant 4 (M) reflected: "When they were selling this whole thing… they were like, oh, with business management you can get a job. I would apply for jobs, and the jobs would come as fast as I wanted... That was my expectation based on what they sold to me."

These early career shocks highlight the uncertain and unpredictable nature of transitioning into a foreign labour market. Despite their substantial education and professional experience, participants were unprepared for the systemic barriers that undermined their initial plans. To navigate these challenges, they leveraged an informal transitional CoP, which provided critical spaces for learning, support, and adaptation. This CoP helped participants overcome complex barriers rooted in immigration policy, the devaluation of Global South work experience, and other contextual factors in the host country that deeply shaped their evolving career paths in Ireland.

4.9 Interpretation of Results

The findings of this study illuminate the complex, non-linear journeys of highly skilled business postgraduate migrants from Nigeria, Ghana, Kenya, and Tanzania as they transitioned from education to employment in Ireland. It is a journey that requires extensive social, multicultural, and cognitive learning through engagement with CoPs, particularly the informal CoP, where most that shapes resilience, skill, and confidence takes place. Interpreted through an interpretivist-

constructivist lens, the data underscore how participants' expectations, actions, identities, and learning were continually shaped and reshaped by the socio-cultural, institutional, and policy contexts in which their careers unfolded. Participants initially arrived in Ireland with high expectations, largely influenced by pre-migration factors such as agents, peers, and the international branding of Ireland's education and technology sectors. These expectations rested on the belief that a master's degree from an Irish institution would guarantee smooth entry into the professional labour market and eventual settlement. However, the career shock many experienced, marked by unfamiliar immigration policies, limited employer sponsorship, systemic inequities, and the devaluation of prior experience, created a sharp disjuncture between anticipated and lived realities. This disruption marked a major career sensemaking point and became a catalyst for new forms of learning and adaptation.

From a constructivist perspective, it becomes evident that participants' understanding of career progression in Ireland was not fixed but evolved through their embedded experiences within various CoPs. These CoPs – educational, transitional, and professional – provided different forms of situated learning, enabling participants to recalibrate their goals, build context-relevant competencies, and cultivate resilience. Learning in this context was not only technical or cognitive but also deeply social and experiential, often requiring participants to navigate failure, uncertainty, and shifts in identity. The Education CoP emerged as the initial and foundational learning space. It enabled participants to build academic confidence, multicultural awareness, and preliminary self-efficacy. Through peer interaction, classroom engagement, and exposure to new cultural norms, participants began to understand the contours of the Irish labour market. However, this educational qualification was not always sufficient to secure employment, particularly in the absence of contextual advantages such as reckonable employment visas or employer sponsorship.

Participants subsequently navigated what this study terms the Transition CoP: a critical, informal, and liminal learning space between graduation and employment. In this phase, participants were often caught between student identities and less recognised skilled identities. They encountered numerous job rejections, ambiguous visa regulations, and an absence of academic institutional support and guidance. Yet this period also became a site of deep experiential learning where skills such as persistence, adaptability, and strategic networking were cultivated. These learning processes were socially constructed through internships, volunteering, peer collaborations, and informal mentorship, functioning as alternative pathways in the face of systemic exclusion.

Gender dynamics add further nuance to this interpretation. While male and female participants shared broadly similar trajectories, female participants more frequently narrated experiences of inclusion, suggesting growing gender parity within the professional CoP in the host country. Their reflections often revealed heightened emotional labour in navigating employers' visa misunderstandings and the additional burden of legitimising their presence and potential. These subtle but significant differences point to gendered dimensions in how resilience and adaptation were experienced and constructed.

Ultimately, the Professional CoP became a space where participants could not only apply their skills but also reclaim professional identities. This phase was marked by increased self-efficacy, growing confidence, and a sense of belonging. Yet even at this stage, participants' career development remained contingent on immigration status, employer support, and ongoing cultural negotiation. Professional CoPs did more than support employment; they nurtured participants' sense of legitimacy, contribution, and psychological safety, all of which are foundational for long-term career flourishing.

A salient dimension of the findings relates to knowledge transfer. Currently, participants' contributions to their home countries are informal, indirect, and primarily non-business in nature. Their knowledge-sharing efforts largely centre on advising others on educational pathways and migration processes. This positions them as local knowledge brokers within migrant communities in Ireland rather than as active agents of transnational business knowledge exchange. The absence of business-oriented transfer reflects both structural limitations and participants' transitional stage. Many are still striving for career stability and improved immigration status in Ireland, conditions they deem necessary before initiating meaningful entrepreneurial or technical engagement with their countries of origin. Nonetheless, participants expressed a strong future orientation. Many articulated aspirations to contribute to their home countries through business ventures, mentoring, or collaborative projects. These ambitions were often linked to long-term goals such as securing Irish citizenship or permanent residency. In this way, knowledge transfer is revealed as a deferred practice rooted in present instability but animated by future intentions. The capacity to give back is not simply a function of goodwill but of structural enablement in the host country.

Overall, the findings interpreted through an interpretivist-constructivist paradigm demonstrate that career development among these skilled migrants is a socially situated, iterative, and contextually embedded process. It is shaped not merely by education or individual agency but by ongoing negotiation with systemic constraints, shifting cultural expectations, and the evolving sense of self. Participants do not passively undergo migration; they actively construct and reconstruct their meanings of career, identity, and success through their interactions within multiple CoPs and across multiple socio-cultural contexts. This interpretation highlights the need to view migrant career development not as a linear pathway but as a fluid, relational process shaped by both structural barriers and collaborative learning practices.

Figure 13 below visually summarises the learning and career development journey of male and female African postgraduate migrants in Ireland as they navigate the three CoPs discussed above: Educational, Transitional, and Professional. Each CoP stage reflects unique support structures, barriers, and outcomes, shaping participants' progression from newcomers to established professionals in the host country. In the Educational CoP, participants build initial self-efficacy within structured academic settings, though they face challenges such as language barriers and feelings of exclusion. Transitioning into the Transitional CoP, they increasingly rely on informal networks within migrant communities for job market navigation and skill development. Finally, in the Professional CoP, participants engage in structured, diverse work environments, achieving enhanced self-efficacy yet encountering lingering challenges related to identity and cultural adaptation. This visual representation emphasises the layered barriers – social, psychological, and structural – encountered at each stage, alongside the role of both formal and informal networks in facilitating career support and guidance for transitioning into professionals within the Irish context. It underscores how participants progressively move from peripheral roles to core participation in their host country's professional landscape.

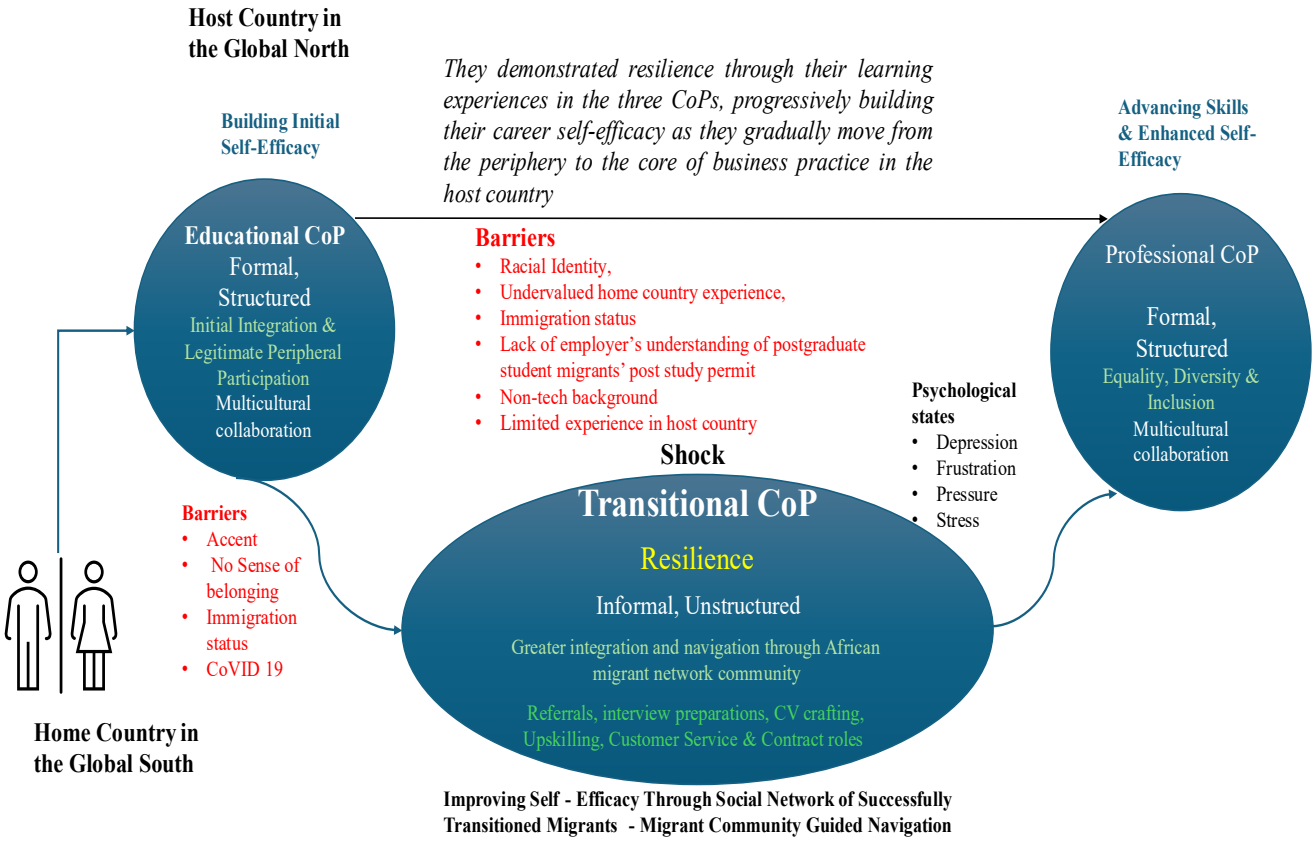


Figure 10. A Process Model of Highly Skilled Migrants' Learning and Career Development Journey in Ireland

5.0 Chapter Five: Discussion

5.1 Introduction

This chapter critically discusses the findings of the study in relation to existing literature and theoretical frameworks. It is organised into two main sections. The first section examines how the findings align with, extend, or challenge three key areas of literature: (1) skilled migration and international student mobility, (2) career development, and (3) knowledge transfer. In doing so, it highlights how the lived experiences of highly skilled postgraduate migrants from Nigeria, Ghana, Kenya, and Tanzania in Ireland reflect broader global dynamics while also revealing context-specific nuances. The second section engages more directly with the study's theoretical foundations of SCCT, SLT, and the framework of CoPs, to assess how well these models capture the complex career trajectories and learning processes described by participants. By engaging critically with theoretical constructs such as self-efficacy, outcome expectations, career goals, situated learning, and career shocks, this chapter explores how the study's empirical insights extend, refine, and contextualise these frameworks considering the lived experiences of post-study migrants transitioning into professional roles in a Global North country. The discussion foregrounds how participants' narratives contribute to a more nuanced understanding of career development, identity formation, and learning across transnational and transitional contexts.

5.2 Skilled Migration and International Student Mobility

This study reveals that international students in Ireland are still predominantly perceived and treated as fee-paying customers rather than as valued future contributors to the host country's workforce, validating existing research by Lee and Rice (2007), Salt (2011), and Wei (2013). Participants' accounts highlight that, despite paying high tuition fees to obtain postgraduate

qualifications, they received little to no institutional follow-up support from Irish academic institutions after graduation. Although this study does not focus on international students' satisfaction within the academic environment, it investigates in depth how these graduates transition from business postgraduate education into the host country's professional landscape. The findings show that, while the academic experience established a foundational base of cognitive, cultural, and communication competencies essential for career development, the lack of post-study support from educational institutions left them feeling lost, thereby compounding their challenges. Consequently, left to navigate visa systems, labour market barriers, and professional identity reconstruction largely on their own, many turned to informal peer-based CoPs comprising fellow migrants for guidance, solidarity, and learning.

Participants' motivations for choosing Ireland strongly reflect global trends in international student mobility. These include the allure of a high-standard, globally recognised education in the Global North and the perceived double advantage of academic credentials and access to career opportunities in international labour markets (Bound et al., 2021; Grimm, 2019; Macrander, 2017; Mathies & Karhunen, 2021; Monk, 2012; Perkins & Neumayer, 2014; Wang et al., 2022; Wei, 2013). However, this study shows that academic qualifications in the host country and the accumulation of intercultural experience, among other skills, are insufficient to access jobs in the host country, particularly for Global South migrants who face structural disadvantages and identity-related barriers in the Global North.

Additionally, this study supports research such as by Glass et al. (2015) and Bryła (2019), which assert that international experiences can significantly enhance students' skills, competencies, and self-confidence, which are necessary for success in multicultural and professional settings.

However, this research extends that claim by demonstrating that self-confidence, conceptualised here as self-efficacy under SCCT, fluctuates across the migration journey. This study found that, while participants' self-efficacy often improved during their academic training, it could subsequently stagnate or decline during the difficult post-study transition marked by labour market shocks, systemic exclusion, and unclear career pathways. In doing so, this study responds to Collins et al.'s (2017), who called for further examination of how international student mobility impacts the post-study trajectories of graduates, particularly concerning the acquisition, utilisation, and application of situated learning and cultural capital. It contributes a more dynamic understanding of how learning within and beyond the university setting across multiple CoPs shapes not only skill development but also the complex, context-dependent evolution of self-efficacy and career aspirations after graduation. The findings of this study align with Bryła's (2019), who argued that international student mobility fosters the development of intercultural skills and self-confidence. Participants described how studying in Ireland allowed them to engage with a highly diverse academic environment, build cultural agility, and enhance their communication skills, which are especially critical for navigating multicultural workplaces in the Global North. For instance, participants reflected on how engaging with peers from different nationalities in group projects or classroom discussions helped them understand diverse professional norms and expectations. This confirms Bryła's claim that international education produces "immeasurable value" in the form of intercultural learning and identity growth.

