

Return migration, informal learning, human capital development and SME internationalization in the CEE region: A systematic literature review*

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Migration from Eastern to Western Europe has increased under transition from planned to market economies. As migrants return home they may enhance local entrepreneurial activity by transferring skills and knowledge gained abroad. Internationalization of small and medium sized-enterprises (SMEs) may thus be initiated. This article presents a review of antecedental factors of internationalization in the transitional Central and Eastern Europe region (CEE). It is proposed that return migration may influence informal learning to enhance local human capital development and more focused SME internationalization. This chain of argumentation is examined through review of empirical studies to develop a basis for future research.

Die Migration von Ost- nach Westeuropa hat mit dem Transformationsprozess von der Plan- zur Marktwirtschaft zugenommen. Kehren Migranten in ihre Herkunftsländer zurück, können sie das dortige Unternehmertum mit ihren im Ausland gewonnenen Fähigkeiten und Kenntnissen stärken. Besonders positive Auswirkungen dieses Know-how-Transfers sind auf die Internationalisierung von Klein- und Mittelunternehmen (KMU) zu erwarten. Dieser Artikel bietet einen systematischen Überblick über die Ursachen der KMU Internationalisierung in den Transformationsländern Zentral- und Osteuropas (CEE). Wir argumentieren, dass die Rückkehr von Migranten informelles Lernen in den Herkunftsländern initiiert und damit das lokale Humankapital stärkt, was wiederum zu einer verstärkten Internationalisierung der dort ansässigen KMU führen kann. Diese Argumentationskette wird anhand der Ergebnisse einer systematischen Analyse empirischer Studien untermauert und bietet eine fruchtbare Ausgangsbasis für Folgeforschung.

Key words: migration, informal learning, human capital, SMEs (JEL: F22; O15)

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1. Introduction

In the middle ages, young craftsmen in Europe invariably left home to work elsewhere. Upon return they often used acquired skills, experience and networks to establish businesses. A similar migration process from Eastern to Western Europe has occurred under transition (Marques 2010). Knowledge, skills and experience acquired abroad may lead to business development when migrants return home. Empirical evidence of international knowledge transfer is scant although Wahba/Zenou (2012), suggest that returnees to Egypt have greater prospects of becoming entrepreneurs. Shane/Venkatamaran, (2000) also suggest that prior international experience may benefit venture success.

While migrant entrepreneurship abroad has attracted substantial attention the effects of return migration on SME internationalization remains largely unresearched. Therefore an overall research proposition is formed: Return migration may lead to entrepreneurship at home and subsequent SME internationalisation.

This is addressed by systematically reviewing extant literature on SME internationalization induced by return migration and intervening variables of informal learning and human capital development. Thus return migration may induce informal learning which may further stimulate human capital development and SME internationalization. Given that links between each variable remain relatively under-researched in a CEE transitional context, major research gaps act as a basis for future empirical research.

Return migrants might tacitly transfer skills and knowledge home through informal learning and thus contribute to human capital development. Combined with relatively high CEE human capital stocks, this may contribute to SME internationalization through enhanced international awareness.

SMEs form 58 per cent of gross value added in the European Union, (European Commission 2011), but typically lack scope and intensity of internationalization (Gemser et al. 2012). Thus, enhanced international activity of European SMEs represents potential to strengthen Europe's global competitive position. Moreover, Okkerse (2008) suggests EU policy needs to further encourage return migration. Thus enhanced inter-EU SME internationalization could potentially boost EU competitiveness.

This review empirically maps grounded knowledge of the effects of return migration on informal learning, human capital development, and SME internationalization in the CEE region to foster development of more intensive research in this emerging field. Thus identification of research gaps serves as a valuable starting point for future research.

This article is structured by firstly identifying antecedental factors of SME internationalization emanating from return migration with secondary research

propositions stated in relation to each. Following an outline of the review method, the main findings are mapped and discussed as a prelude to future research.

Evidence-based evaluation of the effects of return migration on informal learning, human capital development and SME internationalization in the CEE region is presented. Identified links also highlight points of leverage whereby policy can be utilised to promote SME internationalization.

2. Theoretical background

2.1 Return migration

Migration from CEE transitional countries to Western Europe has increased since 1989 and features a short-term bias (Marques 2010). Aydemir/Robinson (2008) suggest higher skilled migrants are more inclined to return home than lower skilled counterparts. Thus return migration may be linked to utilization of skills acquired abroad and higher skilled return migrants may transfer knowledge and experience home. An initial secondary research proposition (1) therefore emerges in terms of how such transfer may occur in reality.

2.2 Informal learning

As SMEs typically lack structured HR policies (de Kok et al. 2006), there perhaps needs to be greater research emphasis on informal learning which occurs through the subconscious transfer of knowledge, skills and experience (Agryis/Schön 1978). This process is unstructured and is initiated tacitly by individuals within organizations (Marsick/Volpe 1999).

