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Master degree project in International Business and Trade

What happens in expatriation, stays in expatriation

A study of how absorptive capacity enables organizational learning from repatriate knowledge

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Abstract

In today's globalized and knowledge driven business landscape, many MNCs make heavy investments in sending international assignees to transfer intra-firm knowledge between organizational units. Though, high turnover rates among homecoming international assignees, i.e. repatriates, imply that MNCs often fail to tap into their knowledge. To understand how firms can learn from repatriates, this thesis adopts an organizational perspective and studies how absorptive capacity of the focal unit enables organizational learning from repatriate knowledge. We conduct a qualitative comparative multiple case study and retrieve empirical data from 23 interviews with HR representatives and repatriates at eight MNCs. We develop a conceptual model in which absorptive capacity is conceptualized to consist of two variables, orientation towards learning and practices for knowledge management. First, we find implications of that orientation towards learning must be adapted to the context of repatriation to enable organizational learning, e.g. by decentralizing global mobility, using global mobility as an explicit strategy for sharing knowledge and staffing repatriates in teams with leaders with own international experience. Also, intra-MNC communication, as well as global governance models and teams, are found to negatively influence learning. Second, we find implications of that practices for informal knowledge management spur institutionalization of knowledge, whilst practices for formal knowledge management mainly treat dissemination. Yet, firms should use a combination of both types and adapt them to the repatriate's hierarchical level and point in time of repatriation, as well as avoid potential implementation issues. Thus, absorptive capacity has a positive impact on organizational learning, although orientation towards learning and practices for knowledge management must be contextually adapted and purposively implemented to generate desired learning outcomes. This study thereby contributes to theory by generating implications from a new perspective that links theories on organizational learning, absorptive capacity and repatriation, whilst it contributes to practice by providing implications of how MNCs can govern their capacity to learn from their employees.

Key words: Repatriation, Absorptive capacity, Organizational learning, Repatriate knowledge management, International assignments
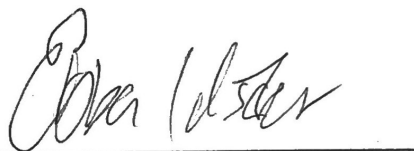
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Table of content

List of figures and tables

List of figures

List of tables

Abbreviations

GM	Global mobility
HR	Human resources
HQ	Headquarters
IA	International assignment
KM	Knowledge management
KS	Knowledge sharing
MNC	Multinational corporation
OL	Organizational learning
RK	Repatriate knowledge

Definitions

Focal unit	MNC unit in home country.
International assignment	Overseas task that occurs when a firm relocates an employee from focal to foreign unit to work during a limited period of time.
International assignee	Employee who is/has been on international assignment.
Expatriate	Employee who currently is on international assignment at a foreign unit.
Repatriate	Employee who previously has been on international assignment and has returned to focal unit.
Expatriation	Period of time when an expatriate is on international assignment at a foreign unit.
Repatriation	Period of time when a repatriate has returned from international assignment to the focal unit.
Global mobility management	Firm's internal work for managing international assignments, including expatriation and repatriation.
Absorptive capacity	Firm's capacity to receive incoming new knowledge. Consists of two variables: orientation towards learning and practices for knowledge management. Full definition, see Chapter 2.4.
Orientation towards learning	Explanatory variable of absorptive capacity that refers to a firm's corporate structure and corporate culture.
Practices	Explanatory variable of absorptive capacity that refers to a firm's established processes and routines to either formally or informally manage knowledge.
Organizational learning	Internal process that results in a change within a firm as it acquires new knowledge. Consists of three stages: acquisition, dissemination and institutionalization. Full definition, see Chapter 2.4.
Acquisition	First stage in organizational learning process, which occurs at individual level as an individual enters focal unit with new knowledge.
Dissemination	Second stage in organizational learning process, which occurs at group level when an individual's knowledge is shared and diffused among focal unit employees.
Institutionalization	Third stage in organizational learning process, which occurs at organizational level as knowledge is integrated into existing systems, structures, procedures and strategies at focal unit.

1. Introduction

In Chapter 1, we introduce and problematize the research topic from both a practical and theoretical perspective. Then, we present our purpose, research question and delimitations.

1.1. Background

Firms seek unique competitive advantages in order to compete in a constantly changing and increasingly more rivalrous international business environment (Grant, 1996). Since firms can gain competitive advantage by exploiting intra-firm knowledge, multinational corporations (MNCs) have potential to use their large human resource bases as strategic assets (Bonache & Zárraga-Oberty, 2008; Gupta & Govindarajan, 2000; Sanchez-Vidal, Sanz-Valle & Barba-Aragon, 2018). MNCs use numerous tools to leverage their internal knowledge bases, where one strategy is global mobility (Bonache & Brewster, 2001; Bonache & Zárraga-Oberty, 2008; Lazarova & Tarique, 2005; Oddou, Osland & Blakeney, 2009; Suutari & Brewster, 2003). By doing so, firms temporary relocate employees, so called expatriates, from the unit in the home country to a foreign MNC unit. Expatriates that go on such international assignments often become transmitters of intra-firm knowledge and expertise, as their circulation among MNC units can diffuse knowledge and increase internal learning (Nery-Kjerfve & McLean, 2012). To reap the multiple potential benefits entailed by global mobility, firms today spend extensive resources on international assignees, who can cost up to three to five times the annual salary of their domestic counterparts (ibid).

Although firms spend immense resources and attention on sending expatriates, limited attention is paid to the aftermath when the expatriates return to the focal units after terminating their international assignments, i.e. when the expatriates become repatriates at the MNC unit in the home country (Nery-Kjerfve & McLean, 2012; Oddou, Szkudlarek, Osland, Deller, Blakeney, & Furuya, 2013; Sanchez-Vidal et al., 2018). While expatriation creates an opportunity to acquire knowledge abroad, repatriation offers an opportunity to retransfer knowledge back to focal units (Lazarova & Tarique, 2005). However, even though repatriates are found to possess highly valuable knowledge, it is a major challenge for firms to successfully harvest and integrate this knowledge into existing operations (Lazarova & Tarique, 2005; Nery-Kjerfve & McLean, 2012; Sanchez-Vidal et al., 2018). Firms' poor management of repatriate knowledge often causes dissatisfaction among repatriates as they seldom can make use of their expertise (Berthoin Antal, 2001; Brewster & Suutari, 2005; Lazarova & Caligiuri, 2001; Lazarova &

Tarique, 2005; Nery-Kjerfve & McLean, 2012; Oddou et al., 2013; Suutari & Brewster, 2003). As a result, many repatriates leave their employers short after they terminate the assignment overseas (ibid). Although the exact turnover rate among repatriates is unsettled and differs across countries (Brewster & Suutari, 2005; Reiche, Kraimer & Harzing, 2011), Nery-Kjerfve and McLean's (2012) estimation of that 20 to 50 percent of repatriates resign within the first year, indicates that MNCs run a large risk of losing valuable knowledge to competitors (Oddou et al., 2009; Stroh, Gregersen & Black, 2000; Yeaton & Hall, 2008).

Since firms make heavy investments in global mobility and experience high turnover rates among repatriates, investments in repatriates' learning risk to be under-used unless firms make a coordinated effort to embrace their knowledge (Berthoin Antal, 2001). Though, since repatriation is a relatively scarce literature stream, theory provides limited guidance on how firms should make such organizational initiative (Furuya, Stevens, Oddou & Mendenhall, 2009; Nery-Kjerfve & McLean, 2012). Even though flaws in MNCs' repatriate knowledge management are evident (Burmeister, Deller, Osland, Szkudlarek, Oddou & Blakeney, 2015; Lazarova & Tarique, 2005; Sanchez-Vidal et al., 2018; Suutari & Brewster, 2003), existing studies have up until now not thoroughly inspected the underlying determinants of why firms generally fail to tap into their repatriates' knowledge bases. Thus, the limited focus that academia and practice pay to repatriation, causes that it remains unexplored how firms can coordinate their efforts to increase learning from repatriate knowledge (Oddou et al., 2009).

1.2. Problem discussion

Although international assignments are recognized as dyadic knowledge transfers (Burmeister et al., 2015), repatriation receives significantly less research attention than the rich literature stream on expatriation (Furuya et al., 2009; Nery-Kjerfve & McLean, 2012; Sanchez-Vidal et al., 2018). Several authors (e.g. Berthoin Antal, 2001; Oddou et al., 2009; Oddou et al., 2013) stress that the international assignment experience should be viewed as a cycle, from selection of assignee and initial preparations, to re-integration in new role and use of know-how. Still, research predominantly examines the earlier stages of the international assignment cycle and largely neglects the later stage of repatriation (Berthoin Antal, 2001; Nery-Kjerfve & McLean, 2012; Sanchez-Vidal et al., 2018). Moreover, the scarce research on repatriation is primarily of conceptual nature (e.g. Lazarova & Tarique, 2005; Nery-Kjerfve & McLean, 2012), which causes a need for more empirical studies on the field (Oddou et al., 2009). Thus, even though it is found that international assignees bring back valuable knowledge to focal units, repatriation

remains an under-researched topic that calls for more empirical research to cover the whole international assignment cycle (Berthoin Antal, 2001; Brewster & Suutari, 2005; Nery-Kjerfve & McLean, 2012; Oddou et al., 2009; Sanchez-Vidal et al., 2018).