However, this study extends Bryła's work by showing that the self-confidence gained during the education phase does not always translate into professional momentum post-graduation. Using self-efficacy as a more precise construct, as framed by SCCT, this study reveals that confidence is dynamic and contingent upon contextual disruption. Participants' self-efficacy was often high in

the Education CoP when learning environments were structured and goals were clear. Yet, during the Transition CoP, which was marked by institutional neglect, complex visa systems, and racialised labour market filtering, self-efficacy often stalled and declined at certain points. Some participants described this period as one of professional liminality, during which they questioned their worth, doubted their competencies, and feared long-term stagnation. This finding highlights the non-linear, fragile nature of self-confidence in the context of skilled migration, which Bryła's generalised framing of "self-confidence development" does not fully capture.

Similarly, this study builds on Collins et al.'s (2017), who argue that the value of international education is not inherent but shaped by the spatial and social contexts graduates navigate after study. Participants described informal, migrant-led peer support groups, referred to here as the Transition CoP, as critical space for learning, emotional support, and identity reconstruction. Within these groups, they exchanged immigration knowledge, interpreted labour market norms, and rehearsed strategies for job interviews and applications. While Collins et al. highlighted the role of networks, this study extends their work by offering a theoretically grounded and detailed analysis of how value is co-produced through peer-driven, situated engagement rather than granted by academic qualifications alone, across a distinct progressive set of CoPs, from structured academic settings, through informal transitional spaces, to formal professional environments. Moreover, it shows how racialised, visa-constrained graduates from the Global South must continually revalidate their educational and cultural capital within host-country systems that often marginalise it, revealing how the value of international education is unevenly realised in Global North labour markets. This study not only addresses Collins et al. 's call for deeper investigation but also provides critical empirical insights into how the situated value of international education is produced and constrained by context.

5.3 Career

The findings show that the individualisation of career responsibility, widely discussed in contemporary career literature (Gubler et al., 2014; Hall et al., 2018), places a disproportionate burden on migrants navigating international labour markets. While dominant career theories such as boundaryless and protean careers celebrate autonomy, self-direction, and adaptability, this study reveals how these ideals are unequally distributed and differently experienced. Migrants from the Global South, despite demonstrating high levels of motivation and agency, encounter systemic constraints such as immigration policy uncertainty, racialised and discriminatory hiring practices, and a lack of institutional aftercare that can restrict the realisation of such self-managed career pathways. This underscores that career autonomy is not experienced in isolation but is mediated by context-specific structures such as visa regimes and racialised gatekeeping, which are often absent from mainstream career discourse.

While the boundaryless or protean career models assume a level of agency and freedom in navigating careers, this study reveals important limitations to that agency for migrant professionals constrained by systemic and contextual structures. For instance, the "self-directed" nature of the protean career (Hall, 2004) was evident in participants' resilience to navigate their careers relentlessly, but these efforts often took place within a highly restricted environment shaped by immigration status, employer reluctance to sponsor, and lack of institutional post-graduation support. This adds nuance to the boundaryless model by showing how structural constraints, such as the work permit system, can render the idea of career fluidity an unequal privilege rather than a universal experience. Though this research aligns with social cognitive and contemporary career theories in recognising the role of individual agency and self-efficacy, it simultaneously offers a

contextual expansion by showing how agency is shaped, constrained, and recalibrated in response to structural barriers and career shocks. The findings suggest that, for migrant graduates, career building is not merely about individual self-management but also about negotiating uncertainty, navigating marginalisation, and reconstructing career confidence in spaces where support is fragmented or lacking. This study argues that career shocks may serve as pivotal turning points that reconfigure career goals, expectations, and identities. In this sense, career development is not only shaped by agency and planning, as emphasised in dominant career theories, but also by how individuals interpret, make sense of, and reconstruct their paths following disruption (Akkermans et al., 2020; Nalis et al., 2021). This reconstruction process is evident in the adaptive strategies, resilience, and redefined aspirations of participants after the post-study career shock. This study thus contributes a nuanced understanding of how careers unfold not merely through individual decision-making but within complex, racialised, and policy-driven landscapes that require both resilience and collective improvisation.

5.4 Extending Theory Through Empirical Insights

While existing literature on SCCT has primarily focused on evaluating, measuring, or statistically modelling the relationships between its components, particularly the influence of self-efficacy on outcome expectations and career goals, this study offers an in-depth, nuanced, exploratory understanding of how social learning experiences shape self-efficacy and how this evolves across distinct phases of learning. It also highlights how these evolving beliefs influence goal setting and outcome expectations during school-to-work transitions in Global South to Global North migration contexts. The findings of this study strongly align with the core principles of SCCT, particularly its emphasis on how learning experiences, both direct and vicarious, influence the development of self-efficacy, outcome expectations, and ultimately career goals (Lent, 2021, 1994, 1999).

Participants' narratives across the three CoPs demonstrated that career development was not linear but rather shaped by contextually grounded learning, persistence in the face of career shocks, and iterative self-reflection. Consistent with SCCT, self-efficacy was found to evolve over time, particularly through informal learning during the Transition CoP, where participants navigated uncertainty, job search frustrations, and limited institutional support.

Participants' early confidence, rooted in their academic success in Irish postgraduate programmes and prior professional achievements, reflects what Paolini (2015) described as the positive link between academic transitions and career efficacy. However, this study critically expands this understanding by revealing that self-efficacy among highly skilled migrants is not only formed by academic and professional mastery but is also highly context-dependent and vulnerable to systemic invalidation**.** In line with Paolini (2015) and Wang and Lent (2022), the study affirms that self-efficacy plays a critical role in shaping the transition from academic to professional life, particularly when the environment poses systemic barriers. While existing literature (e.g. Schaub & Tokar, 2005; Tetteh et al., 2022) underscores the influence of contextual variables such as institutional support and sociocultural norms, this study adds further nuance by showing how transnational experiences, visa restrictions, and perceived devaluation of Global South credentials interact with participants' career beliefs and expectations.

Unlike much of the SCCT research, which tends to focus on self-efficacy development within relatively stable institutional or labour market contexts, the participants in this study developed confidence in highly precarious, systemically disadvantageous, and racialised conditions. Their stories indicate that self-efficacy in migration contexts must be understood as a resilience-based process that evolves not merely in response to performance successes but through adaptive responses to systemic inequities. In doing so, this research nuances SCCT by foregrounding how

structural adversity, such as non-recognition of prior experience or visa constraints, can paradoxically serve as a site of self-efficacy formation through informal coping, peer support, and perseverance. The systemic disadvantages did not merely impede progress; they became unexpected arenas for learning and self-construction. Participants developed confidence by navigating uncertainty, resisting systemic disadvantages, and devising informal strategies for adaptation, often through peer networks, iterative job searches, and emotionally demanding negotiations of identity and belonging. In this way, the study nuances and extends SCCT by showing that self-efficacy in migration contexts is shaped as much by the capacity to persist and adapt in the face of inequity as by traditional indicators of success. It underscores that, for international student migrants from the Global South, confidence is not simply a byproduct of institutional support but a dynamic, socially situated response to marginalisation. Through this lens, self-efficacy becomes a form of agency and survival developed not in ideal conditions but amid structural adversity that is often rendered invisible in dominant career development frameworks.

Findings from this study strongly align with the SCCT proposition that self-efficacy is shaped by learning experiences and, in turn, influences individuals' ability to navigate career-related obstacles (Bandura, 1997; Lent et al., 1994, 2000, 2017; Schaub & Tokar, 2005; Sheu et al., 2018). Despite demonstrating the traits described by Schneider and Preckel (2017), such as persistence, resilience, and high self-belief, participants' confidence was repeatedly affected by the devaluation of their home country experience, systemic racial bias, and employers' fixation on "Irish" experience. This challenges SCCT's typical emphasis on internal psychological processes by highlighting how external, racialised, and policy-related forces deeply affect the stability and evolution of self-efficacy beliefs. Thus, this study supports and extends Wang and Lent's (2022)

and Low et al.'s (2025), asserting that self-efficacy is situational, but goes further by showing that, in migration contexts, beliefs in one's capability must be continuously rebuilt, often in the absence of institutional recognition or support. This suggests that SCCT needs to account more explicitly for how systemic barriers and structural exclusion shape, erode, and potentially distort self-efficacy in marginalised groups.

5.4.1 Self-Efficacy

The conceptualisation of self-efficacy as both task-specific and generalised (Bandura, 1999; Lennings, 1994) offers a useful lens for interpreting the development of confidence among the skilled postgraduate migrants in this study. While Bandura originally defined self-efficacy in terms of individuals' belief in their ability to perform specific tasks, subsequent research has highlighted a broader, more dispositional form of self-efficacy (Ahmad & Nasir, 2023; Lennings, 1994; Penn & Lent, 2019; Räty et al., 2019), which captures individuals' capacity to persist across a variety of challenges and environments. This distinction mirrors the pattern evident in participants' narratives. Early phases of their experience in Ireland, particularly within the Education CoP, were marked by the development of task-specific self-efficacy linked to academic success, intercultural group work, and adaptation to an unfamiliar multicultural pedagogical context. However, as they moved into the Transition CoP, many participants began to draw on a broader sense of self-efficacy, one that was not tied to a single task, but to their capacity to overcome systemic and contextual obstacles such as visa restrictions, employment discrimination, and the devaluation of their home country's work experience. This finding supports and extends existing conceptualisations by showing that self-efficacy can be built not only through cumulative successes but also through repeated engagement in the face of adversity. Participants in this study demonstrated that self-efficacy evolved as a developmental process shaped by lived experiences

of exclusion, perseverance, and peer learning. In this way, findings from this study suggest that self-efficacy among migrants is not merely dispositional but situationally and socially constructed across time and space, expanding the current understanding of how such beliefs are cultivated. The dynamic and contextual nature of self-efficacy, as framed by SCCT, also resonates strongly with participants' lived experiences. Rather than viewing self-efficacy as a fixed psychological resource, participants demonstrated that confidence was shaped and reshaped through iterative and reflexive interaction with their environments. For example, in the Transition CoP, self-efficacy was repeatedly tested by prolonged job searches, repeated rejections, and the ambiguity of post-study immigration policies. Yet, these challenges became sources of experiential learning, reinforcing participants' belief in their strategic thinking and emotional endurance, a process that reflects SCCT's emphasis on the reciprocal relationship between experience, performance, and confidence. Participants' accounts also affirm the literature's argument that self-efficacy is central to goal-setting, persistence, and adaptability in the face of uncertainty (Schneider & Preckel, 2017; Tetteh et al., 2022). Several participants expressed how their growing confidence enabled them to reframe rejection as redirection and develop new strategies such as tailoring CVs, attending sector-specific networking events, or undertaking additional certifications. These behaviours align with what Domínguez et al. (2022), Lent et al. (2000), and Luzzo and McWhirter (2001) described as coping efficacy, which is the belief in one's ability to succeed despite obstacles. It also shows that self-efficacy in this context, especially in the transition phase, was less about ideal conditions and more about navigating real-world constraints.

Equally, these findings extend current literature by showing that coping efficacy for highly skilled migrants is deeply intertwined with social learning practices, particularly within informal networks. This reinforces the idea that self-efficacy is not merely an outcome of personal mastery

but is co-constructed through social learning, shared meaning-making, and peer-driven emotional scaffolding within informal CoPs, especially during the unstructured Transition CoP phase. The Transition CoP functioned as a critical space for sense-making, emotional validation, and knowledge sharing, underscoring that self-efficacy was not developed in isolation but through socially situated processes. While Lent and Brown (2006b) acknowledged the role of social support in career self-efficacy, this study makes a further contribution by illustrating how peer-driven CoPs can act as critical spaces for self-efficacy evolution, particularly in the absence of formal institutional support.

While SCCT and coping efficacy frameworks acknowledge the role of adversity and contextual factors, they rarely account for how self-efficacy fluctuates non-linearly over time. More importantly, this study shows that self-efficacy can decline, stall, and later resurge in response to systemic shocks, particularly in transnational contexts. It contributes a temporally staged model of self-efficacy development grounded in the lived experiences of skilled migrants. Although self-efficacy evolved across the three CoPs, it became a scaffold for broader career resilience and identity formation. Participants moved from uncertainty and hesitation in the Transition CoP to a more agentic and future-oriented stance in the Professional CoP. This transition reinforces findings from the literature that self-efficacy is not only a predictor of academic and career success but a foundational and fundamental element in shaping individuals' career values, interests, and long-term goals (Brown & Lent, 2013; Lent et al., 1994, 1999; Lent & Brown, 2006b; Paolini, 2015). For these highly skilled migrants, self-efficacy was not simply an internal trait; rather, it was socially and contextually forged through their engagement in multiple communities of practice and through their ability to respond to adversity with intentional, strategic effort. Building on this, the study proposes a new temporal and socially embedded framework for understanding self-

efficacy development across education, liminal transition, and professional integration, which may inform future research on migrant career trajectories.

Although prior literature identifies gender as a key factor in shaping self-efficacy and career development (e.g. Betz & Hackett, 1986; Fouad & Santana, 2017; Lindley, 2005; Williams & Subich, 2006), this study, similar to Sevilla and Snodgrass Rangel (2023), found no significant gender-based differences in the evolution of self-efficacy. Both male and female participants exhibited comparable strategic agency and resilience. This suggests that, within migration contexts, the mediating effects of immigration policy and racialised labour dynamics may overshadow gender as primary influences, calling for more intersectional approaches to career self-efficacy in global mobility research.