Return migrants may transfer knowledge, experience and skills through informal learning to establish businesses at home. The extent to which this is successful highly depends on the local business environment. Absorptive capacity may thus enhance the ability to integrate new information from external sources (Cohen/Levinthal 1990), and may be determined by *structured* human resource (HR) policies and *unstructured* informal learning. In a transitional context, this may be influenced by embedded Communist-era working practices (Cseh 2002).

HR policies for large firms are generally seen as having universal relevance for SMEs (Edwards et al. 2003). Hence SME training and development emphasizes generic training programs which may not necessarily address individual business needs (Matlay 2004). Informal learning may then act as a complementary factor to formal training methods, although its outcomes may not be as readily discerned and quantified. The extent to which return migration SMEs may influence informal learning in SMEs thus presents a further secondary research proposition (2).

2.3 *Human capital development*

Human capital is generally considered as the asset value of knowledge, skills and capabilities. Becker (1964) suggests specific human capital is not perhaps as easily transferable as general human capital. Externally acquired general human capital may thus enable return migrants to establish new ventures.

Attempts to quantify human capital in the CEE region have largely focused on using formal educational qualifications as a proxy variable (Földvári/van Leeuwen 2009). However, this approach does not capture the effects of informal learning which may be initiated by return migration. Furthermore, the extent to which human capital may influence international business opportunity identification in CEE SMEs is also unclear thus presenting a further secondary research proposition (3).

2.4 *SME internationalization*

‘Stage’ theory (Johanson/Vahlne 1977) encapsulates a gradualist approach of psychic distance to SME internationalization being initiated in culturally and geographically proximate countries. As market presence develops psychic distance tends to become less important. Return migrants may perceive considerably less psychic distance than non-migrant entrepreneurs (Athannassiou/Nigh 2002). Perhaps reduced psychic distance also may thus enhance confidence in terms of international business opportunity identification gained from international experience of return migrant entrepreneurs.

Barney (1991) proposes a resource based view (RBV) approach whereby SMEs possess tangible and non-tangible resources as human capital stocks and capabilities and utilize knowledge and skills as flows. Thus internationally acquired stocks and flows may be leveraged to enhance internationalization. Although Reuber/Fischer (1997) did not derive a direct empirical relationship between previous international experience of key employees and SME internationalization, a strong theoretical case can be made for such an effect occurring through return migration. Return migrant entrepreneurs may thus more readily identify international opportunities.

Johanson/Mattsson (1988) suggest contact networks may be utilized to form business opportunities and develop international operations by chance rather than by design. Furthermore a ‘bricolage’ concept suggests pre-existing contacts are used to develop opportunities (Baker et al. 2003). Return migrants may thus use international networks for recognizing and developing international opportunities.

‘Born global’ theory (Knight/Cavusgil 1996) posits that firms may internationalize immediately from inception. Oviatt/MacDougall (1994) further suggest prior knowledge of international markets may be a prime driver of internationalization by focused start-up firms. Overall there seems to be striking potential for return

migrants to enhance SME internationalization through more focused identification of international opportunities. The extent to which this may occur in the CEE region remains relatively unexplored thus presenting a final secondary research proposition (4).

3. Review method

Tranfield et al. (2003) suggest traditional literature reviews tend to be narrative and yield contradictory conclusions. For that reason the foregoing variables are regarded as discrete entities to be analyzed systematically. This review therefore maps empirical evidence for the eventual effects of return migration upon SME internationalization. Hence theoretical and empirical links between variables were systematically established on the basis of the following process:

1: Search. As peer-review processes are commonly seen as tools for quality control of research based publications, the focus was limited to journals which require a ‘double-blind’ peer-review process. Keyword string searches for titles and abstracts were conducted in EBSCO Business Source Premier, Academic Search Complete and Master File Premier electronic databases. Selection criteria consisted of:

- (1) articles published between 2000-2011
- (2) full text availability of identified articles.

Table 1: String search results

Discourse Category	String searches	Articles
(1) Return Migration	<i>Return Migration, SMEs</i>	11
	<i>SME entrepreneurs, Return Migration</i>	3
	<i>Inter-EU Migration, SMEs</i>	2
	<i>Return Migration, Social Capital</i>	7
	<i>Return Migration, Human Capital</i>	6
	<i>Return Migration, Eastern Europe</i>	4
		33
(2) Informal Learning	<i>Informal Learning, SMEs</i>	12
	<i>Informal Learning, Return Migration</i>	6
	<i>Informal Learning, SME Human Capital</i>	11
	<i>Informal Learning, SME Internationalisation</i>	8
	<i>Informal Learning, HR</i>	12
	<i>Informal Learning Measurement</i>	9
	<i>Informal Learning, CEE Region</i>	6
		64

(3) Human Capital Development	<i>Human Capital, SMEs</i>	16
	<i>Human Capital Measurement</i>	13
	<i>Human Capital, CEE Region</i>	15
	<i>Human Capital, Informal Learning</i>	10
	<i>Human Capital, SME Internationalisation</i>	7
		61
(4) SME Internationalization	<i>SME Internationalization Theory</i>	25
	<i>SME Internationalization, Technology</i>	9
	<i>SME Internationalization , Social capital</i>	15
	<i>SME Internationalization, Europe</i>	10
	<i>SME Internationalization, CEE region</i>	12
	<i>SME Internationalization, Entrepreneurship</i>	13
		84
		242

This process yielded a total of 242 articles.