Due to the notion that intra-firm knowledge can constitute a competitive advantage (Grant, 1996; Song, 2014), intra-firm knowledge transfer is one of the most popular streams within international business literature (Brewster & Suutari, 2005; Kostova, Marano & Tallman, 2016). Accordingly, repatriate knowledge management is principally studied through the lens of knowledge transfer theory, and focus is thereby directed on how repatriates' know-how is transferred from sender to receiver (e.g. Bonache & Zárraga-Oberty, 2008; Burmeister et al., 2015; Lazarova & Tarique, 2005). However, although knowledge transfer theory provides insights into how MNCs acquire new expertise (Gupta & Govindarajan, 2000; Szulanski, 1996), it falls short in explaining how they should disseminate and institutionalize the expertise (Berthoin Antal, 2001). These actions are though important to include, since knowledge is of no use unless the firm learns from it, which first takes place when the firm performs in changed and better ways (Dodgson, 1993). Organizational learning theory, on the other hand, incorporates these stages as it covers the whole spectrum of action taken by the firm after it receives knowledge (Argote & Miron-Spektor, 2011; Crossan, Lane & White, 1999). Hence, in order to gain a complete vision of how firms can learn from global mobility, repatriation needs to be observed through the lens of organizational learning theory. By applying an organizational learning perspective, firms may consequently not only learn how to transfer repatriate knowledge between units, but also how to spread and integrate it into existing routines and systems (Crossan et al., 1999; Dodgson, 1993; Fiol & Lyles, 1985).

Furthermore, although there is a general consensus within the research community that MNCs' repatriate knowledge management is deficient (Burmeister et al., 2015; Lazarova & Tarique, 2005; Nery-Kjerfve & McLean, 2012; Sanchez-Vidal et al., 2018; Suutari & Brewster, 2003), few studies adopt an explanatory approach and delve into why MNCs often fail in harvesting repatriate knowledge. In broader literature on organizational learning, a firm's ability to use knowledge is many times explained by its absorptive capacity, which refers to how open and receptive a firm is to accept and employ new knowledge (Cohen & Levinthal, 1990; Liao, Welsch & Stoica, 2003; Schilling & Kluge, 2009; Szulanski, 1996; Zahra & George, 2002). Absorptive capacity is a capacity that firms can either strengthen or weaken (Argote & Miron-Spektor, 2011; Berthoin Antal, 2001; Minbaeva, Pedersen, Björkman, Fey & Park, 2003;

Szulanski, 1996; Sun & Anderson, 2010). Therefore, a comprehensive evaluation of absorptive capacity could bring value to firms as such evaluation could teach them how to improve their absorptive capacity and consequently their organizational learning. Yet, even though absorptive capacity is identified as a main determinant of organizational learning in other contexts (Cohen & Levinthal, 1990; Liao et al., 2003; Schilling & Kluge, 2009; Szulanski, 1996; Zahra & George, 2002), it is still unknown whether it determines firms' learning from repatriates. To the best of our knowledge, only Oddou et al. (2009) connect absorptive capacity to repatriation, although they only conceptually integrate absorptive capacity as a minor variable in an extensive framework. This results in a deficit in studies that more thoroughly and empirically examine absorptive capacity's potential impact on organizational learning from repatriate knowledge.

To summarize, both practice and theory increasingly recognize the value of knowledge brought home by repatriates, although available research on the subject can be problematized. Relatively low research attention is dedicated to the later part of the international assignment cycle that depicts the time after the international assignee returns to the focal unit, and most studies are of conceptual nature. Furthermore, organizational learning theory is seldomly applied to repatriation, leading to that limited focus is paid to how repatriate knowledge can be fully disseminated and institutionalized within an organization. For organizations to understand how they can facilitate learning from repatriate knowledge, literature must therefore aim to identify the underlying determinants, which still are rather uninvestigated. Although absorptive capacity is found to be a significant determinant of firms' ability to harvest knowledge in general contexts, the concept of absorptive capacity has not yet been properly explored in the context of repatriation. Thus, this points at a research gap of a comprehensive empirical study on how absorptive capacity impacts organizational learning from repatriate knowledge.

1.3. Purpose and research question

The purpose of this study is to seek deeper understanding of how absorptive capacity enables MNCs to learn from repatriate knowledge. We adopt an organizational perspective of the focal unit and regard assignments overseas as dyadic knowledge transfers, in which repatriates retransfer knowledge from foreign to focal unit. We observe repatriate knowledge management through the lens of organizational learning theory and recognize organizational learning as a continuous process composed by several identifiable stages. In that way, this study aims to bridge the rarely connected literature streams on organizational learning and repatriation, and

therefore advance the knowledge on the intersection of these parallel fields. This study also extends previous findings of that many organizations fail to adequately appropriate repatriate knowledge, by going one step further and examining absorptive capacity as a potential determinant of firms' organizational learning from repatriate knowledge. We thereby aim to provide guidance to firms on how they can govern their capacity to absorb repatriate knowledge, as well as to contribute to the deficient literature on absorptive capacity's impact on organizational learning in the context of repatriation. Thus, to fulfil the purpose of this study, we address the following research question:

How does absorptive capacity of the focal unit enable organizational learning from repatriate knowledge?

In order to answer our research question, we conceptualize absorptive capacity as a firm's capacity to receive incoming new knowledge, which depends on the firm's orientation towards learning and practices for knowledge management. We evaluate absorptive capacity of the focal unit, which here denotes the MNC unit in the home country to which the repatriate returns. Lastly, we conceptualize organizational learning as the internal process that takes place within a firm after it acquires new knowledge, where the process is divided into the three stages of acquisition, dissemination and institutionalization. For full definitions and perspectives of the constructs used in this study, see Chapter 2.4.

1.4. Delimitations

In order to define the boundaries of this study, we make a number of delimitations of our choice of sample, variables of interest and theoretical perspective. First, our study is a qualitative multiple case study, in which empirical data is collected from interviews with repatriates and human resources (HR) representatives from Scandinavia who are employed at large MNCs. Hence, the findings of this study represent our chosen sample, and are not fully transferable to other contexts. Second, our study builds on a conceptual framework that consists of two central constructs, namely, absorptive capacity and organizational learning. Since both constructs are multifaceted and ascribed multiple definitions in previous theory, we delimit the definitions of these constructs. Thus, it should be recognized that our viewpoints in this study are not universal and that our results should be understood in relation to our chosen definitions. Third, our study adopts an organizational perspective of the focal unit. We recognize that individual level capacity, such as a repatriate's ability and motivation, can affect firms' learning from repatriate

knowledge (e.g. Burmeister et al., 2015; Minbaeva et al., 2003; Sanchez-Vidal et al., 2018). Yet, we exclude this individual perspective since we seek to identify measures that firms can take to improve absorptive capacity, regardless of individual level capacity of their employees.

1.5. Disposition

In Chapter 1, we introduce and problematize the research topic from both a practical and theoretical perspective. Then, we present our purpose, research question and delimitations.

In Chapter 2, we introduce the theoretical foundations that this study builds upon, namely, organizational learning and absorptive capacity, as well as review literature on repatriation. Then, we develop a conceptual framework that declares the definitions, perspectives and constructs of this thesis. In the conceptual framework, we present our conceptual model that links generic theories on absorptive capacity and organizational learning and adapts them to the context of repatriation.

In Chapter 3, we describe and motivate our methodological choices, more specifically, our chosen research strategy and collection and analysis of empirical data. Lastly, we discuss ethical considerations and quality of our research.

In Chapter 4, we present the empirical data retrieved from our 23 interviews at eight firms. We let the respondents be heard by including direct citations from the interviews, but also facilitate the reading by embedding our own storytelling. The chapter includes eight subchapters that present our empirical findings from each firm, followed by one final subchapter that provides a summarizing table.

In Chapter 5, we analyze and discuss our empirical findings in relation to our theoretical framework. The chapter is divided into our two variables of absorptive capacity, orientation towards learning and practices for knowledge management, and analyze each variable's impact on organizational learning. Based on our analytical findings, we then provide a summary and revise our conceptual model.

In Chapter 6, we conclude our analytical findings and answer our research question. Then, we put our findings into perspective by discussing theoretical and practical implications. Lastly, we present limitations with our study and provide suggestions for future research.

2. Theoretical framework

In Chapter 2, we introduce the theoretical foundations that this study builds upon, namely, organizational learning and absorptive capacity, as well as review literature on repatriation. Then, we develop a conceptual framework that declares the definitions, perspectives and constructs of this thesis. In the conceptual framework, we present our conceptual model that links generic theories on absorptive capacity and organizational learning and adapts them to the context of repatriation.

2.1. Organizational learning

2.1.1. From knowledge transfer to organizational learning

Intra-firm knowledge is widely recognized as one of firms' most important drivers of firm performance and sources of competitive advantage (Grant, 1996; Gupta & Govindarajan, 2000; Lazarova & Tarique, 2000; Sanchez-Vidal, et al., 2018). Consequently, knowledge transfer has emerged as one of the most popular streams within the international business discipline (Brewster & Suutari, 2005; Kostova et al., 2016). Within this discipline, the MNC is conceptualized as an instrument for transporting intra-firm knowledge between units (Minbaeva et al., 2003) and as an institution for integrating knowledge of its organizational members (Grant, 1996). Knowledge transfer theory mainly seeks to explain the procedure of knowledge transfer and its main barriers and facilitators (Argote & Miron-Spektor, 2011; Kostova et al., 2016; Song, 2014). In doing so, various authors study transfers through the lens of communication theory and thereby observe how knowledge flows from sender to receiver (e.g. Gupta & Govindarajan, 2000; Szulanski, 1996). Both Gupta and Govindarajan (2000) and Szulanski (1996) find that the success of knowledge transfers can be explained by the receiving unit's ability to acquire and absorb incoming information.

Knowledge transfer theory provides valuable insights as it unfolds the process of knowledge acquisition and identifies the drivers that allow for such process to take place (Kostova et al., 2016). Yet, it falls short in explaining what happens to the knowledge after it reaches the receiver (Argote & Miron-Spektor 2011). Though, as pointed out by Dodgson (1993), knowledge does not generate value unless an organization learns from it, which first occurs when it performs in changed and better ways. In order to understand how firms can manage gained knowledge, organizational learning theory is instead more appropriate, since it is an extension of knowledge transfer theory (Argote & Miron-Spektor, 2011; Campbell & Cairns,

1994; Sun & Anderson, 2010). For instance, Campbell and Cairns (1994) define organizational learning as not only the act of acquiring knowledge, which is the central aspect of knowledge transfer theory, but also the act of making use of acquired knowledge and modifying organizational behavior to reflect the learning. So, even though knowledge transfer and organizational learning share common ground in recognizing the strategic importance of knowledge to achieve competitive advantage, the latter differentiates from the former by taking it one step further and observing how knowledge inflows also can result in long-term learning (Crossan et al., 1999). Since the aim of this study is to not only investigate how repatriate knowledge flows are received by focal units, but rather to investigate how these flows result in learnings and improvements over time, we must take this additional step and study repatriate knowledge management in light of organizational learning theory.