5.4.2 Outcome Expectation

According to SCCT, outcome expectations refer to individuals' beliefs about the potential consequences of their actions, such as the likelihood of achieving professional success, financial security, or personal fulfilment (Bandura, 1986; Lent et al., 1994; Lent & Brown, 2008). While self-efficacy concerns the question "Can I do this?", outcome expectations are forward-looking and centre on "What will happen if I do this?" (Barnard et al., 2008; Gore & Leuwerke, 2000). These beliefs are central to career decision-making and influence whether individuals pursue, persist in, or withdraw from career paths (Liguori et al., 2018). SCCT also recognises that outcome expectations are not formed in isolation but are shaped by personal experiences, self-efficacy beliefs, and broader sociocultural and contextual factors such as race, immigration status, and access to opportunity (Brown & Lent, 2013; Franco et al., 2019). Findings from this study align with and extend this theoretical framing. For many participants, outcome expectations were not

only present but formed a core part of their decision to migrate for postgraduate education. These expectations emerged during the pre-migration phase, shaped by both personal aspirations and vicarious learning, such as observing peers who had studied abroad or receiving guidance from family and social networks. Their decisions were underpinned by a perceived link between studying in a Global North context like Ireland and securing improved career opportunities, either within the host country or internationally. Participants envisioned the educational investment as a pathway to upward mobility, financial stability, and professional recognition, all of which are outcomes consistent with what SCCT defines as physical, social, and self-evaluative expectations. These expectations include physical, social, and self-evaluative outcomes and play a central role in shaping motivation, effort, and career decision-making (Appling et al., 2022; Liguori et al., 2018).

However, as SCCT also highlights, these expectations can be hindered by contextual factors (Franco et al., 2019; Lent, 2013), as evidenced in this study, particularly in the post-arrival phase, where structural barriers such as restrictive immigration policies, racialised labour market practices, and non-recognition of prior work experience interfered with the preconceived outcomes participants expected. Although participants initially anticipated positive career outcomes, many encountered uncertainty, career shocks, and systemic exclusion, leading some to recalibrate their expectations. This aligns with Brown and Lent (2013), who asserted that outcome expectations are dynamic and susceptible to contextual disruption, particularly for migrants navigating unfamiliar systems and unequal opportunity structures. Importantly, the study demonstrates that participants' outcome expectations evolved over time. While early beliefs were largely optimistic and aspirational, later expectations became more nuanced, still hopeful but grounded in lived realities. For some, this adjustment was accompanied by a temporary decline in self-efficacy, yet they

continued to act strategically, leveraging informal networks and learning communities to remain on course. This illustrates how self-efficacy and outcome expectations are intertwined: strong self-efficacy enabled participants to adapt rather than abandon their goals, even when outcomes were uncertain, supporting Lent et al.'s (1994), who proposed that self-efficacy often sustains behaviour in the face of outcome ambiguity. In sum, this study highlights the temporal and contextual fluidity of outcome expectations across the migration–career journey. It reinforces SCCT's emphasis on the role of personal agency while also foregrounding the influence of social and structural conditions on how expectations are formed, maintained, or revised. Migrants' career choices are therefore shaped not only by their confidence in their abilities but also by the perceived and shifting plausibility of achieving the outcomes they initially envisioned.

5.4.3 Career Goals

Within SCCT, goals are understood as individuals' intentions to pursue specific activities or outcomes, often shaped by their self-efficacy beliefs and outcome expectations (Bandura, 1986; Lent, 2021; Lent et al., 1994). Goals serve as internal guides that organise and sustain effort towards future accomplishments, even in the absence of immediate reinforcement. They play a central role in enabling individuals to assert agency over their career trajectories (Tetteh et al., 2022). The findings of this study strongly corroborate this conceptualisation. Participants articulated clear, future-oriented goals prior to migration, typically framed as a dual pursuit: obtaining an internationally recognised business qualification and using that qualification as a strategic bridge to global labour markets. This reflects the SCCT position that individuals set goals not only based on interest but also based on perceived feasibility and outcome utility (Lent & Brown, 2008; Sheu et al., 2010). However, this study extends the literature by highlighting the

dual-purpose nature of educational goals among skilled migrants from the Global South. For many participants, studying abroad was not merely a developmental step but a deliberate career strategy to circumvent the barriers associated with direct skilled migration routes. This strategic use of international education as a migration-embedded career goal adds nuance to traditional understandings of SCCT goal setting, which often conceptualise educational and occupational aspirations as sequential or separate phases. Here, education and employment goals were concurrently held and interdependent, shaped by both individual ambition and structural constraints, such as visa limitations and Global North labour policies, among others.

Furthermore, while SCCT acknowledges the role of contextual influences in shaping goal setting, this study draws attention to the specific influence of immigration regimes and Global North labour market structures in reinforcing or restricting the pursuit of those goals. Participants' ability to realise their post-education employment goals was often undermined by systemic factors such as visa insecurity, employer reluctance to sponsor permits, and unrecognised prior experience, which forced some to recalibrate their initial goals. This finding adds empirical weight to calls for a more dynamic, context-sensitive application of SCCT (Lent, 2013), particularly in transnational settings where career development intersects with migration governance. In summary, this study substantiates SCCT's assertion that career goals guide action and reflect personal agency, but it extends the theory by showing how career goal formation and evolution among highly skilled migrants are deeply embedded in migration contexts. The findings call for a more integrated understanding of how mobility aspirations, structural opportunity, and personal agency interact in shaping migrant career trajectories.

5.4.4 SCCT and Gender: Insights from Skilled Migrant Career Transitions from the Global South to the Global North

This study's findings contribute new insight to the SCCT literature by revisiting the assumption that gender is a consistently salient factor in shaping career self-efficacy and decision-making. While prior research has emphasised the impact of gendered learning experiences on self-efficacy and career development, particularly for women and racial and ethnic minorities (Hackett & Betz, 1981; Hackett & Byars, 1996; Williams & Subich, 2006), this study found no significant gendered patterns in participants' self-efficacy development or career trajectories. Male and female participants described broadly similar learning contexts, emotional responses, and adaptation strategies in response to career shocks and systemic barriers in the host country. Theoretically, this suggests that the shared status of participants as highly skilled migrants from the Global South may have superseded gender as a differentiating factor. The contextual barriers they faced created a common experience of marginalisation that shaped their career learning and self-efficacy more strongly than gendered differences. In this way, the migration context appeared to function as a structural equaliser, disrupting the patterns of gendered variation typically observed in more stable, nationally bounded settings. This finding supports calls within SCCT to attend more closely to structural barriers and differential access to learning experiences (Lent et al., 2000), while also highlighting the need to investigate the contextual salience of gender rather than treating it as an assumed variable of influence. While earlier SCCT studies have drawn attention to occupational segregation and the constrained self-efficacy beliefs of women due to cultural limitations and unequal opportunities (Bandura, 1977; Hackett & Betz, 1981; Williams & Subich, 2006), this study suggests that, in transnational and racialised migration contexts, these dynamics may be reconfigured. Thus, this research adds to the growing body of SCCT-informed work that urges

greater empirical attention to when and how gender matters in career development (Williams & Subich, 2006), and under what conditions it may be overridden by other intersecting forms of systemic disadvantage such as migration status and racialisation (Bailey & Mulder, 2017). Consequently, it extends SCCT's applicability to the career development of international student migrants, offering a more contextually embedded and structurally attuned account of how self-efficacy is formed under conditions of compounded inequality.

5.4.5 Career Shock and Resilience

This study illustrates that for skilled migrants, career shocks are not isolated or episodic disruptions but are embedded in enduring systemic conditions such as visa constraints, non-recognition of their home country work experiences, and racialised gatekeeping. These contextually induced and often recurring shocks disrupt assumptions of linear, agentic career progression and compound the unpredictability and vulnerability of transnational career paths (Akkermans et al., 2018; Nalis et al., 2021). While the existing CS literature has framed CS as discrete, triggering events (Akkermans et al., 2018, 2020, 2021a, 2021b), this study highlights how skilled migrants experience a series of structural shocks across the education-to-employment transition, suggesting that, for this group, shocks are systemic, cumulative, and prolonged rather than singular or time-bound. Building on Akkermans et al.'s conceptualisation of CS as both a disruptive event and a moment of sensemaking, this study extends the literature by demonstrating that shocks are often interpreted and managed socially rather than solely psychologically. Within the informal Transition CoP, participants collectively navigated shocks through peer learning, shared emotional labour, strategy sharing, and resource pooling. This socially constructed sense-making process underscores that the impact and interpretation of shocks are embedded in communal, not just

individual, contexts, adding a novel relational dimension to current models of career shock, which have largely centred on individual-level cognition, emotion, and agency (Akkermans & Kubasch, 2017; Bright et al., 2005).

Moreover, this study advances CS literature by reframing shocks as learning triggers that catalyse informal knowledge acquisition, reflection, and recalibration. Participants adapted by undertaking survival jobs, pursuing further certifications (upskilling), and engaging in peer-led knowledge networks. These adaptive behaviours support the argument that individuals can actively reconstruct their career trajectories after disruption (Nalis et al., 2021; Seibert et al., 2013), but extend this by illustrating that such recalibrations are deeply contextualised within the migrant experience, shaped by both external structural constraints and internal resourcefulness. The findings also foreground self-efficacy as a key mediating mechanism in participants' responses to career shocks, echoing recent empirical work that positions self-efficacy as critical to proactive career behaviour and resilience (Ahmad & Nasir, 2023; Ali & Mehreen, 2022). In particular, participants sustained career goals of transitioning to professionals amid disruptions, exhibiting strong belief in their capacity to learn, adapt, and re-engage, often nurtured within supportive peer environments. This supports the view of self-efficacy not as a fixed trait but as a socially shaped, contextually emergent psychological resource (Ahmad & Nasir, 2023), particularly salient in migration contexts where shocks are frequent and agency is constrained by systemic barriers.

This study reconceptualises career shocks as both barriers and catalysts for learning, adaptation, and resilience, offering a nuanced, context-sensitive understanding of career development within uncertain and multicultural labour markets. Through the integration of CS with SLT and SCCT, the research moves beyond static typologies of disruption to examine how shocks precipitate

reflection, skill acquisition, and, at times, redirection. Rather than viewing shocks as isolated or purely negative events, the findings illuminate their role in initiating developmental processes that shape divergent outcomes, wherein some migrants develop heightened self-efficacy and resilience, while others experience stagnation or declining confidence. This perspective positions migrants not as passive recipients of disruption but as active meaning-makers navigating both informal and formal CoPs.

Building on this, the study deepens understanding of career resilience by empirically demonstrating how migrants respond to repeated and often systemic shocks. In line with Seibert et al. (2016) and Akkermans et al. (2020), resilience emerges here not as a reactive trait but as a proactive, developmental capacity involving strategic learning, goal recalibration, emotional regulation, and future-oriented thinking. Migrants in this study exercised agency while drawing on communal resources, enacting a relational and dynamic form of resilience shaped by social and structural context. These insights affirm the value of viewing resilience as a mechanism through which individuals reinterpret and respond to ongoing disruption, particularly those rooted in structural inequality (Akkermans et al., 2021). Finally, by applying the lens of CoP and integrating SCCT and SLT frameworks, this study advances a more socially embedded and psychologically mediated understanding of migrant career development. It challenges linear notions of resilience and static classifications of career shocks, offering instead a fluid account of how skilled migrants learn from and adapt to disruption. In doing so, it contributes to CS theory by foregrounding the lived experiences and adaptive strategies of those often marginalised in dominant career development narratives.

5.4.6 Learning through CoP: Extending SLT

According to Lave and Wenger (1991), learning is not a process of passive knowledge transfer but is a socially situated activity that involves participation in the shared practices of a community. Consistent with SLT, participants in this study learned most effectively not through decontextualised instruction but through real-world engagement with peers, mentors, and colleagues across different CoP contexts. Within the Education CoP, participants' experiences align with Pg Hj Besar s (2018) application of SLT in formal classroom settings. Participants described learning through collaborative peer activities, multicultural group work, and task-based discussions facilitated by lecturers. These findings affirm the idea that academic knowledge is acquired not solely through instruction but also through socially mediated experiences that integrate both cognitive and emotional dimensions of learning (Pederson, 2012). However, this study advances the literature by showing how learning in the Education CoP also involved acculturative learning, such as mastering unfamiliar academic norms and communication styles, which are not fully captured in existing classroom-based SLT models. The Transition CoP presents a more significant theoretical contribution. Existing SLT and CoP literature focuses largely on structured learning environments (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 2011) or intentionally designed pedagogical CoPs (e.g. Smith et al., 2019). In contrast, this study identifies the Transition CoP as a non-institutional, emergent space where learning arises from necessity and shared adversity. Participants formed informal peer networks to exchange job search strategies, decode visa regulations, and emotionally support one another during career shocks. This reinforces Farnsworth et al.'s (2016) expanded view of CoPs as sites of identity negotiation and power dynamics but goes further by demonstrating how learning occurs in liminal and unstable spaces. Thus, the Transition CoP extends SLT by showing that legitimate peripheral participation can also take shape in

peripheral or even excluded social positions, that is, spaces not originally conceptualised in early CoP models. Finally, in the Professional CoP, participants' learning involved mastering industry-specific norms, developing confidence, and refining multicultural collaboration skills within structured workplace environments. These findings echo Fuller et al.'s (2005) and Welch and Welch's (2015) observations that CoPs serve as platforms for skill acquisition, socialisation, and career capital accumulation. However, this study adds nuance by illustrating how participants brought tacit knowledge and adaptive strategies developed in the Transition CoP into the workplace. This bi-directional influence between informal and formal CoPs illustrates how knowledge acquired in marginal or under-recognised spaces can shape professional development: a dimension often overlooked in linear, progression-based models of CoP learning (Wenger, 1998).

Overall, this study affirms the centrality of social participation in learning as theorised by SLT and CoP literature but also challenges assumptions about where and how effective learning occurs. By conceptualising learning as unfolding across three distinct but interconnected CoPs, each with varying degrees of structure, formality, and institutional support, the study expands SLT's relevance to the lived realities of international postgraduate migrants navigating complex educational and professional transitions. This study reinforces and extends SLT by demonstrating how learning for skilled migrants unfolds within dynamic, socially embedded environments across the Education, Transition, and Professional CoPs. By applying SLT to a migration and career development context, this study moves beyond its original conceptualisation in stable apprenticeships or organisational settings. It demonstrates that CoPs can be emergent, adaptive, and necessity-driven, particularly in multicultural and structurally exclusionary environments. Furthermore, the research shows how CoPs are not only sites of skill acquisition but also spaces

where power dynamics, structural inequalities, and emotional resilience are negotiated. In expanding SLT's application into new terrains and framing CoPs as critical mediators of both learning and career integration, this study significantly enriches the literature. It supports Goodwin's (2019) proposition that CoPs can help explain how people build careers in diverse and challenging environments and supports Welch and Welch's (2015) assertion that CoPs help develop the social capital and confidence needed for international career success.