2: *Selection*. This entailed a brief review of articles in the following order:

- (1) Initial evaluation of academic relevance to the given discourse category based on abstracts and conclusions.
- (2) Evaluation of impact within the given discourse category based on the extent of citation elsewhere.
- (3) Evaluation of contextual relevance to the given discourse category.
- (4) Evaluation of fresh theoretical insights to the given discourse category.

This phase resulted in 51 articles, of which 44 were empirical studies, 5 were discussion papers and the remaining 2 were literature reviews. 31 empirical studies were quantitatively based and the remainder were qualitatively based.

3: *Categorization*. Full content analysis was performed by both authors in order to firmly place articles within relevant discourse categories numbered 1-4 as per table I and to ensure inter-code reliability. A parallel categorisation process was applied to articles focused on the CEE region. (5)

Table 2: Categorization

Discourse category	All articles		CEE Region (5)	
		Articles		Articles
Return Migration	5	Barrell, Fitzgerald, and Riley 2010; Dustmann and Weiss, 2007; Dustmann, Fadlon, and Weiss, 2011; Prashantham and Dhana-raj 2010; White and Ryan 2009.	3	Barrell, Fitzgerald, and Riley 2010; Dustmann, Fadlon, and Weiss, 2011; White and Ryan 2009.
Informal Learning	16	Albors, Sweeney and Hidalgo 2005; Birchall and Giambona 2007; Cegarra-Navarro and Rodrigo-Moya 2007; Choi and Jacobs 2011; Clarke 2004; Fogel and Zapalska 2001; Fuller and Russ-Eft 2010; Gold and Thorpe 2008; Mosher 2011; Muscio 2007; Scholarios et al 2008; Şengün 2010; Skule 2004; Storey et al 2010; Thorpe et al 2005; Walden, Bryan and Ramlall 2011.	2	Fogel and Zapalska 2001; Fuller and Russ-Eft 2010.
Human Capital Development	13	Antonelli, Antonietti and Guidetti 2010; De Winne and Sels 2010; Folloni and Vitadini 2010; Harney and Dundon 2006; Jeong, Kejak and Vinogradov 2008; Jurajda and Terrell, .2010; Kessler 2007; Major 2008; Ruzzier et al 2007; Sels et al 2006; Ucbasaran, Westhead and Wright 2008; Welter 2011.	6	Jeong, Kejak and Vinogradov 2008; Kessler 2007; Major 2008 ; Ruzzier et al 2007; Welter 2011.
SME Internationalization	18	Bell and Loane 2010; Chandra, Styles and Wilkinson 2009; Chetty and Agndal 2007; Ciszewska-Mlinarič and Mlinarič 2010; Cloninger and Oviatt 2007; Etemad 2004; Evers 2011; Evers and O'Gorman 2011; Fink and Kraus 2007; Johanson and Vahlne 2009; Prashantham and Young 2011; Reuber and Fischer 2011; Ruzzier, Antoncic and Konecnik 2006; Ruzzier, Antoncic and Hisrich 2007; Sapienza et al 2006; Svetličič, Jacklič and Burger 2007; Schueffel, Amann and Herbolzheimer 2011; Vasilchenko and Morrish 2011.	5	Ciszewska-Mlinarič and Mlinarič 2010; Fink and Kraus 2007; Ruzzier, Antoncic and Konecnik 2006; Ruzzier, Antoncic and Hisrich 2007; Svetličič, Jacklič and Burger 2007.

4: *Mapping*. Relevant aspects of articles were mapped against each other within their own and with other discourse categories. Empirically supported links could thus be identified to suggest the presence of research gaps. The following table therefore summarizes key findings and additional points. Articles are numbered and asterisked in relation to given discourse categories:

Table 3: Findings – return migration (1)

Article	Main additional point					Key findings
	1	2	3	4	5	
Barrell, Fitzgerald, and Riley (2010)	x				x	Return migration enhances social capital. Strong inter-EU migration.
Dustmann and Weiss, (2007)	x		x			Prominent short-term migration. Return migration increases human capital stock.
Dustmann, Fadlon, and Weiss (2011)	x		x		x	External skill accumulation influences ‘brain gain’. Return migration enhances domestic human capital.
Prashantham and Dhanaraj (2010)	x	x		x		Global experience forms social capital ties. Social capital influences new ventures.
White and Ryan (2009)	x	x			x	Migrant social capital networks formed. Tacit knowledge transfer from Western to Eastern Europe.