2.1.2. Organizational learning theory

Organizational learning has been studied over a long period of time by a wide range of academic disciplines, but still has no consensus been reached on a definition of the construct (Campbell & Cairns, 1994; Crossan et al., 1999; Dodgson, 1993; López, Peón, & Ordás, 2005; Sun & Anderson, 2010). Fiol and Lyles (1985, p. 803) provide the commonly used definition of organizational learning as *"The process of improving actions through better knowledge and understanding"*. Despite low convergence, the core of most definitions is that organizational learning includes a change in the organization that occurs as the organization receives knowledge (Argote & Miron-Spektor, 2011), which clearly differentiates organizational learning theory from knowledge transfer theory.

Various scholars attempt to map the process of organizational learning (e.g. Crossan et al., 1999; Dodgson, 1993). Although these scholars use different terminology and typology, they agree on that organizational learning is a cyclical process composed by several identifiable stages (López et al., 2005). Although these stages are named differently, they most often include and refer to acquisition, dissemination and institutionalization of knowledge (Hoe & McShane, 2010). The organizational learning process is initiated with acquisition of knowledge at individual level, since it is individuals that learn, not organizations (Cohen & Levinthal, 1990). Learning then departs from individual level and reaches group level when knowledge is disseminated among organizational members (Argote & Miron-Spektor, 2011; Berthoin Antal, 2001; Crossan et al., 1999; Sun & Anderson, 2010). Members then need to interpret, develop a

shared understanding and transform the knowledge to fit into a specific context, which occurs simultaneously as the other organizational learning stages (Crossan et al., 1999). Finally, learning reaches organizational level when knowledge is institutionalized in systems, structures, procedures, rules and strategies (Crossan et al., 1999; Dodgson, 1993; Fiol & Lyles, 1985). At this final stage, knowledge becomes independent of its origin and guides organizational behavior (Crossan et al., 1999). It is then integrated into the organizational memory, meaning that the organization stores, retains and is able to renew the knowledge for future use (López et al., 2005; Walsh & Ungson, 1991). Again, this points at that organizational learning is an on-going and cyclical process that occurs over time (Argote & Miron-Spektor, 2011).

Organizational learning is a dynamic and complex process that constitutes a major challenge for firms (Crossan et al., 1999; Dodgson, 1993). The process is often interrupted by different kinds of barriers that can impede all stages in the transformation of individual learning to organizational learning (Berthoin Antal, 2001; Schilling & Kluge, 2009). Firms need to be aware of potential barriers and prescribe interventions to overcome them in order to fully appropriate the knowledge of their employees (Argote & Miron-Spektor, 2011; Berthoin Antal, 2001; Sun & Anderson, 2010). This points at that organizational learning is not a random process, but rather a process that firms to high degree can affect (Dodgson, 1993; Minbaeva et al., 2003). Organizations can do so by actively develop learning capacities, foster closer relationships between organizational units and construct strategies and policies that enhance learning (Dodgson, 1993; Minbaeva et al., 2003; Szulanski, 1996). Human resource management is one example of strategies that can be used to enhance learning (Wong, 2001).

A widely discussed determinant that can either facilitate or obstruct organizational learning is absorptive capacity (Schilling & Kluge, 2009; Szulanski, 1996). However, as organizational learning and absorptive capacity somewhat overlap and share similar theoretical backgrounds (Sun & Anderson, 2010), the link between the two constructs is rather ambiguous (Minbaeva et al., 2003). When delineating the relationship between organizational learning and absorptive capacity, we find that some researchers consider absorptive capacity as a determinant of learning (e.g. Reagans & McEvily, 2003; Schilling & Kluge, 2009; Szulanski, 1996), as an outcome of learning (e.g. Liao, Fei & Chen, 2007; Schilling, 2002), or as both a determinant and an outcome of learning (e.g. Cohen & Levinthal, 1990; Lane & Lubatkin, 1998; Zahra & George, 2002). As this study seeks to explain how firms actively can govern their capacity to

learn from repatriates, we therefore adopt the former perspective and conceptualize absorptive capacity as an antecedent and a determinant of organizational learning.

2.2. Absorptive capacity

2.2.1. Conceptualizing absorptive capacity

Absorptive capacity is a controversial and multifaceted construct that receives extensive attention in academia by authors who seek to understand its true intrinsic meaning (Lazarova & Tarique, 2005; Song, 2014; Zahra & George, 2002). Ever since the construct emerged, it has been extended, reconceptualized and applied to several new contexts in a myriad of research. Still, there is no consensus on how to define absorptive capacity, or which dimensions to incorporate in the construct (Song, 2014). A widely used explanation is Cohen and Levinthal (1990, p. 128), who define absorptive capacity as a firm's "*ability to recognize the value of new external information, assimilate it, and apply it to commercial ends*". These authors conceptualize absorptive capacity as a single construct that is determined by the characteristics of knowledge, as well as the firm's previous experience of equivalent knowledge (ibid). Early research on absorptive capacity, such as Cohen and Levinthal (1990) and Lane and Lubatkin (1998), generally investigate the construct's impact on technical knowledge in a R&D context. Nevertheless, later studies adopt more wide-ranging perspectives, add new dimensions and shift the unit of analysis between individuals, countries, organizations and intra-organizational networks (e.g. Gupta & Govindarajan, 2000; Song, 2014). For instance, Minbaeva et al. (2003) add motivation as an explanatory variable of absorptive capacity at individual level, and Gupta and Govindarajan (2000) add similarities of peer unit characteristics as an explanatory variable at intra-firm level.

Although definitions of absorptive capacity slightly differ, most share common ground in recognizing that absorptive capacity affects how knowledge is managed at various stages of organizational learning (e.g. Daghfous, 2004; Gupta & Govindarajan, 2000; Lazarova & Tarique, 2005; Zahra & George, 2002). Absorptive capacity is thus found to be a determinant that both can facilitate and impede firms' learning from new knowledge (Minbaeva, Pedersen, Björkman & Fey, 2014). However, since absorptive capacity is applied in such varied contextual settings, it is still unknown of which underlying variables that this capacity is composed (Daghfous, 2004; Song, 2014).

2.2.2. Variables of absorptive capacity at intra-firm level

Previous scholars identify a wide variety of potential explanatory variables of absorptive capacity (Daghfous, 2004; Song, 2014). However, in order to narrow our scope of research, we choose to select two variables of which we make a comprehensive examination, namely, orientation towards learning and practices for knowledge management. We select these two variables based on that they are extensively discussed by research on absorptive capacity, and at some instances, by research on repatriate knowledge management. To clarify, both orientation towards learning and practices for knowledge management impact firms' ability to receive general intra-firm knowledge, which makes us consider it relevant to examine the impact of these variables on firms' ability to receive knowledge retransferred by international assignees. For further discussion of the relevance of selected variables, see Chapter 2.4.2.

2.2.2.1. Orientation towards learning

An explanatory variable of a firm's ability to absorb knowledge is the firm's orientation towards learning (Ali, Ali, Al-Maimani & Park, 2018; Berthoin Antal, 2001; Oddou et al., 2009; Van den Bosch, Volberda & De Boer, 1999; Volberda, Foss & Lyles, 2010). Orientation towards learning refers to two aspects of a firm, namely, its corporate culture (e.g. Daghfous, 2004; Oddou et al., 2013; Volberda et al., 2010) and its corporate structure (e.g. Ali et al., 2018; Berthoin Antal, 2001; Van den Bosch et al., 1999).

The first part of orientation towards learning, corporate culture, influences how open and receptive organizations are to new knowledge (Berthoin Antal, 2001). By introducing explicit strategies and values that promote knowledge sharing, firms can increase their ability to learn (Berthoin Antal, 2001; Daghfous, 2004). Within the repatriation literature, Oddou et al. (2013) stress the need to have a strategic global mindset to success in repatriate knowledge management. Lazarova and Caligiuri (2001) then extend this reasoning by emphasizing that firms should develop a corporate culture that supports repatriates and values international experience. One such strategy to increase knowledge sharing is by using intra-MNC communication, as firms with frequent communication among peer units tend to have stronger relationships, which in turn enable them so successfully transfer knowledge across units (Ali et al., 2018; Cohen & Levinthal, 1990; Van den Bosch et al., 1999; Volberda et al., 2010). Accordingly, close communication between focal and foreign unit is identified as a positive contributor to organizational learning also in the context of repatriation (Berthoin Antal, 2001;

Oddou et al., 2009; Sanchez-Vidal et al., 2018). Furthermore, leadership that encourages knowledge sharing is another key facilitator of learning (Burmeister et al., 2015; Gupta & Govindarajan, 2000; Oddou et al., 2009; Oddou et al., 2013; Reiche et al., 2011). For instance, in repatriation, Burmeister et al. (2015) illustrate managers as influencers who can facilitate use of repatriate knowledge by valuing and promoting repatriate knowledge as a strategic asset at the focal unit. Also, managers with global mindsets and own personal experience of working abroad are found to be particularly valuable (Gupta & Govindarajan, 2000; Oddou et al., 2009; Oddou et al., 2013).

The second part of orientation towards learning, corporate structure, refers to a firm's formalization and centralization, which can affect how prone it is to absorb new knowledge (Ali et al., 2018; Lane & Lubatkin, 1998). Formalization here denotes the firm's bureaucracy and hierarchy, where more bureaucratic and hierarchical corporate structures generally impede dissemination of knowledge and restrict change management (Ali et al., 2018; Van den Bosch et al., 2009). Berthoin Antal (2001) finds this arguing to hold true also in repatriation, as formalized corporate structures can hinder repatriates from spreading their knowledge. Moreover, centralization here denotes allocation of decision-making, as well as the unit's autonomy within the MNC network. More centralized corporate structures generally obstruct learning within MNCs, since distant decision-making and low level of autonomy make it harder for individual units to implement change (Ali et al., 2018; Lane & Lubatkin, 1998; Song, 2014; Volberda et al., 2010). Still, to the best of our knowledge, centralization is not yet properly investigated as a determinant of managing repatriate knowledge.