5.5 Contributions

This study makes theoretical contributions to the literature on skilled migration and career development from SCCT, SLT, CS, and CR lenses. It addresses notable gaps in how these frameworks and concepts enhance understanding of the career development of highly skilled postgraduate migrants from the Global South as they navigate transitions from education to employment in Global North contexts. The most significant contribution lies in highlighting the informal and unstructured learning space, referred to in this study as the Transition CoP, as crucial in the career development of skilled migrants, especially when adapting to new environments. This area has been largely unexplored in existing research, which has focused mainly on formal and structured learning environments in career development studies. Through a qualitative exploration of Nigerian, Ghanaian, Kenyan, and Tanzanian business graduates in Ireland, this research offers a more context-sensitive understanding of career agency, learning, and adaptation under structural constraints.

5.5.1 Contributions to Skilled Migration Literature

This research contributes to skilled migration scholarship by uncovering the career development journey of highly skilled business postgraduates from the Global South as they transition from study to full-time professional employment in the Global North. Limited attention has been given to the lived experiences of skilled migrants, particularly those from the Global South, whose career trajectories are shaped by structural, racialised, and policy-related barriers. It addresses longstanding gaps in understanding the career development experiences of highly skilled migrants from developing countries. While much of the existing research remains focused on macro-level migration flows or the economic impacts of brain drain and knowledge transfer (Adhikari & Melia, 2015; Burgers & Touburg, 2013; Chand, 2019; Lam & Rui, 2022; Shen et al., 2022; Siar, 2011; Sturge et al., 2016), this study adds to existing research such as Smith and Favell (2006) and Zikic (2015), which shift attention to the lived, micro-level experiences of skilled migrants navigating post-study transitions in a host country. By focusing on business postgraduates from Nigeria, Ghana, Kenya, and Tanzania in Ireland, the study provides nuanced insight into how migrants engage with structural barriers, institutional gaps, and everyday career uncertainties, particularly when they move from the Global south to the Global North. It therefore responds to concerns raised by Al Ariss and Syed (2011) and Bailey and Mulder (2017) about the structural barriers, labour market inequalities, and lack of adequate skill recognition experienced by highly skilled migrants. It also addresses the limited empirical attention paid to the integration processes of highly skilled migrants within host labour markets, particularly in the period following international education. In doing so, the research challenges the dominant portrayal of skilled migrants as uniformly mobile and adaptable (Ramboarison-Lalao et al., 2012; Zikic et al., 2010), instead revealing the complex, situated, and often nonlinear nature of their career trajectories. This

approach responds to recent calls in the literature for more context-sensitive, process-oriented investigations into how skilled migrants build careers, develop resilience, and seek inclusion in new professional environments. It therefore addresses the scholarly call by Al Ariss et al. (2012), Crowley-Henry et al. (2018), and Sarpong and Maclean (2021) for deeper investigations into the career integration of highly skilled immigrants, especially within multicultural and institutionally complex host environments.

5.5.2 Contributions to Social Cognitive Career Theory

While SCCT has been widely applied to understand how self-efficacy, outcome expectations, and goals shape career development, much of this work relies on quantitative methods and focuses predominantly on stable institutional or labour market contexts which are often formal, structured, and Western (Appling et al., 2022; Brown & Lent, 2013, 2017; Domínguez et al., 2022; Lent & Brown, 2019; Schaub & Tokar, 2005; Tetteh et al., 2022; Williams & Subich, 2006). This emphasis is particularly evident in STEM education research (Fouad & Santana, 2017; Lent et al., 2018; Sevilla & Snodgrass Rangel, 2023; Sheu et al., 2018). Consequently, there has been limited exploration of how complex, situated learning experiences influence the development of self-efficacy and career agency, especially for individuals navigating precarious or transitional labour markets. This study contributes to the SCCT literature by providing a micro-level, qualitative account of how learning within three key CoPs, Education, Transition, and Professional, shapes the evolution of self-efficacy, outcome expectations, and career goals among highly skilled migrants from the Global South during post-study career transitions in Ireland. Through an interpretivist lens and rich qualitative data, it illuminates the emotional, relational, and contextual dimensions of self-efficacy development that quantitative studies often overlook. Findings

demonstrate how participants' self-efficacy evolved through the four sources identified by Bandura (1986, 1977): mastery experiences (e.g. succeeding in group projects within the Education CoP), vicarious learning (e.g. learning how peers secure jobs), social persuasion (e.g. encouragement within migrant networks), and emotional regulation (e.g. maintaining motivation and resilience through rejections). By empirically examining these dynamics across distinct phases of career progression, the study extends SCCT beyond static, individual-focused models towards a relational, dynamic, and process-oriented framework. It addresses Wang et al.'s (2022) call for qualitative assessment methods in SCCT and the development of diversified interventions to support students with varying needs. It also responds to Schaub and Tokar's (2005) early appeal for deeper engagement with learning experiences in SCCT, as well as to more recent calls by Sheu and Bordon (2016) for culturally and contextually grounded applications in underrepresented international settings, including Africa, and Wang & Lent's (2022) suggestion to extend SCCT to study abroad experiences and related academic and career behaviours.

Importantly, this research engages with Sheu and Bordon's (2016) critique of SCCT's limited consideration of broader contextual and cultural factors such as structural barriers, opportunity structures, and institutional dynamics. Their recommendation for greater qualitative nuance and experiential depth in international career research is met by incorporating narratives of Global South migrants situated within complex, multicultural host environments, thereby enhancing SCCT's explanatory power and practical relevance across diverse sociocultural contexts. It specifically contributes to international research on SCCT by focusing on individual experiences and contextual elements such as visa restrictions and racial identity that shaped international skilled migrants' learning and career experiences in the form of shock as they transitioned from the Global South to the Global North.

Moreover, the study highlights the temporal and socially embedded nature of outcome expectations in migrant career development. Rather than acting as a one-time motivator, outcome expectations are continuously shaped and reshaped across each CoP phase, influenced by institutional experiences, peer learning, and the emotional highs and lows of transnational adjustment. These findings underscore the need for more dynamic, longitudinal perspectives on how outcome expectations function in global mobility contexts. Additionally, this study advances emerging research streams such as those initiated by Goodwin (2019), who suggested that professional relationships within learning settings, that is, CoPs, are promising yet underexplored domains for understanding the social processes through which self-efficacy and career optimism are cultivated.

5.5.3 Contribution to Learning and Skilled Migration: Extending Situated Learning Theory

A significant contribution is the uncovering of the role of informal, migrant-led learning communities in career transitions. This research establishes the value of informal community of practice in learning and career development. Prior research has mainly applied SLT and CoPs to educational or organisational settings (Cox, 2013; Farnsworth et al., 2016; Fox, 1997; Fuller & Unwin, 2003; Goodwin, 2019; Hotho et al., 2014; Janson et al., 2004; Pg Hj Besar, 2018; Smith et al., 2019; Somekh & Pearson, 2002; Tight, 2004; Welch & Welch, 2015), with limited exploration of how skilled migrants learn within host societies (Cox, 2013; Goodwin, 2019). While SLT has been widely applied in education and organisational studies, its application to skilled migration and career development remains limited. This study addresses this gap by exploring how CoPs function as learning environments for highly skilled migrants navigating career transitions in a multicultural host society. Building on Goodwin's (2019) proposition that CoPs offer

explanatory power for career development, this study provides a nuanced understanding of how informal and formal CoPs shape the learning, confidence, and professional identity formation of migrants. It introduces a tripartite CoP model – Education, Transition, and Professional CoPs – to capture the distinct learning processes across different phases, from newcomer postgraduate study migrants to professionals in the host environment.

The Transition CoP, exemplified by networks such as the Home4All WhatsApp group, in particular, constitutes a novel contribution to SLT. Unlike the more structured Education and Professional CoPs, the Transition CoP emerged and functioned as a non-institutional and socially embedded, survival-driven space borne out of the contextually driven necessity of migrants' situations, where individuals collectively made sense of visa delays, rejections, and systemic exclusion. This phase served as a key site of informal learning, resilience building, and career development navigation and re-strategising, demonstrating how new CoPs can arise spontaneously in liminal spaces when formal support is absent, which is an aspect that remains unexplored in existing CoP literature. In doing so, this study extends SLT by showing how marginal or transitional spaces, rather than only established CoPs, can act as powerful learning environments under conditions of contextual adversity. Furthermore, the study contributes to the discussions by Handley et al. (2006), Farnsworth et al. (2016), Smith et al. (2019), and Wenger (1998) on identity in CoPs by demonstrating how participants' identities were continuously negotiated through multicultural interactions and engagements. The findings challenge the notion that identity development within CoPs is always linear or progressively integrative; instead, it may be disrupted or stalled by exclusionary practices, then rebuilt through peer solidarity and adaptive strategies.

SLT and its concept of CoP have gained prominence in organisational learning and educational contexts but remain underutilised in career development research (Goodwin, 2019; Welch & Welch, 2015). This study offers a significant contribution by extending the theoretical and empirical reach of SLT and CoP into the field of skilled migration and career transitions. It does so by demonstrating how skilled business postgraduates from the Global South engage in informal and formal CoPs across three distinct but interconnected phases: Education, Transition, and Professional. This multi-phased CoP framework is an original contribution that challenges the common binary application of CoP to education or work settings. It shows how learning, identity negotiation, and career confidence evolve through situated participation in academic settings, peer networks, and eventually professional workplaces. The Transition CoP, in particular, offers a novel empirical category that represents a liminal space shaped by uncertainty and informal peer support that has received almost no attention in SLT literature. Here, skilled migrants co-construct learning environments where they share survival strategies, validate each other's experiences, and develop career resilience and professional self-efficacy in the absence of institutional support.

This expands SLT by showing that CoPs are not confined to institutions but can emerge informally to bridge systemic gaps, enabling migrants to learn resilience, adaptability, and career navigation skills in uncertain labour markets. Reinforcing Welch and Welch's (2015) emphasis on the role of CoPs in building career capital, the findings demonstrate how the Transition CoP became a critical site of collective sense-making, confidence building, and professional identity formation during the precarious post-study phase.

5.5.4 Contribution to Career Shock and Mobility Studies: Reconceptualising Shock as a Catalyst for Learning and Resilience

This research extends the growing literature on career shocks by demonstrating how self-efficacy facilitates career resilience to overcoming career shock. While prior research on CS has largely focused on individual-level psychological responses within stable labour markets (Ali & Mehreen, 2022; Nalis et al., 2021; Seibert et al., 2013), this study situates career shocks within broader structural and institutional contexts, illustrating how skilled migrants from the Global South encounter shocks that are deeply embedded in systemic conditions such as visa restrictions, non-recognition of qualifications, employer bias, and racialised experiences. These findings challenge dominant understandings of career shocks as isolated or random disruptions (Bright et al., 2005), and instead presents them as structurally induced and recurrent events that significantly disrupt linear career progression and amplify precarity (Akkermans et al., 2021). By emphasising the under-theorised post-study transition period, this study extends the application of CS theory to a critical phase in the career trajectories of skilled migrants, which is prone to systemic barriers in the host country. Furthermore, the study enriches CS theory by integrating it with SLT and SCCT, highlighting the social and developmental aspects of how individuals experience and respond to shocks. Migrants in this study engaged in informal learning and peer-led Transition CoPs, where they shared knowledge, adapted strategies, and reconstructed career goals collectively, adding a novel social dimension to CS theory, which has traditionally overlooked communal meaning-making processes. Additionally, the study demonstrates that self-efficacy plays a mediating role in how individuals navigate shocks. Those who had built confidence through prior educational and peer interactions were more likely to reframe disruptions as opportunities, reinforcing the view of

self-efficacy as dynamic, contextual, and developable in uncertain environments (Ahmad & Nasir, 2023; Ali & Mehreen, 2022; Brown & Lent, 2013).

Furthermore, this study contributes to CR literature by extending the concept into the underexplored context of highly skilled migrant transitions from education to employment from the Global South to the North. It offers empirical insights into how CR unfolds as a dynamic, socially embedded process shaped by both individual agency and systemic constraints. By deeply exploring the lived experiences of Global South skilled postgraduate migrants, it addresses a significant geographic and contextual gap in existing CR research, which has largely focused on Global North contexts and organisational interests. This shift addresses calls by Mishra and McDonald (2017) to reposition CR as an individual rather than an organisational phenomenon. In the experiences of participants, resilience was not cultivated to benefit host institutions but rather emerged as a survival mechanism enabling individuals to persist through exclusion, uncertainty, and underemployment in a structurally constrained labour market.

The study also demonstrates that CR is not a static personal trait but a developmental and interactional process. As Mansfield et al. (2012) and Gu and Day (2013) suggested, career resilience evolves through the interplay of personal resources and external environments. This was evident in how participants navigated multiple intersecting systemic career shocks by leveraging informal support networks, improvising job search strategies, and continually reappraising their career goals. These findings reinforce the view of CR as an ongoing process of adaptation, as outlined by Mishra and McDonald (2017), rather than a fixed capacity. They further highlight the central role of self-efficacy in the development of CR, particularly within multicultural and uncertain post-study contexts. London's (1983) early conceptualisation of CR identified self-

efficacy as a foundational dimension, a link reinforced by studies such as Lyons et al. (2015), Akkermans et al. (2014), and Abdullahi et al. (2024). Participants in this study drew heavily on confidence gained through formal and informal CoPs, which helped them reframe career setbacks and maintain momentum. This empirical link between evolving self-efficacy and resilient behaviour demonstrates that CR can be socially cultivated over time rather than being solely internally driven.