Table 4: Findings – informal learning (2)

Article	1	2	3	4	5	Main additional point	Key findings
Albors, Sweeney and Hidalgo (2005)		x	x		x	Low IT awareness in CEE SMEs.	Formal IT-based learning networks are ineffective
Birchall and Giambona (2007)		x	x			Postulation of ‘double-loop’ SME learning.	SME managers possess innate knowledge.
Cegarra-Navarro and Rodrigo-Moya (2007)		x	x			Individual knowledge effectively transformed.	Learning culture fostered by social knowledge.
Choi and Jacobs (2011)		x	x			Formal learning impacts informal learning.	Formal and informal learning complementary.
Clarke (2004)		x	x			Difficulty in measuring informal learning.	Training and development policies poorly assessed.
Fogel and Zapalska (2001)		x	x	x	x	Lack of managerial training in CEE.	Transition varies between CEE countries.
Fuller and Russell (2010)		x	x	x	x	Older SMEs more organizationally responsive	‘Emerging’ status of CEE SMEs may stimulate learning.
Gold and Thorpe (2008)		x	x			UK SMEs focused on addressing training needs.	HR ineffective for SMEs survival needs.

Mosher (2011)	x	x				Informal learning associated with lack of structure.	Informal learning equated with elearning.
Muscio (2007)	x	x				Absorptive capacity unplanned.	Absorptive capacity associated with higher human capital.
Scholarios et al (2008)	x	x				SME skill acquisition dependant on short-term.	Lack of SME ‘soft’ skills.
Şengün (2010)	x	x				Learning occurs locally.	Mutual trust influences inter-SME learning .
Skule (2004)	x	x				Tasks classified according to skill acquisition.	Informal learning measurement framework.
Storey et al (2010)	x	x				HR for SMEs may demotivate.	Formal HR exists in larger SMEs.
Thorpe et al (2005)	x	x	x			Absorptive capacity leads to opportunities.	Less interventionist SME policy required.
Walden, Bryan and Ramlall (2011)	x	x				Informal learning should account for time.	Informal learning unforeseen.

Table 5: Findings – human capital development (3)

Article	1	2	3	4	5	Main additional point	Key findings
Antonelli, Antonietti and Guidetti (2010)	x	x	x			Work-based human capital measurement model.	Work based training has informal elements.
De Winne and Sels (2010)	x	x	x			RBV used to examine SME innovation and human capital.	Higher SME innovation leads to higher human capital.
Folloni and Vittadini (2010)	x	x				Qualifications inappropriate for human capital measurement.	Varying national education systems unaccounted for.
Harney and Dundon (2006)	x	x				Formal and informal HR exists in SMEs.	Large firm HR unsuitable for SMEs.
Jeong, Kejak and Vinogradov (2008)		x			x	Shift from ‘technical’ to ‘business’ occupations in CEE.	CEE education systems unresponsive to labor markets.
Jurajda and Terrell, (2010).		x			x	Composition of human capital changed in CEE.	Transition associated with low labor mobility in CEE.
Kessler (2007)		x			x	Cultural embeddedness may influence entrepreneurship.	Start-up processes more organized in Austria.

Major (2008)		x		x	High survival of unprofitable Hungarian SMEs.	Human capital underutilized by Hungarian SMEs.
Ruzzier et al (2007)	x		x	x	International experience predicts internationalization.	SME human capital contains international experience.
Sels et al (2006)		x	x		HR for SMEs may benefit performance but not costs	HR for smaller SMEs unviable.
Ucbasaran, Westhead and Wright (2008)			x	x	Human capital linked to opportunity pursuit.	Human capital drives effective opportunity identification.
Welter (2011)			x	x	Institutional embeddedness exists in CEE.	Institutional embeddedness linked to informal networks.

Table 6: Findings – SME internationalization (4)

Article	1	2	3	4	5	Main additional point	Key findings
Bell and Loane (2010)				x		IT drives internationalization.	IT-driven SMEs tend to be born-global firms.
Chandra, Styles and Wilkinson (2009)	x				x	International knowledge fosters opportunity identification.	Opportunities formed from international knowledge.
Chetty and Agndal (2007)	x	x			x	Network theory explains opportunity identification.	Serendipity influences opportunity identification.
Ciszewska-Mlinarič and Mlinarič (2010)		x			x	Internationalization enhanced by international knowledge.	International experience unrelated to internationalization.
Cloninger and Oviatt (2007)			x	x		Tacit knowledge drives internationalization.	Internationalization not driven by type of industry.
Etemad (2004)		x			x	SME internationalization should not imitate MNE models.	Local social capital networks may drive internationalization.
Evers (2011)	x	x			x	Internationalization likely in IT-based industries.	Entrepreneurship influences internationalization.
Evers and O'Gorman (2011)	x	x			x	Bricolage, may influence internationalization.	Internationalization driven by improvisation.
Fink and Kraus (2007)				x	x	Psychic distance may facilitate international trust.	Trust between non-transition and transition SMEs.