2.2.2.2. Practices for knowledge management

Another explanatory variable of firms' capacity to absorb knowledge is the systematic use of practices for knowledge management (Hoe & McShane, 2010; Minbaeva et al., 2003; Zahra & George, 2002). Practices can be divided into two types, namely practices for formal knowledge management (e.g. Lazarova & Tarique, 2005; Minbaeva et al., 2003; Oddou et al., 2009), and practices for informal management (e.g. Hoe & McShane, 2010; Liao et al., 2003; Mueller, 2015).

Researchers use various terminologies to define the variable of practices for formal knowledge management, such as dissemination (Cohen & Levinthal, 1990), knowledge transfer tools

(Lazarova & Tarique, 2005) and internal mechanisms (Oddou et al., 2009). Yet, all indicate that firms can improve absorptive capacity and hence organizational learning by establishing practices, routines, processes and systems for knowledge management (Inkpen, 1998). Practices have this potential since they can help firms both to disseminate and institutionalize knowledge from individual to organizational level (Hoe & McShane, 2010). Although not discussed to the same extent, the same finding is also recognized in literature on repatriation, as practices for repatriate knowledge management can increase learning from repatriates (Oddou et al., 2009; Sanchez-Vidal et al., 2018). Practices for formal knowledge management are primarily of formalized and standardized nature (Lazarova & Tarique, 2005; Minbaeva et al., 2003; Mueller, 2015; Oddou et al., 2009), such as documentations, trainings, workshops, debriefings, mentorships and presentations. The formalized nature of these practices, leads to that they often are pre-arranged, planned and scheduled by representatives of an organization (Hoe & McShane, 2010).

Furthermore, some researchers (e.g. Hoe & McShane, 2010; Liao et al., 2003; Mueller, 2015) stress that informal knowledge management can be used as a complement to formal knowledge management to increase organizational learning. Informal knowledge management here denotes when individuals diffuse and implement know-how by spontaneous and unstandardized means (Mueller, 2015). These informal acts are most often voluntary, unstructured and casual (Hoe & McShane, 2010). Following this logic, firms can introduce proactive practices in order to encourage employees to informally spread and exploit expertise (Hoe & McShane, 2010; Liao et al., 2003). These proactive initiatives often aim at creating organizational forums and channels for sharing, such as co-locating office spaces and setting up cross-functional teams (ibid). Whilst practices for formal knowledge management enable dissemination of knowledge immediately when the practice is implemented, practices for informal knowledge management take longer time and are less governable by firms (Hoe & McShane, 2010). Yet, Hoe and McShane (2010) argue that informal knowledge processes generate higher learning than formal knowledge processes, since the former is more spontaneous, frequent and captures more information over time. Though, as far as we are aware, academia has not yet investigated the potential impact of practices for informal management on absorptive capacity of repatriate knowledge.

2.3. Literature review of repatriation

Literature on global mobility has a history dating back to the 1960s (Kostova et al., 2016). Already from the emergence of the research field, international assignees were recognized as efficient carriers of intra-firm knowledge (Lazarova & Tarique, 2005; Sanchez-Vidal et al., 2018). Though, earlier studies predominantly adopted a HQ perspective and examined how HQ managers executed control and diffused corporate know-how at foreign subsidiaries (Galbraith & Edstrom, 1976; Martinez & Jarillo, 1989). Already in early development of the literature stream, global mobility management was recognized as a troublesome element among firms, although most difficulties were depicted at the foreign units (e.g. Beer & Davis, 1976; Heenan, 1970). Common occurrence of failures in international assignments opened up for literature focusing on how firms could reduce failure rates among international assignees while working at foreign units (e.g. Tung, 1986; Zeira, 1975).

Even though academia critically recognized MNCs' struggles and searched for potential improvements of expatriation already several decades ago, equivalent aspects of repatriation have been observed first in recent years (e.g. Furuya et al., 2009; Sanchez-Vidal et al., 2018). Literature today widely recognizes that international assignments are dyadic knowledge transfers between foreign and focal units, still, significantly less research attention is dedicated to repatriation (Burmeister et al., 2015; Nery-Kjerfve & McLean, 2012; Oddou et al., 2009). The scarce literature that exists on repatriation can be divided into three main segments, namely, repatriation adjustment, organizational commitment and turnover intention (Nery-Kjerfve & McLean, 2012). First, many scholars study how repatriates often experience a reverse cultural shock when returning home and how firms seldom offer re-integration support to manage such adjustment difficulties (e.g. Baruch, Steele and Quantrill, 2002; Gregersen & Black, 1995; Stroh et al., 2000). Second, others discuss how firms often manage repatriation care ad hoc and lack repatriation programs, which causes that repatriates feel low organizational commitment (e.g. Berthoin Antal, 2001; Lazarova & Caligiuri, 2001). Lastly, another group of scholars investigates why many repatriates resign close to repatriation and identifies deficient repatriate knowledge management as a main reason (e.g. Suutari & Brewster, 2003; Yeaton & Hall, 2008).

As observed, none of the main segments within literature on repatriation specifically addresses learning, which confirms the lack of studies on repatriate knowledge management (Nery-Kjerfve & McLean, 2012). The limited research that exists on repatriate knowledge

management overall concludes that repatriates are an underestimated resource of the firm (Fink & Meierewert, 2005). Though, their expertise is usually highly valuable as it allows firms to better understand overseas markets and thus can be used to gain competitive advantage (Bonache & Brewster, 2001; Burmeister et al., 2015; Minbaeva et al., 2003; Suutari & Brewster, 2003). The value identified in repatriate knowledge paves the way for the discussion on how firms best appropriate this knowledge, where one contribution is the international assignment cycle by Berthoin Antal (2001), see Figure 1 below. In her article, Berthoin Antal (2001) empirically studies how different barriers obstruct organizational learning from repatriate knowledge at two German firms. Berthoin Antal (2001) adequately underlines that an international assignment should be viewed as a cyclical process, that continues even after the assignee re-enters the focal unit. Indeed, Berthoin Antal (2001) treats the former organizational learning stages of acquisition and dissemination by incorporating the steps of re-entry and knowledge sharing. Still, she fails to recognize how firms institutionalize knowledge at organizational level (e.g. Crossan et al., 1999; López et al., 2005; Walsh & Ungson, 1991). Although Berthoin Antal (2001) succeeds to observe repatriate knowledge management through the lens of organizational learning theory far better than the majority of researchers within the field (e.g. Burmeister et al., 2015; Lazarova & Tarique, 2005), she still falls short in accounting for the full learning cycle.
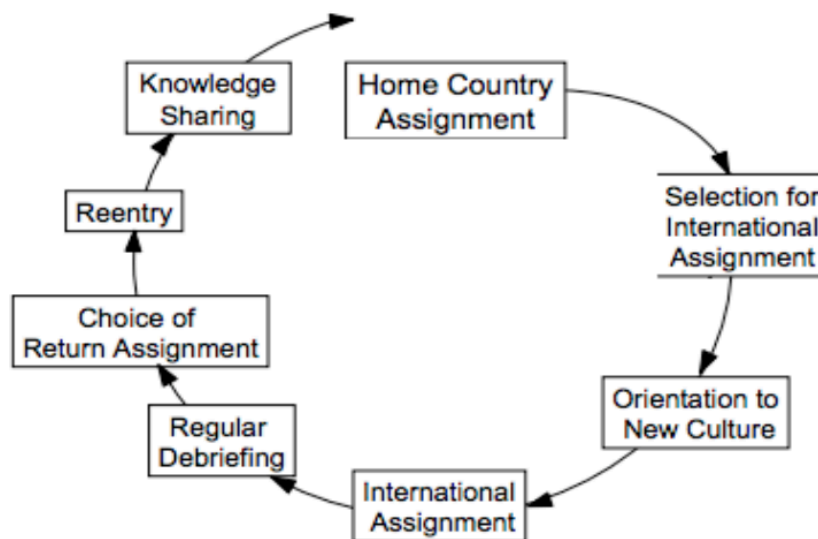
Figure 1. International assignment cycle (Berthoin Antal, 2001, p.78)

Since few studies address repatriate knowledge management, even fewer studies specialize in identifying the underlying determinants of why firms generally fail to successfully harvest and integrate this knowledge into existing operations (Furuya et al., 2009; Nery-Kjerfve & McLean,

2012). Among these few articles, some evaluate how repatriates' characteristics, such as ability and motivation, impact organizational learning (e.g. Lazarova & Tarique, 2005; Sanchez-Vidal et al., 2018), while others evaluate how characteristics of the knowledge itself impact organizational learning (e.g. Bonache & Zárraga-Oberty, 2008; Fink & Meierewert, 2005; Szulanski, 1996). This leaves only a few authors that take the standpoint of the focal unit and examine firm level determinants that impact learning from repatriates (Nery-Kjerfve & McLean, 2012). To the best of our knowledge, only one article examines absorptive capacity as a potential determinant in the context of repatriation, namely Oddou et al. (2009). Their study conceptually observes the mutual merge between repatriate and focal unit, where absorptive capacity is incorporated as one of multiple facilitators that explain the focal unit's ability to receive incoming knowledge (ibid). However, since Oddou et al. (2009) integrate absorptive capacity as a minor sub-variable into an extensive framework, they pay low attention to the definition and causes of absorptive capacity. Their work thereby falls short in empirically examining how different variables of absorptive capacity affect organizational learning cycle over time.

2.4. Conceptual framework

2.4.1. Definitions and perspectives

In order to investigate how absorptive capacity of the focal unit enables organizational learning from repatriate knowledge, we establish a conceptual framework that defines the theoretical definitions, perspectives and constructs that form this study. Our conceptual framework links generic theories on absorptive capacity and organizational learning, and further adapt them to the context of repatriation.