It also introduces the Transition CoP as a critical yet underacknowledged learning space for the development of CR. Positioned between formal education and professional employment, the Transition CoP functioned as an informal learning space where participants confronted career shocks, exchanged coping strategies, and supported one another's emotional and career resilience. This finding supports Bimrose and Hearne's (2012) and Tokbaeva and Achtenhagen's (2021) view that CR is fostered not only through formal career development structures over time. Additionally, the study affirms the cyclical and situated nature of CR. As participants transitioned from their initial expectations through disillusionment, recalibration, and eventual integration into host labour markets, their CR developed in non-linear, recursive ways. These trajectories reflect the multidimensionality and evolution of CR noted by Mansfield et al. (2012) and Bimrose and Hearne (2012), while also expanding understanding of how this process unfolds across transnational spaces and institutional vacuums. Finally, the study contributes to CR literature by highlighting intersectional nuances in the development and demonstration of resilience by specific individuals with particular identities, such as the unique migrant cohort in this study. These patterns reinforce the work of Robertson et al. (2015), who argue that CR must be understood as shaped by structural, relational, and identity-based factors, not simply individual grit. Thus, the study reconceptualises shocks as catalysts for informal learning and resilience building. By embedding career shock

within SCCT and SLT, the thesis demonstrates how unplanned disruptions can drive self-efficacy development through persistence, vicarious learning, and collective coping strategies. This addresses the gap identified by Hirschi (2010) and Seibert et al. (2013), who noted the limited understanding of how shocks shape early career transitions, and extends the insights of Abdullahi et al. (2024) by situating career resilience at the core of migrant adaptation in host labour markets.

5.6 Summary of Contributions

Holistically, this study offers several theoretical contributions by advancing an integrated, context-sensitive understanding of career development that brings together SCCT, SLT and its core concept of CoP, CS, and CR. The findings extend SCCT by illustrating that self-efficacy, outcome expectations, and personal goals are not formed solely through personal mastery or social persuasion but are continuously reshaped through migrants' engagement with institutional structures, informal peer communities, and systemic constraints in the host country. These dynamics foreground the importance of contextual affordances, particularly immigration-related constraints and other social identities such as race, as critical moderators of self-efficacy development, thus challenging the individual-centric assumptions often found in SCCT applications. SLT and the CoP framework are reinterpreted in this study through the identification of both formal and informal learning spaces. Migrants participated in structured educational and professional CoPs but also co-constructed transition CoPs during the precarious post-study period. These emergent communities of practice were marked by peer-led sense-making, emotional support, and informal knowledge exchange, allowing participants to navigate exclusion and marginalisation while building career-relevant competencies. Therefore, the study reconceptualises learning not as a linear or institutionalised process but as a relational, necessity-

driven activity shaped by context and community. Moreover, by positioning career shocks as both disruptive and generative forces, the research extends existing CS literature, which often treats shocks as isolated or individualised events. Instead, this study demonstrates that career shocks are socially patterned, recurring, and interpreted through collective practices. Migrants' responses to these disruptions involve reflective recalibration, learning, and adaptive strategy building within CoPs, highlighting career shock not only as a threat but also as a prompt for transformative learning. The integration of CR further enriches this model by conceptualising resilience not as a static trait but as a socially embedded and evolving process. Rather than being framed solely as psychological perseverance, resilience in this study emerges through communal learning, strategic repositioning, and the reconfiguration of personal goals in response to shocks. Taken together, these theoretical insights advance a multidimensional understanding of migrant career development that challenges linear, individualistic models by emphasising the interplay between social learning, career disruption, and agentic adaptation in multicultural and uncertain labour markets. This theoretical synthesis positions skilled migrants not merely as passive recipients of structural barriers but as active meaning-makers navigating a complex landscape of opportunity, exclusion, and transformation.

6.0 Chapter Six: Conclusion

6.1 Introduction

This research set out to explore how the careers of highly skilled business postgraduate migrants from Nigeria, Ghana, Kenya, and Tanzania developed as they moved through education, job search, and into permanent professional employment in Ireland. The research was motivated by the relative paucity of scholarship on highly skilled migrants from Africa in the Global South within Global North contexts and by the need to better understand how situated learning, career shocks, and gender dynamics influence their career development and knowledge exchange. Central to this inquiry was the overarching research question:

How do the careers of highly skilled business postgraduate migrants from Nigeria, Ghana, Kenya, and Tanzania in the Global South develop as they progress from education to job search and successful transition to full-time permanent employment in Ireland in the Global North? What are the complexities and gender differences that they face in their experiences, and do their acquired skills and knowledge flow back to their home countries?

To address this question, the study adopted a qualitative career narrative inquiry design to capture the lived experiences of 35 participants who successfully transitioned from postgraduate business education to full-time employment in multinational organisations in Ireland. These participants provided rich accounts of their journeys. Drawing on SCCT and SLT, the research illuminated how learning experiences across three distinct Communities of Practice – Education, Transition, and Professional – shaped self-efficacy and resilience throughout participants' career journeys. The emergent theme of Career Shocks further deepened the analysis, highlighting how unpredicted

and uncontrollable disruptive events faced by skilled migrants triggered responses to tackle these shocks within their situated contexts.

6.2 Summary of Key Findings

6.2.1 Situated Learning and Career Development

The findings revealed that the CoPs were a central mechanism through which participants learned to navigate career development in Ireland. The Education CoP enabled participants to build cross-cultural competence, confidence, and collaborative skills through structured academic and peer interactions. The Transition CoP, a novel and informal community exemplified by the Home4All WhatsApp group, emerged in the absence of institutional support during the precarious post-study visa period. It functioned as a survival-driven, socially embedded learning space where migrants collectively made sense of how to overcome visa challenges, rejections, and systemic exclusion. Finally, the Professional CoP provided access to workplace learning, mentoring, and professional identity development. Collectively, these CoPs demonstrate that highly skilled migrants' career development learning is not confined to formal institutions but unfolds across formal and informal, structured and spontaneous contexts.

6.2.2 The Evolution of Self-Efficacy

A significant contribution of this study is its demonstration of how self-efficacy evolved across the three CoPs. In the Education CoP, self-efficacy grew through mastery experiences in teamwork and intercultural collaboration. In the Transition CoP, it was challenged by repeated rejections and immigration barriers but resurged through resilience and peer support. In the Professional CoP, self-efficacy was consolidated through workplace mastery, mentoring, and recognition. This

dynamic process highlights the importance of confidence building in migrant career development, extending SCCT by showing how self-efficacy is socially embedded and contextually contingent.

6.2.3 Career Resilience and Career Shocks

The study provides new insights into how career resilience was cultivated under conditions of uncertainty. Participants demonstrated persistence, adaptability, and proactive strategies in navigating structural exclusion and labour market barriers. Career shocks such as visa delays, job rejections, and systemic discrimination disrupted linear career trajectories but also provoked re-strategising and sensemaking that enabled participants to overcome setbacks and progress from student status into professional roles. These findings highlight that resilience and adaptation are not merely individual attributes but are socially co-constructed within migrant peer networks.

6.2.4 Gendered Experiences

Male and female participants shared broadly similar learning and career development experiences, with no significant gender-based differences emerging across the Education, Transition, or Professional CoPs. This suggests that in the context of highly skilled migration from the Global South to the Global North, career development during the education-to-employment transition is shaped more by structural and systemic factors than by gender, highlighting the common challenges faced by skilled migrants in navigating host-country labour markets.

6.2.5 Knowledge Flow between Ireland and Africa

The research found no evidence of current direct bi-directional business knowledge transfer from Ireland to participants' African home countries. However, participants actively shared practical

insights and strategies for successfully transitioning from student status to full-time, work-permit employment with current and prospective skilled migrants from their home countries in Ireland. Several participants also expressed long-term intentions to apply the knowledge and skills acquired in Ireland to entrepreneurial ventures back home once they obtain Irish citizenship, which they believe would facilitate smoother mobility and exchange between Ireland and Africa.

6.3 Summary of Contributions

This study makes several important contributions. Theoretically, it advances SCCT by showing that self-efficacy is not solely individually constructed but socially embedded across CoPs and highly sensitive to migration contexts. It extends SLT by introducing the concept of the informal Transition CoP, a novel learning space emerging during post-study liminality, and integrates Career Shock Theory to demonstrate how unexpected disruptions intersect with learning and resilience processes, providing a more dynamic account of migrant career development.

Methodologically, the research illustrates the value of a phenomenological qualitative approach in capturing the nuanced experiences of skilled African migrants, a population often underrepresented in career and migration research. The combined use of purposive and snowball sampling within migrant peer networks provides an effective strategy for accessing hidden populations in transnational contexts.

Practically and in policy terms, the findings offer insights for multiple stakeholders. Higher education institutions can enhance structured post-study career support, reducing overreliance on informal peer networks. Employers may improve inclusion by recognising the value of international talent and addressing gaps in visa and sponsorship understanding. Policymakers can

design migration policies that enable smoother transitions from education to skilled employment, aligning with Ireland's Strategy for Africa to 2025. Moreover, at a global level, the study contributes to the Sustainable Development Goals, particularly SDG 4 (Quality Education), SDG 5 (Gender Equality), SDG 8 (Decent Work), and SDG 10 (Reduced Inequalities), highlighting the wider significance of African postgraduate migrants as agents of knowledge transfer and economic development.

6.4 Limitations of the Study

While this research offers significant insights into how situated learning experiences shape the career development of highly skilled migrants transitioning from the Global South to the Global North, it is important to acknowledge its limitations, which provide context for interpreting the findings and highlight directions for future research.

6.4.1 *Sample and Scope Limitations*

The study's focus on a highly specific cohort – African postgraduate business students from Nigeria, Ghana, Kenya, and Tanzania who successfully transitioned to full-time professional employment in Ireland – limits understanding of the broader experiences of skilled migrants navigating home-to-host country transitions. While this focus ensures in-depth exploration of the complete education-to-employment trajectory, it inherently excludes individuals who did not secure professional employment or who left Ireland post-graduation. Consequently, the findings may not capture the experiences of less successful migrants or those facing different structural, social, or economic constraints. The study also prioritised participants who completed a Level 9 master's programme within a five-year post-graduation window, which may limit the applicability of insights to older graduates or those with longer-term career trajectories.

6.4.2 Methodological Limitations

The use of purposive and snowball sampling, although effective for accessing a hard-to-reach population, may have limited the findings to those who transitioned successfully, thereby excluding perspectives on alternative trajectories and outcomes. Participants who were willing but unable to participate due to the strict inclusion criteria limit the scope of the findings in relation to the broader population of African postgraduate migrants in Ireland who transitioned from study to non-business work or entered professions such as health care assistance. While the qualitative, phenomenological design applied in this study provided rich, nuanced data, the findings may not be generalisable. Instead, they are best interpreted as offering deep, contextually grounded insights into career development processes that may be transferable to similar cohorts of highly skilled migrants. Furthermore, while the study included both male and female participants and found broadly similar experiences across genders, it did not explore the nuanced influences of other cultural factors from participants' home countries, such as ethnic background and religion, in shaping their home-to-host country career transitions.

6.4.3 Scope of Knowledge Transfer Findings

Although the study explored knowledge flows between Ireland and participants' home countries, the findings indicate that knowledge sharing occurred primarily through informal, peer-to-peer interactions within migrant networks rather than through formal or institutionalised channels. Specifically, participants who had successfully transitioned into professional roles in Ireland shared practical insights and strategies for moving from student status to full-time work with current and prospective migrants from their home countries. This non-business-focused recycling

of knowledge reflects the context and scope of the study cohort and does not support broader claims regarding transnational knowledge transfer. Future research, particularly longitudinal studies, could examine how these informal practices might evolve into formalised mechanisms or entrepreneurial applications in participants' home countries.

6.4.6 Reflexivity and Researcher Positionality

Finally, as a qualitative study, the research is shaped by the researcher's interpretive lens. While conscious bias mitigation strategies were employed to ensure objectivity and credibility through rigorous coding and reflexive journaling, the researcher's positionality may have influenced both data interpretation and interaction with participants.

Having acknowledged these limitations, the study maintains transparency regarding the scope and applicability of its findings. Importantly, these limitations highlight opportunities for future research, such as longitudinal studies, larger-scale quantitative analyses, cross-country comparisons, and deeper exploration of intersectional dimensions within skilled migrant populations. Despite these limitations, the study offers significant contributions to understanding the complex interplay between learning, resilience, career shocks, and self-efficacy in the career development of African postgraduate migrants in Ireland. These limitations do not undermine the study's rigour, credibility, or contributions; rather, they situate its findings within a defined context, highlighting areas where future research could deepen understanding of home-to-host country transitions of highly skilled migrants via educational pathways in the Global South to Global North migration context. They also point to opportunities for extending and improving the research, as discussed in the following section.

6.5 Recommendations for Future Research

This study has set the foundation by providing insights into the career development of postgraduate business migrants from the Global South who successfully transitioned from education to professional employment in the Global North. Building on these findings, future research is encouraged to adopt a comparative design that includes both migrants who successfully transitioned post-graduation and those who did not. Such an approach would enable systematic analysis of the factors that differentiate successful from less successful transitions, including variations in learning experiences, coping strategies, career shocks, and self-efficacy development. Examining these contrasts could uncover additional barriers, alternative pathways, and adaptive strategies that remain unexplored in the current study. Furthermore, a comparative design could extend and refine the theoretical frameworks applied in this study: SCCT, SLT, and Career Shock Theory, by illustrating how these mechanisms operate differently across subgroups within the migrant population. This approach would also provide practical insights for universities, employers, and policymakers seeking to promote more inclusive and effective career development pathways for highly skilled migrants from the Global South in Global North contexts.

Longitudinal research designs could also be employed to track career development over extended periods, capturing the evolving influence of social, institutional, and personal factors on professional integration. Cross-sectoral studies examining migration into industries beyond business could reveal sector-specific challenges and opportunities, further enriching understanding of skilled migration dynamics. Additionally, research that explores formal and institutionalised knowledge transfer between host and home countries would complement the current study's findings on informal peer-to-peer knowledge sharing, providing a broader perspective on

transnational learning and professional mobility. These approaches would address the limitations outlined in this study while advancing theoretical, practical, and policy-oriented knowledge in the field of skilled migration and career development.

6.6 Concluding Reflection

Completing this research has been both a challenging and transformative journey. Over the past four years, I have engaged deeply with the experiences of highly skilled African postgraduate migrants navigating the transition from education to professional employment in Ireland. This study has provided rich insights into the dynamics of resilience, peer solidarity, and knowledge sharing while uncovering structural barriers, career shocks, and gendered nuances that shape these career trajectories.