Johanson and Vahlne (2009)	x	x	x	x	Stage theory revisited to account for business networks	International experience influences 'born-global' status.
Prashantham and Young (2011)	x		x		Internationalization influenced by absorptive capacity.	Social capital ties underlie internationalization.
Reuber and Fischer (2011)	x	x		x	Internet based 'tribes' emerging as entrepreneurs.	Online reputation leads to opportunity identification.
Ruzzier, Antoncic and Konecnik (2006)		x	x	x	Organizational learning drives internationalization.	Resource bundles needed for internationalization.
Ruzzier, Antoncic and Hisrich (2007)			x	x	Stage and network theories used to examine internationalization.	Internationalization more gradual in born global firms.
Sapienza et al (2006)	x			x	International experience may influence internationalization.	Dynamic capabilities effective with earlier internationalization.
Schueffel, Amann, and Herbolzheimer (2011)	x		x	x	Empirical test of the Sapienza <i>et al</i> (2006) model.	International experience unrelated to internationalization.
Svetličič, Jacklič and Burger (2007)			x	x	CEE SMEs view market pursuit as an internationalization driver.	Low human capital forms barriers to internationalization.
Vasilchenko and Morrish (2011)					Serendipity influences opportunity identification.	IT-based social networks enable internationalization.

4. Discussion

Key findings are summarized in Tables 3, 4, 5 and 6. The horizontal axis contrasts theoretical links between categories and the vertical axis contrasts empirical links.

Each discourse category is discussed with initial reference to its theoretical status with each of the empirical links and denoted by the relevant code. Research gaps are identified at respective intersections of theoretical and empirical links on the basis of lack of substantive empirical evidence.

Table 7: Map of links

		<i>Empirical links</i>				
		<i>(1) Return Migration</i>	<i>(2) Informal learning</i>	<i>(3) Human capital development</i>	<i>(4) SME Internationalization</i>	<i>(5) CEE Region</i>
<i>Theoretical links</i>	<i>Discourses</i>	<i>(1) Return Migration</i>	<i>(2) Informal learning</i>	<i>(3) Human capital development</i>	<i>(4) SME Internationalization</i>	<i>(5) CEE Region</i>
	<i>Return migration (1)</i>	Migration is short term	Return migration effects social capital development.	‘Brain gain’ induces human capital accumulation.	Experience abroad enhance internationally focused entrepreneurship.	Social capital transfer occurs between Western and Eastern Europe.
	<i>Informal learning (2)</i>	Return migration drives social capital networks.	Informal learning measurement is embryonic.	Absorptive capacity utilization enhances human capital.	Social capital drives internationalization.	Low emphasis on managerial skill development.
	<i>Human capital development (3)</i>	Return migration influences human capital	SMEs lack HR strategies.	Human capital measurement focuses on educational qualifications.	Human capital determines international opportunity identification.	Strong institutional embeddedness.
	<i>SME Internationalization (4)</i>	Previous international experience influences internationalization.	Absorptive capacity influences speed of internationalization.	Internationally derived human capital influence internationalization.	Born-global theory more relevant than stage approach.	Low psychic distance between non-transition and transition SMEs.
	<i>CEE Region (5)</i>	Strong inter-EU migration.	‘Top-down’ training approaches in CEE SMEs.	Low regional labor mobility in CEE.	Poor knowledge of non-CEE markets.	CEE SMEs feature proprietorial cultural embeddedness

4.1 Return migration

(1) Dustmann/Weiss (2007) suggest most migrants return home within five years due to relatively high living costs. A tendency towards short term migration within Europe was noted by Barrell et al. (2010). Thus return migrants may be relatively agile in terms of transferring skills, knowledge

and experience to contribute to SME internationalization eventually thus suggesting an initial research gap (1).

- (2) Prashantham/Dhanarjee (2010) posited that social capital of return migrants from the USA to India in terms of network ties are more developed than that of local counterparts. Dustmann et al. (2011) refer to 'learning by doing' by return migrants from the USA to Mexico, thus inferring tacit knowledge transfer. White/Ryan (2009) further suggest knowledge is developed by Polish migrants in Britain which may be tacitly transferred home and effect local enterprise development.
- (3) A 'brain gain' process in Europe was examined by Dustmann et al. (2011) whereby skills and knowledge acquired abroad may increase domestic human capital stocks. This was not examined in the CEE region but although return migration may induce human capital development, how it may occur through informal learning is unclear.
- (4) Prashantham/Dhanarjee (2010) suggested social capital transfer from the USA to India may lead to new venture creation but the extent to which this may drive SME internationalization was unexplored. This would however infer that SME business opportunity identification is influenced by return-migration induced social capital.
- (5) Barrell et al. (2010) found that CEE migrants to Western Europe tend to be lowly-skilled but no firm deduction can be made as to the nature of acquired skill levels of return migrants and thereby forms a parallel research gap (1a).