Organizational learning is conceptualized as a continuous and cyclical internal process that results in a change within a firm as it acquires knowledge (in line with e.g. Argote & Miron-Spektor, 2011; Fiol & Lyles, 1985; López et al., 2005). In the context of this study, the acquired knowledge is gained by the international assignee at a foreign MNC unit and retransferred by the same individual to focal unit. To review firms' level of organizational learning, this construct is evaluated based on three stages acquisition, dissemination and institutionalization (in line with e.g. Hoe & McShane, 2010). The first stage, acquisition, is assumed to be initiated automatically when the repatriate re-enters the focal unit, since repatriate knowledge then exists at the focal unit at individual level (Brewster & Suutari, 2005; Oddou et al., 2009; Sanchez-Vidal et al., 2018). To clarify, all focal units in our study are assumed to already have acquired

repatriate knowledge, as their repatriates already have re-entered the units. We therefore focus on how the focal units disseminate and institutionalize knowledge over time, which are the necessary stages to go through in order to fully create organizational learning (Argote & Miron-Spektor, 2011; Berthoin Antal, 2001; Crossan et al., 1999; Sun & Anderson, 2010).

Absorptive capacity is viewed as a determinant of organizational learning (in line with e.g. Reagans & McEvily, 2003; Schilling & Kluge, 2009; Szulanski, 1996). More specifically, absorptive capacity is perceived as a permeable filter that repatriate knowledge must penetrate when entering focal units. As other determinants of organizational learning, absorptive capacity is understood as a capacity that firms both can strengthen and weaken (Argote & Miron-Spektor, 2011; Berthoin Antal, 2001; Minbaeva et al., 2003; Szulanski, 1996; Sun & Anderson, 2010). It is assumed to positively impact organizational learning (in line with e.g. Szulanski, 1996), meaning that high absorptive capacity facilitates organizational learning from repatriate knowledge, whilst lack of absorptive capacity hinders it. However, since the purpose of this study is to examine *how* absorptive capacity enables organizational learning from repatriate knowledge, we do not a priori assume how each individual variable of absorptive capacity impacts learning. Motives and definitions of the individual underlying variables of absorptive capacity are further discussed in Chapter 2.4.2.

2.4.2. Conceptual model

Figure 2 below presents a holistic view of the conceptual model used in this study. Our model builds on the international assignment cycle by Berthoin Antal (2001), found in Figure 1. Although Berthoin Antal (2001) adopts an organizational learning perspective, we question her model for only observing the former learning stages of acquisition and dissemination, while ignoring institutionalization. Due to this notion, we extend Berthoin Antal's (2001) model by incorporating both absorptive capacity and the full organizational learning cycle. Our conceptual model focuses on the time after the repatriate re-enters the focal unit, which means that the first six stages in the inner international assignment cycle are not further observed. However, instead of adopting Berthoin Antal's (2001) reasoning that the focal unit engages in knowledge sharing after the international assignee returns, we argue that the focal unit then initiates the organizational learning process. In Figure 2 below, the long orange arrow represents the repatriate knowledge, which the focal unit acquires when the international assignee re-enters. Repatriate knowledge must then permeate through absorptive capacity,

before it flows into the closed-loop cycle of organizational learning. In Figure 2 below, the organizational learning cycle is illustrated by the outer blue circle and is composed by acquisition at individual level, dissemination at group level and institutionalization at organizational level.
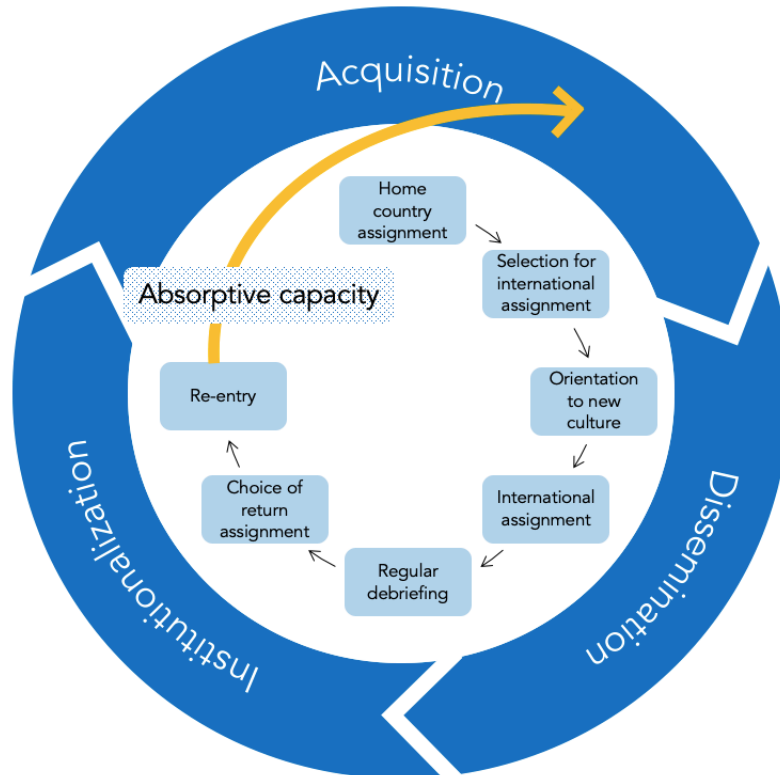
Figure 2. Conceptual model, holistic view (Compiled by authors, based on Berthoin Antal, 2001)

Figure 3 below zooms in on the absorptive capacity component of Figure 2 above. Figure 3 is thereby a detailed close-up view of the same conceptual model, that further clarifies relevant constructs and variables. The long orange arrow in Figure 3 still represents repatriate knowledge that the international assignee transfers from foreign to focal unit, as well as that the closed-loop blue circle still represents organizational learning. As indicated by Figure 3, absorptive capacity is divided into two variables, namely, orientation towards learning and practices for knowledge management. Each variable is furthermore divided into two sub-variables, which are selected based on former theoretical findings and their relevance in our setting. Thus, the selected variables are not necessarily the most widely used ones in generic theory on absorptive capacity, but presumably the most critical ones to examine in this specific context. We further clarify our definitions and motivations of these variables of absorptive capacity below.
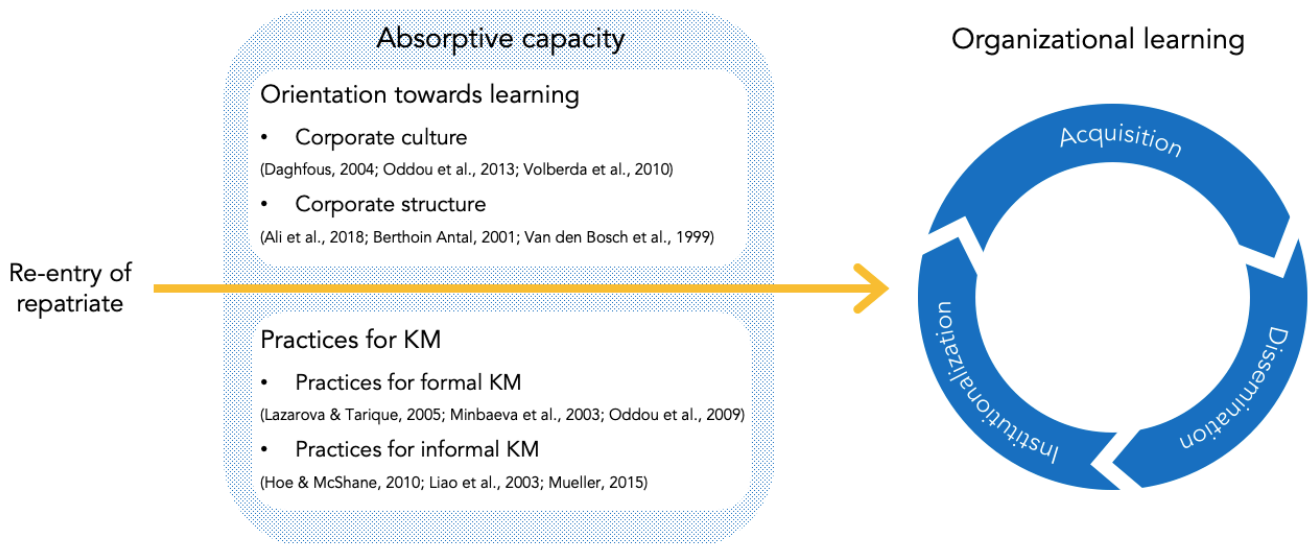
Figure 3. *Conceptual model, detailed view (Compiled by authors, based on above-mentioned researchers)*

Abbreviations: KM=Knowledge management

First, we perceive orientation towards learning as an explanatory variable of absorptive capacity in our conceptual framework, which is divided into corporate culture and corporate structure. We consider corporate culture to be relevant as the variable is recognized both by broader research on absorptive capacity (Daghfous, 2004), and research on repatriation (Berthoin Antal, 2001; Lazarova & Caligiuri, 2001; Oddou et al., 2013). Corporate culture refers to a firm's general values and strategies promoting knowledge sharing, such as leadership and communication (in line with Berthoin Antal, 2001; Burmeister et al., 2015; Cohen & Levinthal, 1990; Gupta & Govindarajan, 2000; Volberda et al., 2010). To adapt corporate culture to fit our contextual setting, we also conceptualize global mobility as an additional strategy to share knowledge (in line with Bonache & Brewster, 2001; Bonache and Zárraga-Oberty, 2008; Suutari and Brewster, 2003).