Reflecting on the process, I recognise how the integration of SCCT, SLT, and Career Shock Theory enabled a nuanced understanding of how learning, self-efficacy, and unanticipated disruptions interact in shaping career development. These frameworks offered both conceptual guidance and a lens through which to interpret the social, institutional, and individual factors influencing migrants' journeys.

Through participation in scholarly engagements, including over ten conferences during this PhD, I have gained critical feedback that enhanced the depth and rigour of my analysis. If I were to conduct this research again, I would consider a comparative design that includes both those who successfully transitioned and those who did not, to examine differences in coping strategies, learning experiences, and self-efficacy development systematically. Such a design could provide

a more holistic understanding of the spectrum of migrant experiences while extending the theoretical frameworks applied.

Methodologically, I have learned the value of purposive and snowball sampling in accessing hard-to-reach populations while recognising the limitations this imposes on the breadth of perspectives captured. In hindsight, a broader recruitment strategy or a cross-sectoral approach might have enriched the data and provided additional insights into alternative career trajectories. However, the focus on those who completed the education-to-employment pathway allowed for a detailed, in-depth exploration of "how success happens," which aligns with the study's objectives and offers valuable implications for universities, employers, and policymakers.

Personally and professionally, this PhD has strengthened my capacity for critical thinking, reflexivity, and resilience as a researcher. I have developed a deeper appreciation of the complexity of migration, career development, and knowledge transfer, and I have learned how to navigate both theoretical and practical challenges in conducting qualitative research with underexplored populations. While no thesis is without limitations, this study provides a strong foundation for future inquiry and contributes meaningfully to understanding highly skilled migration in Global South-to-Global North contexts.

Ultimately, this research underscores that skilled migration is not merely an economic phenomenon but a deeply human experience shaped by aspirations, challenges, solidarities, and contributions that extend across borders. Reflecting critically on both the study's strengths and its limitations, I am better equipped to continue exploring the complexities of migration, career development, and transnational knowledge exchange in future research endeavours.

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Appendices

Appendix I

Table I1

Participants' Profiles

Participants	Gender	Country of Origin	Years Lived in Ireland	Role at Home	Home Experience (Years)	Full-time Master's Level 9 Programme	Current Role
1	Male	Nigeria	5	Banking Operations Specialist	4	Management	Transfer Agent Analyst
2	Female	Nigeria	5	Product Manager	5	International Business	Business Analyst
3	Male	Nigeria	4	Senior Procurement Specialist	13	Technology & Innovation Management	Procurement Specialist
4	Male	Nigeria	6	Business Analyst	4	Business Management	Graduate programme –

							Business Analyst
5	Male	Nigeria	7	Business Analyst	2	International Business	Business Analyst
6	Female	Nigeria	4	Business Development Executive	8	Human Resource Management	Workforce Management Business Analyst
7	Female	Nigeria	5	Accounts Officer	2	Strategic Management & HRM	Recruitment Associate
8	Female	Nigeria	6	Human Resource Specialist	3	Human Resource Management	Human Resource Partner
9	Male	Nigeria	5	Banking Relationship Manager	15	Digital Marketing	Content Analyst

10	Male	Nigeria	6	Web Developer & Data Analyst	2	Data Analytics	Risk Operations Analyst/ Investigator
11	Female	Nigeria	7	Business Administrator	2	International Business and Law	Trainee Accountant
12	Male	Nigeria	5	Business Analyst	6	International Business Management	Business Analyst
13	Male	Nigeria	7	Network Engineer	4	Information System Management	Access Network Engineer
14	Female	Nigeria	5	Programme Manager	8	International Management	Programme Manager
15	Female	Nigeria	6	Business Operations Analyst	3	Management Practices	Trust & Safety Analyst

16	Female	Nigeria	5	Business Analyst	4	Management	Graduate Programme: Business & Marketing Analyst
17	Female	Nigeria	3	Programme Executive	6	Management	Graduate Programme – Business & Marketing Analyst
18	Female	Nigeria	5	Customer Service Manager	8	MBA Human Resource Management	Customer Success Manager
19	Male	Nigeria	6	IT Security Analyst	4	Data Analytics	MDR (Multifactor Dimensionality Reduction) Analyst
20	Female	Nigeria	5	Compliance Analyst	2	International Business Management	Customer Due Diligence Analyst

21	Female	Nigeria	5	Compliance Specialist	5	Accounting & Finance	Product Manager
22	Female	Kenya	4	Banking Operations Specialist	7	International Business Management	Community Operations Analyst
23	Female	Nigeria	4	Financial Operations Analyst	6	International Business Management	Underwriting Operations Analyst
24	Male	Nigeria	4	Strategy, Business Development & Project Manager	9	MBA Marketing	Senior Analyst-Strategic Growth
25	Male	Nigeria	6	Associate Project Management	5	International Management	Program Manager

26	Female	Nigeria	4	Project Coordinator – Financial Services	4	MBA Project Management	Project Manager – Business Development
27	Male	Nigeria	6	Data Engineer	4	Data Science	Data Analyst
28	Female	Tanzania	5	Operations Analyst	4	International Management	Quality Assurance Analyst
29	Female	Nigeria	3	Business Analyst	4	International Management and Global Business	Contact Resolution Specialist
30	Female	Nigeria	5	Customer Relationship Associate	2	Human Resource Management	Client Life Cycle Management Specialist
31	Female	Nigeria	4	Human Resource Executive	3	International Finance	Senior Analyst – Risk Management &

							Investment Controlling
32	Female	Nigeria	3	Banking Operations Specialist	4	Business, Management & Marketing Strategy	Senior Operations Analyst
33	Female	Kenya	4	Business Process Analyst	4	International Business Management	Business Analyst
34	Male	Ghana	4	Team Lead Marketing Operations	5	International Business	Business Analyst
35	Male	Ghana	3	Operations Analyst	3	International Business	Operations Analyst

The composition and representation of this study's participant group reflect broader trends identified in national and international data on student mobility. According to the 2023 report by the Irish Higher Education Authority (HEA), Nigeria represents the largest share among African

nations. This demographic prominence is reflected in this study's participant group, where out of 35 participants, 30 (85.7%) are Nigerians, 2 (5.7%) are Ghanaians, 2 (5.7%) are Kenyans, and 1 (2.9%) is Tanzanian. This distribution not only mirrors Nigeria's leading position among African student-sending countries to Ireland but also reinforces the growing educational and migratory links between Ireland and the Global South. Furthermore, the strong representation of business postgraduate students in this cohort is consistent with the HEA's observation regarding the popularity of business disciplines among international students. Therefore, this study reflects national demographic trends reported by HEA and embodies broader shifts in international student aspirations and behaviours, as highlighted by Choudaha (2017). Consequently, it contributes to a nuanced understanding of how international education is leveraged by students from the Global South for professional and personal advancement in the Global North.

Appendix II: Thematic Analysis Process

The reflexive thematic analysis of the 35 interview transcripts was conducted through six iterative stages explained below.

Phase 1: Familiarisation with the Data

To familiarise with the data set, all interviews were transcribed manually by the researcher as they were conducted. Once all transcripts were completed, each transcript was thoroughly read again to immerse the researcher in the data and generate initial ideas for analysis, keeping the research question in focus. This initial immersion allowed for a preliminary understanding of the scope and nature of the data.

Phase 2: Systematic Data Coding

The coding process was conducted separately for female and male participants across five categories aligned with the structure of the interview questions:

i. Decision to emigrate to Ireland through the education pathway
ii. Educational experience in Ireland
iii. Post-study transition experience
iv. Professional career experience in the host country
v. Transfer of knowledge to the home country

Codes were generated from the outset for female and male participants separately to ensure that dynamics in experiences were captured from inception (see Appendix I). Codes were identified by recognising recurring patterns in the data related to the research questions. This involved interpreting how participants narrated their career development journeys from education to job search and eventual transition to full-time permanent employment in the host country. The coding process also captured barriers and gender differences participants faced, as well as their engagement with their African home countries through the knowledge and skills acquired in Ireland. These codes reflect participants' experiences of integrating into the host environment during their college years, transitioning into professional practice post-graduation, and planning their future career trajectories.

From the systematically generated codes in Phase 2, dominant codes – those with the highest recurrence across participants – indicated repeated patterns. These were extracted and organised into a table, as shown below. Themes were subsequently drawn from these clusters of initial codes.

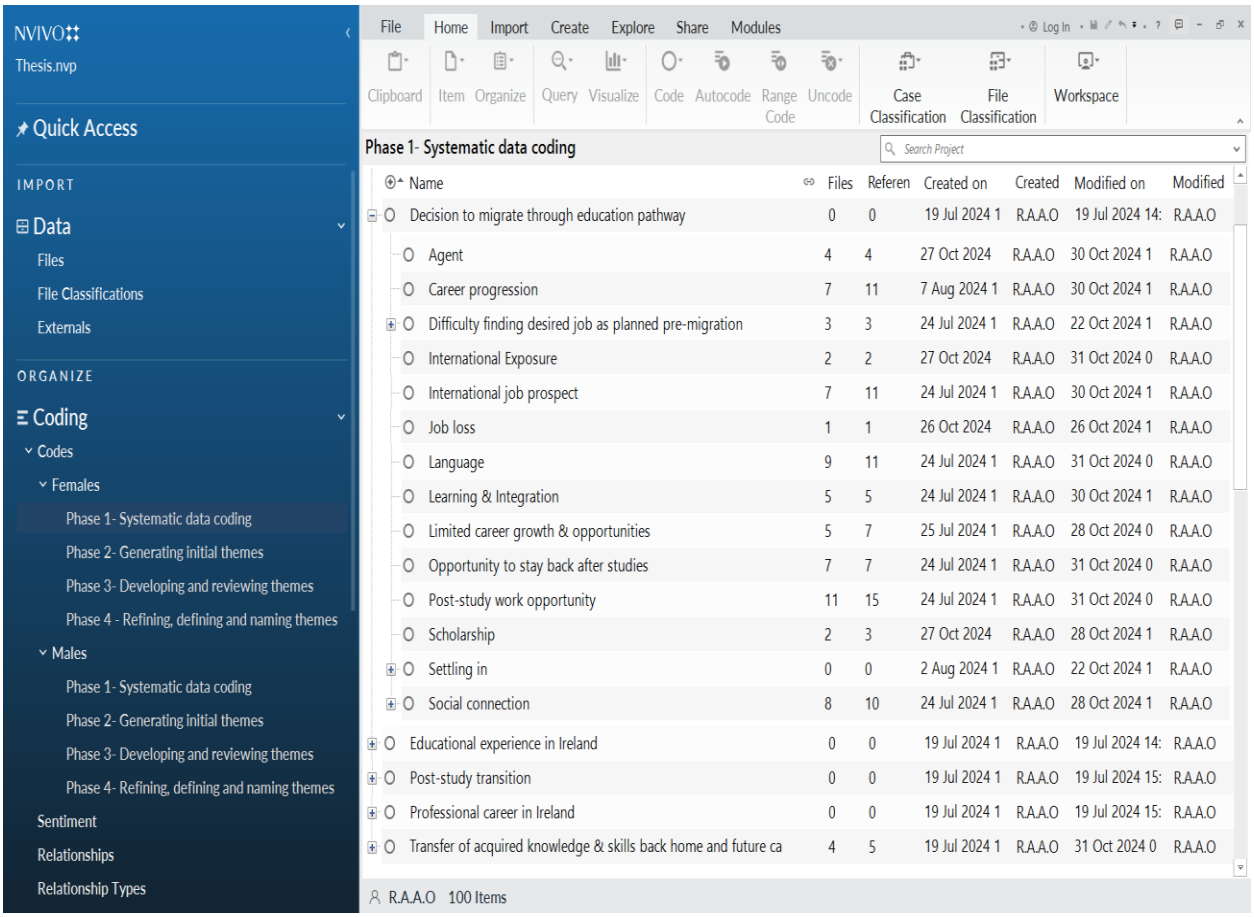


Table III

Table of Codes

Decision to Emigrate to Ireland through the Education Pathway					
S/N	Codes	Number of participants referencing (Males, N=14)	References (Males, N=14)	Number of participants referencing (Females, N = 21)	References (Females, N = 21)
1	Agent	4	6	7	8
2	Outcome less than expectation	6	12	6	13

3	International Exposure	4	5	2	2
4	Job Prospect	2	3	7	8
5	English Language	5	6	9	13
6	Opportunity to stay back (post-study work visa)	10	20	9	11
7	Career progression	5	5	2	2
8	Learning and Integration	1	2	2	5
9	Presence of technology companies	5	5	3	3
Educational Experience in Host Country					
1	Confidence	4	5	7	9
2	Knowledge Sharing	6	9		6
3	Career support from college				
	Career fair/ workshop	5	6	7	7
	CV crafting & review	7	8	7	8
	Interview preparation	3	4	4	5
	Grad. Ireland	2	3	3	3
4	Developed Skills				
	Multicultural awareness	8	17	11	17
	Multicultural collaboration	10	18	20	33
	Communication/Presentation	11	22	16	29
	Teamwork	8	6	19	40
	Research	3	4	9	12

	Analysis	2	3	6	11
	Decision making	1	1	3	3
	Problem solving	2	2	4	5
	Critical thinking	2	2	4	5
	Patience	5	6	5	9
	Time management	0	0	2	2
	Open mindedness	0	0	9	12
5	Diversity	7	14	9	11
Post-Study Transition Experience					
1	Barriers				
Immigration status		7	13	18	37
i.	*Lack of employers' understanding of graduate immigration status and visa*	2	2	10	15
ii.	*Delay in processing time*	2	5	2	2
iii.	*Companies unwilling to sponsor work visa*	0	0	9	10
	Name-Based Discrimination	3	6	2	3