4.2 *Informal learning*

- (1) No articles revealed direct empirical or theoretical links between informal learning and return migration. However, return migration may drive the development of social capital networks to effect tacit knowledge transfer. This may result in social embeddedness of new learning practices (Thorpe et al. 2005) which may organically develop due to unforeseen events.
- (2) Walden et al. (2011) developed a process-based model of informal learning in the USA by inculcating tacitly acquired experience and learning. This model, however, has not been tested to substantial empirical depth. Nonetheless, Scholarias et al. (2008) in study of employability of European IT personnel in SMEs, conclude that learning strategies are sporadically deployed. Thus skills are acquired on a somewhat reactive and short-time basis which would accord with the essence of the Walden et al. (2011) model.

Regarding calibration of learning, incorporation of formal learning programs into HR policies in terms of attempted measurement of outcomes is generally perceived as being relatively uncomplicated in relation to informal learning (Clarke 2004).

Skule (2004) developed an empirically based framework for the measurement of informal learning in Norway to suggest formal learning is somewhat less intangible in terms of outcome measurement. The model classifies jobs as ‘learning deficient’ or ‘learning intense’ by examining the time taken to become deficient or proficient in a given skill. It does not however attempt to measure the quantity of learning but represents perhaps the closest attempt to measure informal learning but was not specifically applied to SMEs. Hence a further research gap (2) is discerned.

- (3) Thorpe et al. (2005) suggest utilization of absorptive capacity may influence human capital development. Cegarra-Navarro/Rodrigo-Moya (2007) examined learning culture whereby individual knowledge is transformed into market orientation through collective pooling into human capital development. Thus formal and informal learning may perhaps be considered as components of human capital with absorptive capacity as a transmissionary mechanism between it and informal learning.
- (4) An overall impression of SME formal learning practices as unstructured and unfocused on business needs was reinforced (Gold/Thorpe 2008; Storey et al. 2010; Thorpe et al. 2005) However Choi/Jacobs (2011) suggest a strong complementarity between formal and informal learning and Storey et al. (2010), concluded that formal HR practices, tends to occur in larger SMEs. Thus informal learning may predominantly exist in smaller SMEs and tacitly transferred through social capital networks.
- (5) Fogel/Zapalska (2001) suggested CEE SME employees lack managerial training but receive substantial technical training. This would infer a lack of *managerial learning* in the CEE region and poor awareness of the potential for leveraging internationally acquired informal learning. This presents a parallel research gap (2a) in terms of comparing internationally and domestically induced informal learning.

4.3 *Human capital development*

- (1) Ruzzier et al. (2007) predicted the extent to which previous international experience may lead to SME internationalization. However no firm deductions arose with regard to how human capital development may intercede. Nevertheless, ‘brain gain’ (Dustmann et al. 2011) would infer potential for internationalization through exploitation of previous international experience.
- (2) Inappropriateness of large firm HR practices was outlined in that SMEs insufficiently leverage human capital (Harney/Dundon 2006; Sels et al. 2006). Hence SMEs may possess relatively low human capital configuration capabilities and informal learning may act as a substitute for HR in SMEs.

- (3) Human capital calibration based on formal qualifications tends to underline perceived difficulty of quantification. (Antonelli et al. 2010; De Winne/Sels 2010). Furthermore, SME human capital measurement seems to be approached at a macro level (Ruzzier et al. 2007; De Winne/Sels 2010). Moreover, traditional measurement methods tend to be retrospective and cost-based (Folloni/Vittadini 2010). Antonelli et al. (2010) formed a measurement model incorporating work-based training (WBT) in Italian manufacturing firms. This also classifies formal qualifications but with WBT partly consisting of coaching, entailing implicit consideration of informal learning. Folloni and Vittadini (2010) further suggest educational attainment measures take little account of variations in national education systems. The Antonelli et al. (2010) model could be viewed as innovative in that it encompasses intensity of skills. In terms of how informal learning may influence human capital development the model strongly contributes towards identification of a further research gap (3).
- (4) Ruzzier et al. (2007) inferred *international orientation* of entrepreneurs predicted human capital driven SME internationalization, whereas possession of *international business* skills did not. Hence a picture of internationally-derived entrepreneurship instigating internationalization is presented. This may be related to entrepreneurial human capital in relation to identifying international business opportunities. Ucbasaran et al. (2008) further hypothesized in a UK-based study that a greater extent of human capital may enhance international opportunity identification, which was empirically confirmed.
- (5) Jurajda/Terrell (2010) suggest higher-skilled CEE workers tend to move to areas where skills may be in demand, whereas lower skilled counterparts contribute to low labor mobility. This infers compatibility with ‘institutional embeddedness’ (Welter 2011) whereby formal institutions are avoided and informal networking arrangements adopted as a means of business opportunity identification. This may in turn affect human capital development in the CEE region presenting a further parallel research gap (3a).