Furthermore, we consider corporate structure to be relevant, which refers to a firm's formalization, in terms of hierarchy and bureaucracy, as well as its centralization. We include formalization based on that multiple researchers, both in general and repatriate specific contexts, confirm its impact on absorptive capacity (e.g. Ali et al., 2018; Berthoin Antal; Van den Bosch et al., 1999). We observe centralization based on its demonstrated impact on absorptive capacity of general knowledge (Ali et al., 2018; Lane & Lubatkin; 1998; Volberda et al., 2010). To further adapt corporate structure to our contextual setting, we also study the

centralization of a firm's global mobility function. Although some authors (e.g. Berthoin Antal, 2001; Oddou et al., 2009) investigate orientation towards learning in repatriation, their findings lack empirical support. Adding this variable to our conceptual framework may therefore both provide useful implications to firms on how they can adapt their culture and structure to increase learning from repatriates, whilst simultaneously provide empirical evidence to theory on how culture and structure are applicable to repatriation.

Second, we include practices for knowledge management as an explanatory variable of absorptive capacity, since various authors stress the importance to establish practices for managing knowledge in general (Inkpen, 1998; Minbaeva et al., 2003; Song, 2014), but also specifically in the context of repatriation (Oddou et al., 2009). Practices for knowledge management refers to both practices for formal and informal knowledge management. The former is included in our framework since this type of practices has proven potential to increase organizational learning from repatriates (e.g. Lazarova & Tarique, 2005; Minbaeva et al., 2003; Oddou et al., 2009). The latter is incorporated due to that informal knowledge management is important for firms' broader learning (Hoe & McShane, 2010; Liao et al., 2003; Mueller, 2015), although it has not yet been applied in the context of repatriation. We particularly include practices for informal knowledge management since this kind of practices can spur later stages of the organizational learning cycle (Hoe & McShane, 2010). Hence, evaluating practices for both formal and informal knowledge management is expected to generate valuable insights into how firms may use practices effectively to further learn from repatriate knowledge.

3. Method

In Chapter 3, we describe and motivate our methodological choices, more specifically, our chosen research strategy and collection and analysis of empirical data. Lastly, we discuss ethical considerations and quality of our research.

3.1. Research strategy

3.1.1. Abductive research approach

When conducting this thesis, we followed a methodology in which both theoretical and empirical evidence were used to support our findings. We initiated our research process with a thorough literature review in order to narrow our scope. Following Sandberg and Alvesson (2011), we used neglect spotting to identify a research gap on how absorptive capacity affects organizational learning in the context of repatriation. Based on the identified gap, we developed our purpose and research question that further settled our research design. We then established a theoretical framework based on previous research on organizational learning, absorptive capacity and repatriate knowledge management. By combining theory from these parallel fields, we created a conceptual framework that guided our collection of empirical data. Though, based on our empirical findings, our conceptual framework was revised and re-conceptualized throughout the entire research process, which ultimately generated a conceptual model grounded on both previous theories and new empirical evidence.

Merriam (2002) argues that deductive approaches aim to test existing theories, whilst inductive approaches seek to build new theories based on empirical findings. In this sense, we initially adopted a deductive approach as we tested our conceptual framework on our empirical data, but then shifted to a more inductive approach as we developed our framework based on our empirical findings. Consequently, we used a combination of the two above-mentioned approaches, resulting in an abductive research approach where we continuously moved between theory and empirics to maximize the relevance of our results in relation to our research question (Dubois & Gadde, 2002). This also illustrates how we used an iterative approach, since we made a constant comparison and recursive interplay between theory and empirics, as described by Doz (2011). By adopting both an abductive and an iterative approach, we gained new theoretical insights, such as that we discovered new variables of absorptive capacity that appeared relevant in the context of repatriation, that had not been recognized in previous research.

3.1.2. Multiple case study design

In order to empirically study absorptive capacity's impact on organizational learning in the context of repatriation, it was considered suitable to retrieve empirical data from organizations with experience in repatriation. Our unit of analysis is consequently the focal unit, which is represented by its employees. We chose a qualitative data collection method to capture employees' subjective perceptions (Marschan-Piekkari & Welch, 2011; Merriam, 2002; Patel & Davidson, 2011; Yin, 2009). Although a quantitative method would generate a larger amount of data (Bell, Bryman & Harley, 2019), fewer sources with more substantial experience were considered more relevant to gather information on firms' repatriate knowledge management. This is due to that we aim to generate results of non-numerical character, have an explanatory narrative and have a flexible approach in the contact with the respondents (Marschan-Piekkari & Welch, 2011; Yin, 2009). We also chose to design the study as a comparative multiple case study to open up for a multilayered analysis with comparisons both across and within cases (Bell et al., 2019; Eisenhardt, 1991; Marschan-Piekkari & Welch, 2011). Notably, we considered to conduct a single case study, but rejected the option due to that single case studies are appropriate when studying a unique phenomenon related to a specific case (Dubois & Gadde, 2002). We, on the other hand, aimed to not observe repatriate knowledge management at a single firm since we sought variance in different firms' absorptive capacity and organizational learning, which would allow us to draw a single set of conclusions for the studied firms (Yin, 2009).

3.2. Data collection

3.2.1. Data sources

This study relies on data retrieved from both primary and secondary sources. Primary data is gathered in real time by the researchers of a study with the aim to address a research question, whereas secondary data is retrieved at an earlier point in time by other researchers, agencies or organizations (Bell et al., 2019). In our study, primary data is mainly used in the empirical section as our empirical material consists of qualitative interviews. Secondary data is mainly used in the background, problem discussion, theoretical framework, method and analysis section, but also in our preparations for the interviews, as recommended by Bell et al. (2019).

3.2.2. Sampling

3.2.2.1. Sampling approach

As all researchers of multiple case studies, we had to sample both our cases and the respondents within our cases (Marschan-Piekkari & Welch, 2011; Merriam, 2002; Yin, 2009). We selected case study firms and respondents purposively on the basis of their estimated ability to contribute to our understanding of the subject of our thesis. Consequently, the transferability of our results is limited to illustrate a phenomenon at selected firms, rather than to provide generalizable conclusions (Bell et al., 2019; Marschan-Piekkari & Welch, 2011). Purposive sampling is a non-probability sampling concept that includes different sampling approaches, such as generic purposive sampling and snowball sampling (Patel & Davidson, 2011), which best describe the sampling approaches used in this study. We adopted a generic purposive sampling approach as we established both firm level and individual level sampling criteria in advance (Bell et al., 2019; Marschan-Piekkari & Welch, 2011; Merriam, 2002). We chose this approach to increase our chances of selecting respondents that could provide valuable and useful information in relation to our research area (Patel & Davidson, 2011).

Nevertheless, we complemented generic purposive sampling with snowball sampling as we allowed existing respondents to recruit potential respondents (Bell et al., 2019; Marschan-Piekkari & Welch, 2011). After developing our sampling criteria, we established contact through e-mail and/or phone with HR representatives at potential case study firms. We chose to establish this initial contact with HR representatives since these employees both could serve as respondents, but also suggest other suitable respondents as they presumably have access to internal information on repatriates within their firms. As anticipated by Bell et al. (2019), by using snowball sampling, we could indeed reach out to a large pool of respondents as many HR representatives recruited other respondents by using their intra-firm and personal network. In order to extend our number of respondents, we adjusted our initial sampling criteria to fit the recruited respondents in cases where it was considered appropriate. To mitigate the risk of creating a non-representative sample (Bell et al., 2019), we however excluded some recruited respondents that deviated extensively from our initial sampling criteria.

3.2.2.2. Sampling criteria of case study firms

In our purposive sampling, we developed firm level sampling criteria of which firms to include in our study. As our intention was to investigate repatriate knowledge management within

MNCs, we limited our scope to MNCs with repatriates. We assumed that primarily large firms work with global mobility, and consequently only sampled large-sized enterprises with an annual turnover exceeding 50 million euro per EU's (n.d.) definition. However, even though the case study firms share certain characteristics, it should be underlined that they differ in other aspects. It was not theoretically desirable or practically possible to develop firm level criteria that provides a homogeneous sample, which leads to that we, as well as the reader of this study, should bear in mind that unaccounted firm specific characteristics might impact the results. Nevertheless, instead of considering differences in firm characteristics as something negative, we actually sought to include them. As the objective of this study is to illustrate how MNCs in general, and not MNCs from a specific industry or country, handle repatriate knowledge management, we desired a variety in firms' sectorial belonging and origin. We aimed to include approximately the same number of firms from the manufacturing as from the service industry, since global mobility management can differ across these two industries (Cheong, Sandhu, Edwards & Poon, 2019; Song, 2014). Similarly, we also aimed to include firms of different origins, since global mobility management also can differ across countries (Suutari & Brewster, 2003). By doing so, we thereby achieved a variety in our empirical findings and got access to a larger pool of potential case study firms.

3.2.2.3. Sampling criteria of respondents at case study firms

We furthermore developed individual level sampling criteria to follow Edwards, Almond and Colling's (2011) suggestion to specify which organizational members that are desired to speak for an organization. We chose to interview both HR representatives and repatriates in order to observe a phenomenon from two perspectives, as recommended by Dubois and Gadde (2002) and Minbaeva et al. (2014). The HR representatives could, from an organizational perspective, contribute with relevant factual corporate information on e.g. the MNCs' global mobility practices, cultures and structures. The repatriates, on the other hand, could contribute with their subjective perceptions of the same aspects based on their lived experiences. We chose to incorporate both organizational and employee perspective as it can provide valuable contextual information (Bell et al., 2019; Edwards et al., 2011). We considered it particularly important in this context, since absorptive capacity is a multi-level construct that can be manifested in different ways, depending on who's perspective one takes (Minbaeva et al., 2014; Song, 2014).

HR representatives were purposively sampled based on their estimated knowledge and insight into their employer's global mobility management. In most instances, these respondents worked at global mobility departments, whilst in some few instances, these respondents worked at HR with responsibility of global mobility management. We identified suitable HR representatives that could provide us with all desired factual information, which made us decide to only interview one such respondent per firm. Sampling should be ended when additional respondents do not provide additional value (Bell et al., 2019), and we therefore settled with one HR representative per firm.