	Lack of host country (local) experience	5	9	4	5
	Racial identity	4	7	6	11
	No sense of belonging	5	10	6	11
	COVID-19	5	8	11	15
2	Unplanned disruptions (Shock)	4	5	7	10
3	Redundancy	1	3	2	4
4	Confidence – Outcome	7	12	10	15
5	Facilitators				
	i. Contract roles	2	4	8	12
	ii. Customer Service roles	5	15	11	22
	iii. Peripheral participation (part-time jobs)	3 1	4 2	5 3	5 5
	iv. Internships				
	Informal Network				

	i. *Professional (LinkedIn)* ii. *Social (CoP)*	4 5	9 8	8	9 5
4	Referral	6	9		9
5	Influence of home country experience	4	5	4	5
6	Upskilling	10	21	18	36
7	Identity advantage	0	0	4	6
	Psychological states				
	i. Depression ii. Frustration iii. Stress iv. Pressure	2 3 0 2	4 8 0 3	3 1 3 3	4 2 3 4
8	Resilience	7	14	13	24
Professional Career Experience in the Host Country					
1	Starting afresh	3	4	2	3
2	Stay back to harness opportunities	12	18	5	7
3	Career development		3		0
4	Career satisfaction	6	6		9
5	Career dissatisfaction	9	12		6

6	Confidence	8	12		8
7	Improved skills				
	i. Communication	8	10	11	18
	ii. Multicultural awareness	2	4	7	10
	iii. Multicultural collaboration	4	8	7	11
8	Goals				
	i. Citizenship	4	8	6	9
	ii. Work visa sponsorship	9	15	6	9
9	Inclusion	0	0	5	8
10	Upskilling	5	6	8	10
Transfer of Knowledge to Home Country					
1	Advice	4	5	5	8
2	Entrepreneurial Intention	3	4	6	6
3	Mentoring	2	3	1	1
4	Training	2	2	3	3
5	Volunteering	0	0	2	3
6	No transfer yet, but willing to	5	5	9	15

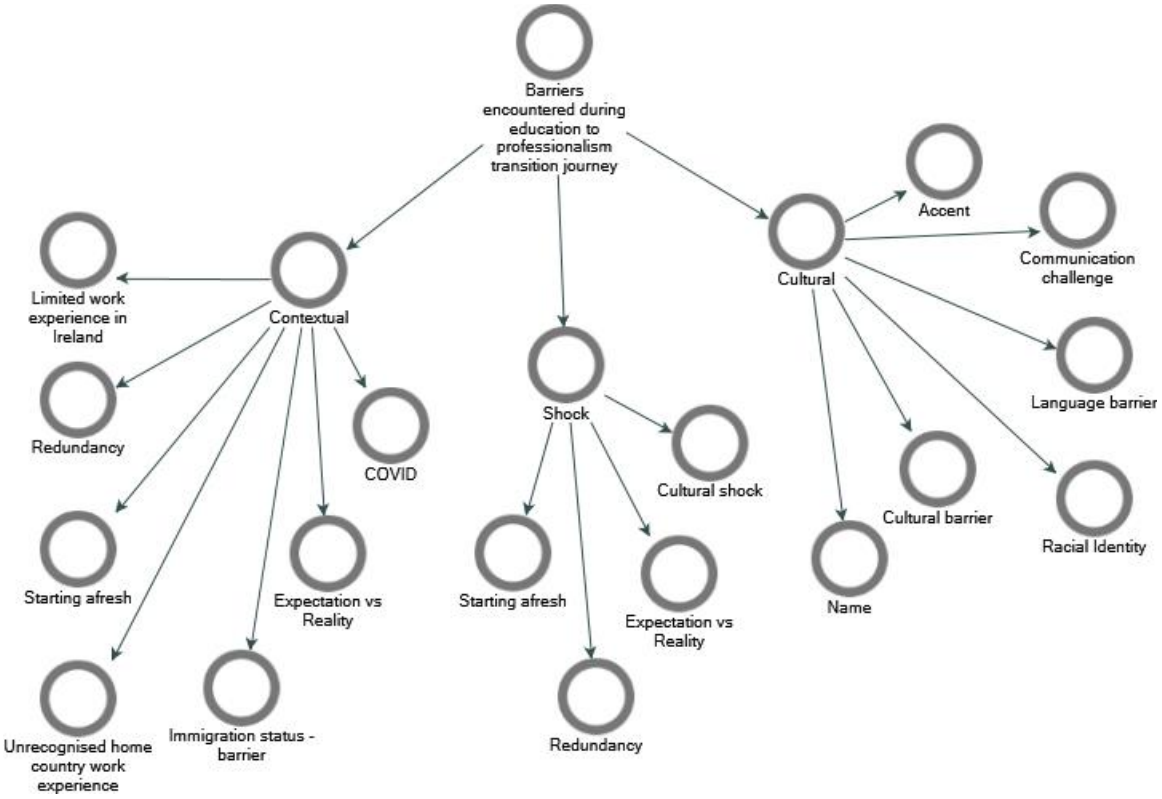
Phase 3: Generating Initial Themes

In this phase, the initial codes were clustered to form preliminary themes for male and female participants separately, in alignment with the study's research questions and objectives. This approach supported the identification of patterns, meanings, and interrelationships among the codes.

For male participants, the following initial themes were generated: academic institution support, attractions to the host country, confidence building, integrative and adaptive contextual learning, contextual advantage, contextual barriers, cultural barriers, culture shock, psychological states, goals, home country work experience, response to shock, self-discovered facilitators, cognitive and interpersonal skillsets, multicultural and collaborative competence, unplanned events (disruptors), and knowledge transfer and future plans.

For female participants, the initial themes included academic institution support, attractions to the host country (Ireland), confidence building, integrative and adaptive contextual learning, contextual advantage, contextual barriers, cultural barriers, culture shock, psychological states, goals, home country work experience, motivations to emigrate, peer learning, progression, response to disruptions (shock), self-discovered facilitators, cognitive and interpersonal skillsets, multicultural and collaborative competence, unplanned disruptions, and knowledge transfer and future plans.

At this stage, each theme was clearly articulated, and its core properties were defined to ensure internal coherence, conceptual clarity, and alignment with the study's overall aims.


Barriers encountered during education to professionalism transition journey
Contextual
Limited work experience in Ireland
Redundancy
Starting afresh
Unrecognised home country work experience
Expectation vs Reality
Immigration status - barrier
COVID
Shock
Starting afresh
Redundancy
Expectation vs Reality
Cultural shock
Cultural
Accent
Communication challenge
Language barrier
Cultural barrier
Racial Identity
Name

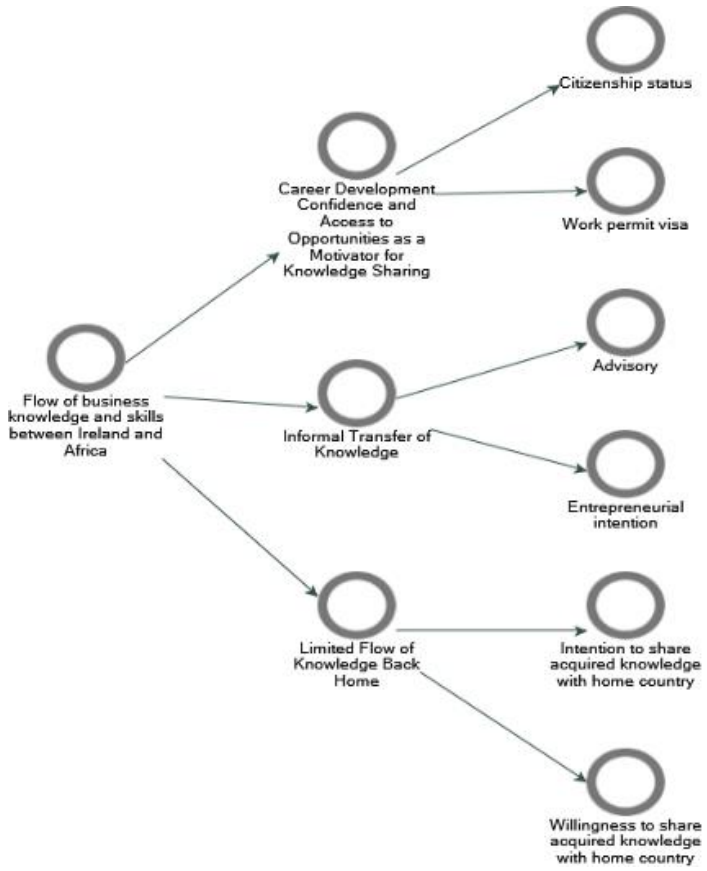


Table II2

Analytical Table of How Initial Themes Were Generated: Illustrative Data- Thematic Analysis Phase 3

Research Question	Illustrative Quotes	Codes	Themes
RQ1: How do the careers of African business postgraduate skilled migrants develop as they progress from	"They did a couple of webinars and job fairs... but there was not maybe a one-to-	Career fairs, CV preparation, internship, knowledge sharing, mock interviews	Academic Institution Support

education to job search and successful transition to full-time, permanent employment in the host country?	one guidance or counselling" (P20F). "One of my lecturers helped me with my CV... but there was really nothing much." (P11F). "They did some career fairs... and there's a department that helps discuss how to get jobs and immigration." (P4M).		
	"I think there's an office for career advice... help you with your CV writing, LinkedIn... but the actual hands-on support was not there." (P9M).	Inclusion and diversity	Contextual Advantage

	"I did a customer service job for about a year... I knew that job was not going to help my immigration status." (P4M). "Having that experience in customer service... really pushed my career to the next level." (P12M). "The job with Three... was not great... I took certifications to give me an edge." (P29F). "With the kind of community we created then, they got you an interview	Temporary contract, customer service, home-country work experience, upskilling, informal networks (CV review, LinkedIn, referrals)	Self-discovered facilitators

	through referrals." (P19M).		
	"Presenting in front of a class with other students... was not something I did before... that aspect of my study gave me a confidence boost." (P20F).	Multicultural awareness, teamwork and collaboration, presentation and communication, research and critical thinking, confidence	Skill and confidence
RQ2: What are the complexities and gender differences that they face in their experiences?	"I think the name as well… I've been using Michael instead of Segun… it makes it easy for people to pronounce." (P1M). "Finding it difficult to break into the cycle… others share the same	Immigration status, lack of understanding of immigrant visa status, non-tech background, racial identity, unrecognised home experience	Contextual barriers

	background." (P10M).		
	"It was a struggle… I had to pick up the accent fast." (P19M). "I found it difficult to understand people from India… communication barriers really affected me." (P12M).	Accent, communication	Cultural barriers
	"I thought I'd go work for Google, make my millions… but I'm not where I thought I'd be." (P23F). "What was advertised to us wasn't what we got… they just	Country transition shock, outcomes below expectation	Shocks

	wanted our money." (P8F).		
RQ3: Do their acquired skills and knowledge flow back to their home countries?	"Maybe start my own educational agency… help more people with sufficient information." (P2F).	Intention or willingness to share acquired knowledge	Intentions and willingness to contribute
	"If I can get a job to sponsor me, I can get my citizenship as the icing on the cake." (P9M).	Citizenship, work permit visa	Personal goals
	"Many people are coming… contacting me on LinkedIn… I've had to counsel many people." (P13M). "I engage people who are coming to Ireland, give them	Advisory service, entrepreneurial intention	Transnational entrepreneurship and diaspora networks

	information, try to support them." (P3M). "Here has equipped me… with opportunities I can replicate back home." (P9M).		

Phase 4: Developing and Reviewing Themes

In line with Braun and Clarke's (2019, 2021) reflexive thematic analysis approach, Phase 4 involved a rigorous review of the initial themes to ensure coherence, internal consistency, and alignment with the study's research questions and objectives. This stage included reviewing coded extracts for internal homogeneity, revisiting the full data set to confirm that themes were adequately supported, collapsing overlapping or redundant themes in relation to the theories used in interpreting the participants' experiences, and refining those that lacked sufficient distinction.

During this process, the initially separate themes generated for male and female participants were found to converge, reflecting shared experiences across gender lines. As a result, the themes were unified into a final thematic structure. These themes were mapped onto the research questions and objectives as follows:

Research Question 1/Objective 1 (Exploring key learning and transition experiences): Education Community of Practice (CoP), Transition CoP, Professional CoP, and Confidence Building and Resilience

Research Question 2/Objective 2 (Examining contextual complexities and career shocks): Barriers and Psychological States

Research Question 3/Objective 3 (Understanding the nature of knowledge transfer): Knowledge Recycling within the CoPs

Each theme was then clearly defined in the next phase, ensuring conceptual clarity and analytical depth.

Table III3

Analytical Table of How Themes Were Refined and Further Developed: Illustrative Data- Thematic Analysis Phase 4

Research Questions	Initial Themes (from Phase 3)	Refined and Merged Themes (Phase 4)	Interpretive and Theoretical Reasoning for Theme Merging & Refinement
RQ1: How do the careers of African business postgraduate skilled migrants develop as they progress from education	Academic Institution Support (career fairs, CV preparation, mock	Learning Spaces: Education CoP (formal institutional learning and skill acquisition)	Overlapping categories under "skills," "facilitators," and "academic support" were

to job search, and successful transition to full-time permanent employment in Ireland?	interview, internship, knowledge sharing) Contextual Advantage (inclusion and diversity) Self-Discovered Facilitators (temporary contract, upskilling, home country experience, customer service, informal networks, including LinkedIn, and referrals) Skill and Confidence (multicultural awareness, teamwork, communication, presentation, research,	Transition CoP (informal peer-based learning amid post-study uncertainty) Professional CoP (learning through workplace participation and collaboration) Confidence Building and Resilience	restructured from theoretical viewpoint of SLT, integrated with SCCT into three Communities of Practice to reflect progressive learning contexts. Confidence and resilience were analysed as cross-cutting processes evolving through these CoPs.

	critical thinking, confidence)		
RQ2: What are the complexities and gender differences that they face in their experiences?	Contextual Barriers (immigration status, visa misunderstanding, racial identity, non-technical background, unrecognised experience) Cultural Barriers (accent, communication) Shock (transition shock, outcomes below expectation)	Immigration Status Limited work experience in host country Undervalued/discounted home country experience Racial identity Unplanned disruptions (shocks) Resulting psychological states/impact	Overlapping themes were collapsed due to shared experiences across the two genders. Themes were restructured to reflect the full range of systemic and psychological states from the theoretical understanding of career shock and SCCT complexities influencing transition.
RQ3: Do their acquired skills and knowledge flow back to the home countries?	Intentions and willingness to contribute (intention and willingness to share knowledge)	Knowledge recycling within the CoPs Long-term entrepreneurial intention in home country	Themes refined to reflect both immediate and aspirational knowledge transfer. Focus shifted from

	Personal goals (citizenship, work permit) Transnational entrepreneurship (entrepreneurial intention, advisory service)		intention alone to active and potential knowledge recycling processes across applying SLT: CoPs.