4.4 *SME internationalization*

- (1) Several articles dealt with previous international experience of entrepreneurs to conclude IT-based social capital influences SME internationalization. (Chandra et al. 2009; Chetty/Agndal 2007; Evers 2011; Evers/O’Gorman 2011; Prashantham/Young 2010; Vasilchenko/Morrish 2011). Previous international experience may thus induce knowledge transfer to drive internationalization This was mostly viewed through born global theory although the extent to which internationalization is derived from previous international experience remains unclear.

Reuber/Fischer (2011), examined internet-based international entrepreneurship, and suggest entrepreneurs need not have previously worked abroad. Thus a distinction arises between *limited* and *extensive* previous international experience.

A conceptual framework for SME development in early internationalization was devised by Sapienza et al. (2006), incorporating previous international experience as a moderating element. Schueffel et al. (2011), empirically tested this model and found that previous international experience may determine the international SME survival but not long-term growth.

Ciszewska-Mlinarič/Mlinarič (2010) further suggested international *knowledge* positively affected internationalization, but without differentiating between domestic and internationalized SMEs. Overall there appears to be no clear agreement on what may constitute international experience.

- (2) Prashantham/Young (2010) suggest speed of internationalization varies according to capabilities gained through exploitative learning. Thus social capital is perhaps ‘bridged’ externally and ‘bonded’ internally by absorptive capacity. Chetty/Agndal (2007) compared internationalized SMEs to suggest existence of serendipity-based social capital. Thus unexpected new opportunities may arise as opposed to somewhat more structured attempts to internationalize. Unplanned social capital construction would thus infer presence of informal learning.
- (3) Ruzzier et al. (2007) empirically tested international *orientation* of entrepreneurs to predict human capital may drive SME internationalization but possession of previously acquired international skills did not do so. Moreover, Chandra, Styles and Wilkinson (2009), suggest entrepreneurs with meagre prior international knowledge tend to grasp international opportunities instinctively compared to those who may be more systematic. Evers/O’Gorman (2011) further suggest previous international experience may not impact internationalization strongly but bricolage may lead to its effectuation. No direct empirical link between human capital development and SME internationalization was discerned but international opportunity identification may serve an intermediary role.
- (4) Stage theory generally seems somewhat outdated in the context of technology-driven globalization. However Johanson/Vahlne (2009) revisited the Uppsala model and suggested development of more focused business networks in the meantime and that internationalization more closely resembles entrepreneurship thereby inferring closer conformity to born-global theory.

Cloninger/Oviatt (2007) suggested theoretical support for an emerging view that a high degree of service as opposed to manufacturing orientation may lead to internationalization. Evers (2011) drew on a ‘push-pull’

model devised by Etemad (2004) to suggest internationalization is more likely in IT-based industries primarily due to global niche markets and relatively low transport costs at variance with stage theory. Hence perhaps internationalization depends on how SMEs create opportunities regardless of service or manufacturing orientation. Discussion of influence of IT-based technology on internationalization is still emergent. Bell/Loane (2010) argue that 'Web 2.0' technology drives rapid internationalization. Moreover, Reuber/Fisher (2011) suggest clear online visibility may lead to international opportunity identification through online brand communities. Overall a research gap (4) emerges in that human capital development may influence international opportunity identification.

- (5) Fink/Kraus (2007) examined Austrian and transition country SMEs to suggest that mutual trust may enhance international co-operation. This may be attributable to low psychic distance but the extent to which CEE SMEs internationalize in a wider context is unclear thus presenting a further parallel research gap (4a).

4.5 CEE region

- (1) Tacit knowledge transfer through return migration from Western Europe to Poland is inferred by White/Ryan (2009). While substantial outward movement from Eastern Europe has occurred since EU accession, the extent of return migration however remains unclear.
- (2) Fuller/Russ-Eft (2010) examined Russian SMEs to suggest external knowledge acquisition leads to internal knowledge dissemination to facilitate absorptive capacity. Older SMEs were particularly responsive, inferring that transition drives greater absorption by more established firms. Nevertheless Welter (2011) suggests pre-transition culturally-embedded learning practices persist. Hence there may be little awareness of potential for exploitation of informal learning capabilities in CEE SMEs.
- (3) Relatively high CEE human capital stocks may not be utilized effectively (Jurajda/Terrell 2010) which may be linked to low labor mobility in that lesser skilled workers are less inclined to move to relatively 'higher-skilled' regions. Major (2008) concluded that ironically profitable Hungarian SMEs are less likely to survive than loss-making ones and that SMEs tend to belong to informal groups of firms inferring institutional embeddedness.
- (4) Svetličič et al. (2007) empirically compared outward FDI between large firms and SMEs in CEE countries to suggest internal barriers in lowly utilizable human capital and knowledge to engender low confidence in seeking internationalization opportunities in non-transition countries. Ruzzier et al. (2006) suggested a relatively greater extent of human resource bundles in Slovenian internationalized SMEs. Ruzzier et al.