Repatriates were also purposively sampled, but according to more specified sampling criteria. We chose to only include repatriates that continued to be employed by the organization that sent them on assignment abroad, since we sought repatriates' perceptions of that same organization's repatriate knowledge management. Though, this sampling criterion may have caused positively biased results, since in reality, many repatriates resign short upon repatriation due to dissatisfaction (Nery-Kjerfve & McLean, 2012; Stroh et al., 2000; Yeaton & Hall, 2008). Satisfied repatriates are therefore presumably overrepresented in our sample, which we accounted for when analyzing the empirical data. Moreover, we sampled repatriates from Scandinavia out of accessibility motives, as we sought to interview all respondents in person. The fact that we sampled repatriates from Scandinavia and firms from different countries, led to that we met assignees that were sent from HQ to subsidiary, from subsidiary to HQ and between peer subsidiaries. We consider this diversity to be useful since the success of knowledge transfer can differ depending on the direction of knowledge flow (Gupta & Govindarajan, 2000).

When sampling repatriates, we also defined criteria for their international assignments. We defined a minimum duration of the international assignment to three months, which we estimated as the approximate time required to gain the knowledge that many researchers argue that international assignees gain abroad (e.g. Brewster & Suutari, 2005; Oddou, et al., 2009; Sanchez-Vidal et al., 2018). Furthermore, we defined that the international assignment must be terminated minimum three months and maximum five years ago. On one side of the spectrum, we thus excluded individuals that repatriated very recently, since such cases would impede an examination of the focal unit's long-term practices and organizational learning process as it occurs over time (Argote & Miron-Spektor, 2011; Fiol & Lyles, 1985; López et al., 2005). On the other side of the spectrum, we excluded individuals that repatriated more than five years

ago, since it would be difficult for them to retrospectively and accurately describe past experiences that occurred long time ago, which Patel and Davidson (2011) mention as a common issue.

Similar to how we embraced variety in our firm level sampling criteria, we allowed repatriates to vary in certain aspects. We aimed to sample repatriates of different organizational positions and levels, since the potential impact of hierarchical level is largely ignored in the repatriation context (Kostova et al., 2016; Martinez & Jarillo, 1989), as well as credibility can be strengthened by applying matrix identities and including respondents of different hierarchical levels (Edwards et al., 2011). Also, we desired to include repatriates with different destinations of their international assignments, to reduce the risk of that cultural differences at the foreign units affect the outcome of repatriate knowledge management (Bonache & Brewster, 2001; Burmeister et al., 2015).

In contrast to the HR representatives, we searched for minimum two repatriates at each case study firm to grasp multiple repatriates' subjective experiences, perceptions and opinions, as these vary between individuals (Edwards et al., 2011; Merriam, 2002). To interview multiple respondents facilitates identification of patterns and permits replication and extension among findings (Eisenhardt, 1991). In our case, to interview multiple repatriates per firm gave us a more wide-spanning image of how repatriates in general perceive that firm's repatriate knowledge management. Notably, two case study firms could due to time and resource restrictions only offer one repatriate, leading to that empirical bases differ between firms. Credibility of our results may therefore be higher for the case study firms with more respondents, than for the ones with fewer respondents. Still, although the empirical bases at two firms only consist of data from one repatriate, their empirical bases are complemented with data from HR representatives. Even though HR representatives primarily contribute with factual corporate information, they are still employees of their firms, and thus contribute with additional individuals' subjective experiences, perceptions and opinions (Edwards et al., 2011; Merriam, 2002). We thereby use triangulation as we rely on multiple sources, which significantly increases credibility of the results (Guba & Lincoln, 1994; Welch & Piekkari, 2017).

3.2.2.4. Compilation of respondents

Initially, we sought to interview one HR representative and two repatriates at twelve firms, implying a target number of 36 interviews. We set this target since we considered 36 interviews to be the maximal number of interviews that we would manage within our given time frame. Another reason is that we strived towards collecting equivalent quantity of data as researchers at higher educational level, and 36 interviews corresponds to the average number of interviews in doctoral theses (Bell et al., 2019). In order to reach our target, 156 firms were contacted, of which the target number of twelve firms accepted to participate in our study. Though, four firms withdrew their interest due to the outbreak of Covid-19 pandemic, which resulted in that ultimately eight firms participated with 23 respondents. Even though our sample is smaller than aspired, a sample of 23 cases is considered sufficiently large to allow for both breadth and depth in our analysis, which is important according to Dubois and Gadde (2002). Our target number of interviews would offer larger empirical foundation (Bell et al., 2019; Dubois & Gadde, 2002), but since we had to reduce our ambition due to external factors beyond our control, our actual number of interviews is considered satisfactory.

Table 1 below presents an overview of the respondents in this study. As indicated by the first main column in Table 1, our eight case study firms are labelled from A-H, categorized by sector and presented by country of origin. Then, as observed in the second main column, our 23 respondents are assigned individual codes that show employer (A-H) and whether the respondent is an HR representative (HR) or a repatriate (REP). The 23 respondents are also presented by hierarchical level and country of permanent employment. Lastly, as showed by the third main column, information on the international assignment of each repatriate is presented in terms of destination and duration.

Table 1. *Overview of respondents*

Company			Respondent			International assignment	
Code	Sector	Origin	Code	Hierarchical level	Location	Destination	Duration
A	Manufacturing	Germany	A1HR	HR	Sweden	N/A	N/A
A	Manufacturing	Germany	A2REP	Associate	Sweden	Germany	6 months
A	Manufacturing	Germany	A3REP	Top Manager	Sweden	Taiwan	4 years
B	Manufacturing	Sweden	B1HR	HR	Sweden	N/A	N/A
B	Manufacturing	Sweden	B2REP	Middle Manager	Sweden	Poland	2 years
C	Services	UK	C1HR	HR	Sweden	N/A	N/A
C	Services	UK	C2REP	Top Manager	Sweden	UK	4 years
C	Services	UK	C3REP	Middle Manager	Sweden	UK	2 years
C	Services	UK	C4REP	Associate	Sweden	Netherlands	3 months
D	Services	UK	D1HR	HR	Sweden	N/A	N/A
D	Services	UK	D2REP	Top Manager	Sweden	UK	4 months
E	Manufacturing	Norway	E1HR	HR	Norway	N/A	N/A
E	Manufacturing	Norway	E2REP	Top Manager	Norway	China	7 years
E	Manufacturing	Norway	E3REP	Top Manager	Norway	South Korea	8 years
F	Services	Sweden	F1HR	HR	Sweden	N/A	N/A
F	Services	Sweden	F2REP	Middle Manager	Sweden	US	2 years
F	Services	Sweden	F3REP	Top Manager	Sweden	US	4 years
G	Services	Sweden	G1HR	HR	Sweden	N/A	N/A
G	Services	Sweden	G2REP	Middle Manager	Sweden	US	1 year
G	Services	Sweden	G3REP	Middle Manager	Sweden	UK	1 year
H	Services	US	H1HR	HR	UK	N/A	N/A
H	Services	US	H2REP	Middle Manager	Sweden	UK	9 years
H	Services	US	H3REP	Middle Manager	Sweden	Luxemburg, Netherlands	1 year

3.2.3. Interviews

All interviews took place between March 18th and April 7th, 2020, lasted approximately one hour each and were held either in Swedish, Norwegian or English, depending on the respondent's preferred language. All interviews were held virtually via Microsoft Teams or similar online communication tool. Initially, we booked face-to-face interviews with all respondents living in Sweden, since this interview mode offers benefits of personal interaction (Patel & Davidson, 2011). However, as the Covid-19 pandemic caused uncertainties in travel restrictions, we rescheduled all interviews to virtual meeting rooms. Although the virtual interview mode did not appear to impact interview quality, it might have limited our ability to tie personal relationships to the interviewees and reduced their feeling of trust (Bell et al., 2019). This potential issue might though have been mitigated by the fact that almost all respondents conducted the interviews from their homes or other familiar environments, leading to that they probably could speak more freely and unimpeded (Patel & Davidson, 2011). Also, virtual interviews offered us additional benefits, such as that we saved time and cost, as well as got access to respondents that otherwise might have declined to participate (Bell et al., 2019)

We followed the guidelines of Swedish Research Council (2017) as we initiated each interview by introducing ourselves and describing the purpose of our study. In the introduction, we asked for recording permission and informed on data treatment, which was accepted by all respondents. To record the interviews helped us to dedicate full attention to the interviewees, transcribe the interviews afterwards and reduce the risk of misinterpretations and dismissed information (Bell et al., 2019). Then, the interviews advanced in a semi-structured manner, meaning that we followed pre-formulated questions, but modified and complemented with follow-up questions when appropriate. Semi-structured interview design is particularly useful when making comparative multiple case studies, as it both contains standardized questions, which increase the comparability across cases, but also allows for further discussions (Merriam, 2002; Yin, 2009). We furthermore formulated and asked our questions so that they covered the entire repatriation, to review how absorptive capacity has impacted the entire organizational learning cycle over time.

Our interviews followed interview guides that were established in advance, one for repatriates and one for HR representatives, see Appendix A and B, respectively. We developed two separate interview guides since the two respondent groups contributed with different information, which is further clarified in the interview matrix in Table 2 below. Table 2 translates the constructs, variables and sub-variables of our conceptual framework into measurable and empirically testable interview themes, and thus motivates the questions in the interview guides.