Phase 5: Defining and Naming Themes

In this final phase of the thematic analysis, each theme was clearly defined and named to encapsulate its conceptual essence and contribution to the overall analytical narrative. This stage involved articulating the underlying meaning of each theme and clarifying how it responded to the research questions and objectives. The definitions were informed by close engagement with the coded data extracts and the further application of the broader theoretical frameworks underpinning the study, namely SCCT, SLT, and CS. Each theme was interpreted in relation to the research questions and the wider dataset. Theme names were carefully selected to reflect the core concept they represented, ensuring clarity, coherence, and analytical depth.

The final themes illustrate how participants navigated the transition from postgraduate education to employment in Ireland, the barriers and contextual complexities they encountered, and the potential for knowledge and skill transfer to their countries of origin. Through this process, the themes were structured to convey distinct and meaningful insights into the participants' experiences, while remaining interconnected within the overarching narrative of transition, adaptation, and career development.

The themes are structured according to the three research questions as follows:

Research Question 1

How do the careers of highly skilled business postgraduate migrants from Nigeria, Ghana, Kenya, and Tanzania in the Global South develop as they progress from education to job search and successful transition to full-time permanent employment in Ireland in the Global North?

Themes:

(a) Communities of Practice (CoP)

Here, the specific CoPs that facilitate learning for career development were identified, named, and defined. Three primary communities of practice emerged from the data as critical spaces where participants gained knowledge, skills, and confidence.

i. Education CoP: This CoP encapsulates formal and structured academic settings where participants developed initial multicultural skills, networks, and strategies essential for integrating into their host country.

ii. Transition CoP: Informal and unstructured spaces, particularly the professional and social networks of peer international skilled migrants, where participants shared experiences and sought guidance during their post-study transition phase.
iii. Professional CoP: Formal, structured work environments and professional associations where participants engaged with colleagues, applied their skills, and further developed practical experience through collaboration with other professionals.

These CoPs facilitated learning through cooperation and shared experiences, providing a supportive framework for the transition from newcomers to experts in their careers within the host environment.

(b) Confidence Building

This theme covers how confidence developed progressively through participants' engagements within the three CoPs throughout their journey. It reflects how participants gradually grew in awareness and recognition of their abilities, becoming increasingly self-assured about their skills and potential as they progressed from novices to professionals.

(c) Resilience

This theme captures how participants demonstrated determination and psychological strength in response to a series of unexpected events that disrupted their transition from education to professional employment in Ireland. These unplanned disruptions, including extended job searches, repeated rejections, and experiences of systemic barriers, posed significant challenges. However, participants exhibited strong willpower and consistent commitment to their long-term

career goals, adapting to adversity and persisting through uncertainty until they achieved a successful transition into professional roles.

Research Question 2

What are the complexities and gender differences that they face in their experiences?

Themes:

(a) Immigration Status

This theme reflects how participants' immigration status affected their ability to secure employment during the transition from the graduate visa to a full work visa. Participants reported that many employers were either unwilling to sponsor non-EU candidates or lacked understanding of the graduate visa scheme, leading to missed opportunities and prolonged job searches despite their qualifications.

(b) Limited Work Experience in the Host Country

This theme captures how, as newcomers, participants had little or no prior work experience in Ireland, which became a significant barrier. Employers often prioritised local experience, making it difficult for participants to access job opportunities even when they held relevant qualifications and international experience.

(c) Undervalued or Discounted Home Country Work Experience

This theme reflects how participants' prior professional experience from their home countries was often not recognised or valued by Irish employers, even when applying for equivalent roles. As a

result, many were compelled to accept jobs far below their qualifications and experience levels, with some describing the process as "starting afresh" in their careers.

(d) Racial Identity

This theme represents the various disadvantages participants experienced related to their racial background, including bias or discrimination based on accent, name, and skin colour. These identities influenced their interactions with employers and affected their access to opportunities in the host country.

(e) Unplanned Disruptions (Shocks)

This theme captures the unexpected challenges participants faced when the attractive feature of the two-year post-study work visa did not translate into an easy or guaranteed transition to a work permit. It also includes several mismatches between their lived realities and the expectations formed at the beginning of their journey. It covers challenges they had not envisaged but encountered, which disrupted their transition.

(f) Resulting Psychological States and Impact

This theme captures the unexpected challenges participants faced when the attractive selling point of the two-year post-study work visa did not translate into an easy or guaranteed transition to a work permit. This section examines the emotional and psychological impact of these disruptions on participants. It covers stress, frustration, and discouragement resulting from prolonged job searches, visa challenges, and systemic barriers, while also acknowledging participants' capacity to rebuild confidence and continue pursuing their goals. It also includes all other numerous

mismatches between their lived realities and the expectations planned at the inception of their journey. It covers challenges they had not envisaged that disrupted their transition.

Research Question 3

Do their acquired skills and knowledge flow back to the home countries?

Theme:

(a) Knowledge recycling within the CoPs

This theme represents the nature of knowledge flow within and across the Communities of Practice (CoPs) among this unique migrant cohort. It highlights how acquired skills and business knowledge circulate primarily within the host country, particularly among migrants from the same home countries, fostering experience sharing and knowledge empowerment within supportive migrant communities.

(b) Long-term entrepreneurial intention in home country

This theme captures participants' expressed desire to eventually return to their countries of origin and establish entrepreneurial ventures after securing Irish citizenship and professional experience abroad. It reflects a future-oriented vision where knowledge and skills acquired in Ireland are channelled back into business and social development in the home country. These aspirations illustrate how migration serves not only as a pathway to host-country integration but also as a source of motivation for long-term entrepreneurial engagement upon return.

Each theme is distinct yet interwoven with others, collectively illuminating the career journeys of highly skilled migrants from the Global South as they navigate cross-border transitions from education to employment. These themes are presented and discussed in detail in the next chapter.

Table II4

Analytical Table of How Themes Were Named and Defined: Illustrative Data- Thematic Analysis Phase 5

Research Question	Final Themes (Defined & Name)	Definition/Meaning	Theoretical Link
RQ 1	Education CoP	Formal, structured academic environments where participants developed foundational cognitive, multicultural, and collaborative skills essential for integration and employability.	SLT: legitimate peripheral participation.

	Transition CoP	Informal and unstructured peer networks that emerged post-graduation, facilitating social learning, emotional support, and adaptive strategies during periods of uncertainty and systemic exclusion.	SLT: informal CoPs SCCT: vicarious and social learning.
	Professional CoP	Formal workplace contexts where participants applied accumulated knowledge, consolidated confidence, and contributed to collective learning through collaboration and mentorship	SLT: recognised and participation as experts/professionals, i.e., professional identity SCCT: performance accomplishments

	Confidence Building	Progressive strengthening of self-belief and awareness of capability developed through ongoing participation and feedback within CoPs.	SCCT: self-efficacy development
	Resilience	Persistent effort, determination, and adaptability demonstrated by participants when facing systemic, racial, or procedural barriers during career transition.	SCCT: self-evolution, persistence, outcome expectation vs. lived reality Career Shock Theory
RQ 2	Immigration Status	How visa restrictions and employers' limited understanding of post-study work schemes shaped access to employment	Career Shock: Contextual Influences on Career Development

	Limited Work Experience in Host Country	The disadvantage faced by newcomers lacking Irish work experience despite international qualifications.	
	Undervalued Home Country Experience	Employers' devaluation of prior experience from the Global South, forcing participants into lower-level roles.	
	Racial Identity	Biases and discrimination linked to race, accent, or name influencing job prospects and workplace inclusion.	
	Unplanned Disruptions	Unexpected challenges (job rejections, systemic barriers) that contradicted initial	

		migration expectations.	
	Resulting Psychological States/Impact	Emotional and cognitive consequences of prolonged job search and rejection, influencing confidence and persistence.	SCCT: Self-efficacy as a driver of career development
RQ 3	Knowledge Recycling within the CoPs	Reciprocal and ongoing knowledge sharing among migrant professionals, fostering collective learning within host communities	SLT, Knowledge transfer
	Long-term Entrepreneurial Intention in Home Country	Future-oriented aspiration to reinvest acquired knowledge and experience into home-country	

		development through entrepreneurship.	

Appendix III: Reflexive Journal: Data Collection and Analysis

Introduction: Reflexivity and Positionality

October 2023

As I embark on this research, I am conscious of the role my positionality as an African postgraduate migrant in Ireland plays in shaping my study. Listening to participants and relating through shared experiences allowed me to understand their stories on a deeper level. This insider perspective fostered trust and openness during the research process; however, it also requires careful reflexivity to ensure that I remain aware of how my subjectivity may influence the study. I aim to balance empathy and self-awareness, using this journal to document my reflections. Throughout this process, I will also draw on feedback received during conferences where I presented my work, allowing external perspectives to guide me in refining both my methodology and analysis.

Data Collection Stage (October 2023–February 2024)

Initial Reflections: Preparing for Data Collection

As I prepare for data collection, I am reflecting on how my shared background with participants might shape my interactions. Having migrated to Ireland for postgraduate studies, I can relate to many aspects of their journeys. This connection offers valuable insight into their experiences; however, I must remain mindful not to over-identify with their stories. While empathy facilitates richer engagement, I need to ensure that it does not obscure the individuality of each participant's narrative.

Before starting the interviews, I outlined specific strategies to remain reflexive. I decided to log my emotional reactions immediately after each session to track moments when my positionality may have influenced the conversation. My goal is to engage empathetically while remaining aware of how my own experiences shape my understanding of their stories.

During Interviews: Participant Interactions

October 2023

During the first few interviews, I was struck by how naturally I connected with participants' narratives. For example, when one participant discussed the difficulty of finding a job after graduation, I found myself resonating strongly with their frustration. This shared experience enhanced our rapport; however, I also questioned whether it affected the direction of the conversation. I wondered if I was unintentionally steering the discussion towards familiar struggles. After each interview, I reflected on these moments in my journal, noting when my experiences seemed to align too closely with theirs.

In subsequent interviews, I made a conscious effort to listen without imposing my perspective. This required balancing empathy with critical reflection, particularly when participants shared

emotional challenges that I could relate to. I continued documenting these reflections to remain aware of how my positionality could influence the data collection process.

Mid-Collection Reflection: Conference Feedback

December 2023

At this point, I had the opportunity to present my preliminary findings at a conference on migration studies. The feedback I received was instrumental in refining my approach. Several attendees emphasised the risk of over-identification when researchers share similar experiences with participants, which resonated with my earlier reflections. This prompted me to reconsider how my insider perspective was shaping the way I engaged with participants and interpreted their stories.

After the conference, I reflected on how to adjust my approach moving forward. I decided to introduce a more structured interview process, ensuring that my questions encouraged broader and more diverse responses. I wanted to avoid unintentionally guiding participants towards experiences that mirrored my own, so I rephrased some questions to allow participants to express viewpoints that might differ from my expectations.

Analysis Stage (March 2024)

Initial Analysis: Engaging with the Data

As I transitioned into the analysis phase, I became increasingly aware of how my positionality could shape the way I interpreted the data. I found that I was initially drawn to themes related to the challenges participants faced, such as visa struggles and difficulties transitioning into the workforce, which were issues that resonated with my own journey. However, I reminded myself

that while these barriers were significant, they did not represent the totality of participants' experiences.

The feedback from conferences played a key role during this stage. It encouraged me to balance my insider perspective with a more critical and reflective analysis. I made a conscious effort to approach the data with fresh eyes, ensuring that the codes I developed were grounded in participants' narratives rather than filtered through my own assumptions. This required revisiting the transcripts multiple times to confirm that I was truly engaging with participants' words and not overlaying them with my interpretations.

Conference Reflections: Methodological Adjustments

April 2024

After presenting my research at a second conference on qualitative methods, I received feedback that challenged me to consider alternative interpretations of the data, particularly those that did not align with my own experiences. One attendee suggested using more detailed memos to document my thought process during coding, which would help me remain critically engaged with the data and prevent my subjectivity from overshadowing the participants' voices.

This feedback prompted me to revise my approach. I began writing detailed analytic memos alongside my codes, reflecting on how each theme emerged from the data and whether my personal experiences were influencing interpretation. I also noted moments when my emotional response to a participant's story was particularly strong, which helped me maintain a critical distance from the data without losing empathy for the participants' experiences.

Ongoing Reflexivity: Balancing Empathy and Subjectivity

May 2024

As I delved deeper into the analysis, I continued to reflect on the tension between empathy and subjectivity. One recurring theme in the data was participants' engagement with their home countries, whether through remittances, networks, or plans to return. This theme was personally meaningful to me, as I also navigate the balance between staying connected to my home country while building a life in Ireland.

Upon reviewing my initial analysis, I realised that I had focused more on participants who expressed a strong desire to maintain ties with their home countries. This likely resonated with my experiences, and I needed to ensure that I was giving equal attention to those who had different perspectives. I revisited the transcripts of participants who showed little interest in returning home, ensuring that their voices were equally represented in my final analysis. This reflection helped me maintain balance in representing the diversity of participants' narratives.

Conclusion: Reflexivity in Practice

Reflecting on this process, I recognise how my positionality as an African postgraduate migrant has shaped my research at every stage. My shared background with participants allowed for deep engagement; however, it also required continuous reflection to ensure that empathy did not obscure their unique experiences. The conferences I attended provided invaluable external feedback, which helped me refine my methods and analysis, ensuring that I approached the data critically.

Through ongoing self-reflection and the incorporation of external feedback, I was able to identify moments where my positionality might have influenced data collection and analysis. This journal has been crucial in tracking my evolving understanding of the research process and ensuring that my analysis remained grounded in the participants' authentic experiences.

By committing to reflexivity and integrating external perspectives, I have upheld ethical standards, ensuring that the findings reflect the complexity and diversity of the participants' stories.