(2007), developed a multi-dimensional model combining elements of stage and network theory consistent with systematic internationalization. Thus transition country SMEs may internationalize in a relatively gradual manner.

- (5) SME cultural embeddedness with a proprietorial bias is discerned (Kessler 2007; Welter 2011) whereby values and beliefs of SME owner/managers in relation to formal state institutions may differ than to informal vested business networks. Hence internationalization efforts may be restricted although Welter (2011) suggests the existence of a pre-Communist era entrepreneurial business culture which may be re-emerging. This aspect therefore forms an overall current basis for exploration of the parallel CEE contextual research gaps.

5. Conclusion

Several areas have been identified which would require further research to form greater understanding of forces driving inter-EU SME internationalization and act as a basis for policy development. The following conclusions may thus act as a basis for development of a conceptual framework.

Firstly, it seems return migration infers international transfer of social capital to entail accumulation of working practices which may not necessarily be acquired domestically. While return migration may facilitate knowledge transfer, there is tenuous evidence to suggest experience of living and working abroad may eventually lead to SME internationalization. Moreover, perhaps simple knowledge of international markets without entrepreneurs having previously lived or worked abroad may also influence SME internationalization. Through online social networks, entrepreneurs may be able to inculcate globally accepted working practices without necessarily leaving home. An initial research gap (1) therefore exists in that internationally transferred social capital may eventually influence SME internationalization in return migrant's home countries.

Secondly, a picture of unstructured HR policies and a high extent of informal learning in SMEs is confirmed. However while formal training and learning methods may infer greater tangibility, the nature of informal learning renders attempts to attach tangible outcome values to it somewhat daunting. Nonetheless there has been no discernible attempt to compare formal and informal learning in terms of how both may enhance human capital development. Although absorptive capacity, taken as a transmission mechanism of skills, knowledge and capabilities may act as a driving factor. Thus the second research gap (2) may address how return-migration induced informal learning may influence human capital development through absorptive capacity utilization.

Thirdly, with regard to measurement of human capital the WBT method (Antonelli et al. 2010) implicitly encompasses the role of informal learning in its development. How human capital may influence SME internationalization re-

mains however unclear and thus presents a third research gap (3) in terms of assessing how this may be initially driven by return migration through informal learning.

Fourthly, human capital development may drive SME internationalization through international opportunity identification, which may also be influenced by IT-based technology to form a final research gap (4). Debate on the nature of internationalization has shifted towards a ‘born global’ bias but studies reviewed here confirms the impression that the impact of previous international experience of SME employees upon internationalization remains relatively unexplored which would add credence to the existence of this research gap.

Parallel research gaps are also discerned in a CEE transitional context. Consideration of parallel research gap (1a) infers substantial short term inter –EU migration, yet the effect of post EU accession return migration upon competitiveness and subsequent internationalization of CEE SMEs remains unclear.

While internationally derived social capital formation may drive CEE informal learning, institutional embeddedness may complicate its effectiveness in terms of SME competitiveness to form parallel research gap (2a). A relatively level of institutional embeddedness in CEE SMEs may have a strong influence upon subsequent human capital development thus forming parallel research gap (3a). Inferred low psychic distance in CEE SMEs may be a strong determinant of the extent and nature of SME internationalization to form parallel research gap (4a).

Overall, the review reveals the extent to which SME internationalization theory has evolved since the 1970s. It may be argued that debate has shifted towards that of born global theory but psychic distance may still be prominent in influencing internationalization. Nevertheless, the extent to which return migration may eventually influence it through the intermediary factors previously outlined infers the presence of prominent research gaps to address the overall research proposition posed in the theoretical background of this article.

Ultimately, this review has academic and practical relevance in that it represents an attempt to evaluate antecedents of inter-EU SME internationalization which have hitherto been under-researched. Thus its prime value lies in terms of providing a basis for future empirical testing of its conclusions.

6. Limitations

As with any academic article, this review entails notable limitations: firstly, the whole process relied to a large extent on subjectivity. The process began by string searching which occasionally yielded somewhat random results which may have been partially due to the placing of word order. This was not exclusively the case but low yielding searches were discontinued. This emerged as a learning process whereby further iterations yielded articles of closer relevance. String searching and selection (steps 1 and 2) were entirely conducted by one

author which also increased the scope for subjectivity. However category-zation (step 3) of the final group of articles was agreed by both authors prior to their detailed analysis.

Secondly, there were overlapping aspects in some articles which caused difficulty in placing them in a single category, although this was addressed by both authors. In the categorization phase, a somewhat balanced picture emerged in terms of the medium of analysis in that just over half the papers were quantitative in nature. Fortunately, most of these emphasised longitudinal research, as did most of the qualitative papers.

Finally, the sheer volume of articles rendered it necessary to initially review abstracts and conclusions, entailing a possibility that vital elements of analysis may be overlooked. However, an academically credible body of evidence was accumulated for the purpose of discerning prominent research gaps.

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