Table 2. *Interview matrix*

Construct	Variable	Sub-variable	Repatriate	HR
Absorptive capacity	Orientation towards learning	Corporate culture	Perception of how focal unit's strategies and values promoting KS impacts KM of RK	Information on focal unit's strategies and values promoting KS, and purpose of working with GM
		Corporate structure	Perception of how focal unit's formalization and centralization impact KM of RK	Information on formalization of focal unit and centralization of entire MNC as well as GM function
	Practices for KM	Practices for formal KM	Personal experience of using practices for formal KM of RK	Information on focal unit's practices for formal KM of RK
		Practices for informal KM	Personal experience of using practices for informal KM of RK	Information on focal unit's practices for informal KM of RK
Organizational learning			Personal experience of how focal unit disseminates and institutionalizes RK	General perception of how focal unit disseminates and institutionalizes RK

Abbreviations: GM=Global mobility, KM=Knowledge management, KS=Knowledge sharing, RK=Repatriate knowledge

3.3. Data analysis

As argued by Bell et al. (2019), researchers of qualitative studies must find an analytic pathway to navigate through large and complex data sets. In this study, we settled our analytic pathway by following the data analysis methodology presented in Figure 4 below. Figure 4 exemplifies how we treated the empirical data from respondent A1HR, all the way from transcribing her interview to analyzing her data in relation to other respondents' data.
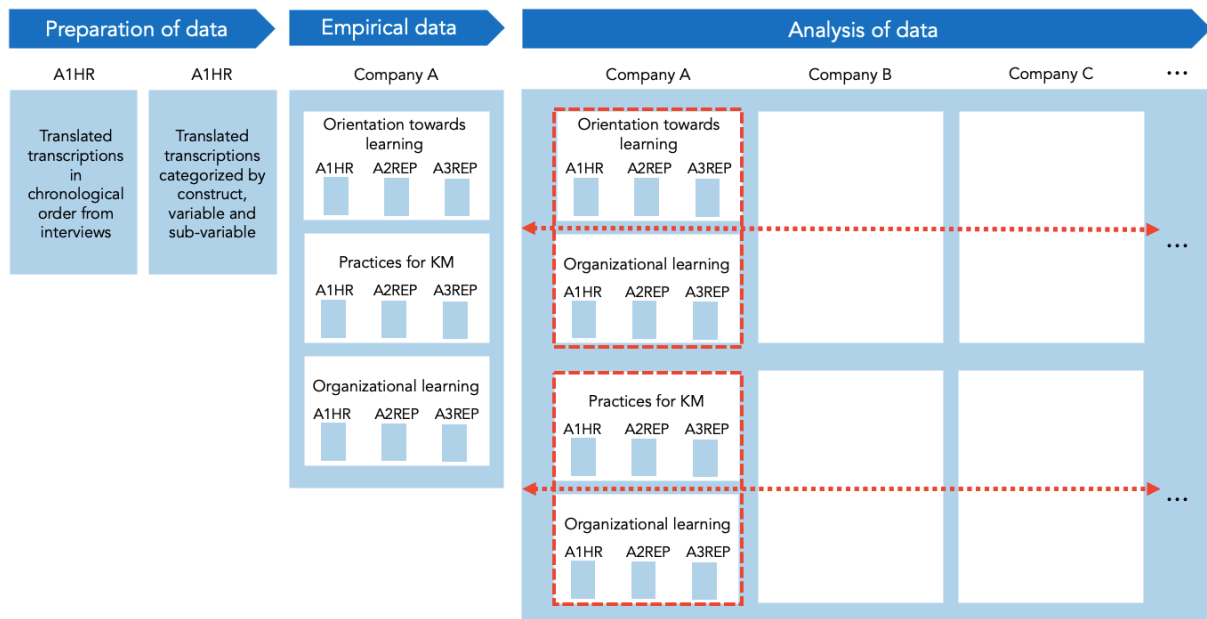
Figure 4. Data analysis methodology

In a first stage, we prepared the empirical data gathered from interviews. Based on the recordings, we transcribed our 23 interviews short after conducting them, as recommended by Bell et al. (2019) and Patel and Davidson (2011). The interviews held in Swedish and Norwegian were translated to English simultaneously as we transcribed them, which may cause inadequacies and misinterpretations (Patel & Davidson, 2011). However, we mitigated this risk as we asked all interviewees for approval of the compiled and translated empirical material before proceeding. We first transcribed the material in chronological order of the interviews, but then re-structured and categorized the material into the constructs, variables and sub-variables in our conceptual framework. Due to the semi-structured nature of the interviews, some data was in disorder and we therefore needed to use pattern matching methodology to do the categorization. To exemplify how we conducted this first stage with respondent A1HR in Figure 4, we first transcribed and simultaneously translated A1HR's interview, and then

categorized the transcription by construct, variable and sub-variable from our conceptual framework.

In a second stage, we sorted the data firm-wise by collecting the empirical data from respondents within the same firm. We chose to present data firm-wise in the empirical section of this study in order to offer a collective view of how all respondents from the same firm perceive our constructs, variables and sub-variables. As seen in Figure 4 above, when conducting this second stage with respondent A1HR, we merged the transcribed, translated and categorized material from A1HR's interview with the material from the other respondents at Company A, namely A2REP and A3REP. This second stage thus provided a collective overview of how all respondents at Company A individually perceive orientation towards learning, practices for knowledge management and organizational learning their firm.

In a last stage, we analyzed the empirical data both intra-firm and inter-firm based on each of our two variables of absorptive capacity. In the intra-firm analysis, we analyzed how each variable of absorptive capacity enables organizational learning in that particular organization. The upper red dotted square in Figure 4 illustrates how we on intra-firm level analyzed how Company A, consisting of A1HR, A2REP and A3REP, find that orientation towards learning enables organizational learning in Company A. The lower red dotted square in Figure 4 illustrates how the same respondents find that practices for knowledge management impact organizational learning. Such intra-firm analysis thereby allowed us to detect discrepancies and similarities between respondents from the same firm. In the inter-firm analysis, we compared how each variable of absorptive capacity enables organizational learning across organizations. The upper red vertical dotted arrow in Figure 4 shows how we conducted such inter-firm analysis by comparing empirical data regarding orientation towards learning of Company A, consisting of A1HR, A2REP and A3REP, with corresponding empirical data of other firms. The lower red vertical dotted arrow in Figure 4 similarly illustrates how we compared the data regarding Company A's practices for knowledge management with corresponding data of other firms. Such inter-firm consequently allowed us detect discrepancies and similarities between firms and draw conclusions on how different variables of absorptive capacity enable organizational learning.

3.4. Quality of research

Throughout entire Chapter 3, we have continuously discussed potential problems entailed by our methodological choices. However, to ensure high quality of research, some issues need to be further highlighted and criticized to clarify the limitations of our study (Doz, 2011). The most commonly used criteria in business research, reliability and validity, have been criticized for their relevance in qualitative studies (Welch & Piekkari, 2017). Therefore, we instead applied Guba and Lincoln's (1994) alternative four criteria of trustworthiness to assess the quality of our study.

The first criterion, credibility, was acknowledged by using both respondent validation and triangulation. Respondent validation was used for all participants in the study by first sending them the data for approval immediately after it was converted from transcription into empirics, then again by sending the final dissertation to fulfil Bell et al.'s (2019) principle of reciprocity. Hence, the participants were able to adjust and question our interpretation of their data before it was further processed and provide final comments before the thesis was published. Triangulation, which refers to the process of using more than one method or source for collecting data (Guba & Lincoln, 1994; Welch & Piekkari, 2017), was applied by including multiple data sources, where a total of 23 respondents from eight firms were interviewed. As suggested by Edwards et al. (2011), we also applied matrix identities by interviewing employees of different hierarchical levels to incorporate diverse perspectives and experiences, which in turn provided more credible results. Still, it should be noted that the respondents represent their own subjective perceptions, and the empirical data does not reflect the organization per se.

Guba and Lincoln's (1994) second criterion, transferability, was managed by providing a thick description of this study. As this criterion aims to enable researchers to evaluate the degree of transferability of their findings into other contexts (Bell et al., 2019), we presented all methodological approaches, decisions and procedures in detail. In that way, we intended to provide full transparency when deemed necessary. Though, due to ethical considerations, we chose to not expose any confidential information or identities of the respondents. Nevertheless, it should be emphasized that we aim to particularize rather than generalize the findings of this study, in line with the general purpose of case studies (Doz, 2011; Yin, 2009). Our objective is to explain a phenomenon in a specific context for the case study firms, not to draw universal conclusions. Instead, our conclusions may serve as useful implications for the research

discipline, as well as provide relevant indications for firms that face similar circumstances as our case study firms.

To observe Guba and Lincoln's (1994) third criterion, dependability, we managed all data with caution and confidentiality. As suggested by Bell et al. (2019), we kept all documents, transcriptions and equivalent material throughout the research process and ensured that no unauthorized individuals had access to it. Parts of the material were however shared with our supervisor in order to receive feedback, which we clarified towards the respondents in advance to avoid potential confidentiality conflicts. Moreover, to secure that no material or data was lost, we used an online cloud-based program for storage and made continuous back-ups during the entire writing process. This online program enabled us to save our data and keep it inaccessible for externals, as well as to share and update our material efficiently in between the two of us.

Lastly, Guba and Lincoln's (1994) fourth criterion, confirmability, was acknowledged since we consistently sought to act in good faith. Although it is impossible to achieve complete objectivity in research (Bell et al., 2019), we aimed to avoid bias and maintain a neutral approach to the extent possible. This is supported by the fact that neither of us has prior relationship with any of the case study firms or respondents, as well as that we choose a topic that does not cause any personal conflict of interests.

3.5. Ethical considerations

This study was conducted in compliance with Swedish Research Council's (2017) guidelines of good research practice. An ethical approach was therefore adopted throughout the entire study, particularly in the processes of retrieving, managing and storing empirical data (Bell et al., 2019). First, the criterion of anonymity (ibid) was fulfilled in our study. Although only two respondents explicitly requested anonymity, we decided to anonymize all case study firms and respondents to follow Swedish Research Council's (2017) recommendation of respecting integrity and confidentiality. Also, to anonymize participants may even provide more accurate results, since respondents feel more comfortable to depict the truth (Bell et al., 2019). Second, the principle of informed consent (Swedish Research Council, 2017) was recognized during the data collection process by several means. For example, the respondents were thoroughly informed on the purpose and intentions with our study. Also, we requested prior consent of recording and transcribing before each interview. The respondents were furthermore asked to

approve material during two phases, namely, before we proceeded to analyze the empirical data and before the final version was handed in. Third, the retrieved data was consistently managed with great confidentiality to maintain and ethical approach (Swedish Research Council, 2017). We kept all recordings, transcriptions, documentation and other critical information safe and only accessible to us. All recordings were moreover deleted immediately after they were transcribed, in order to prevent that information could be traced back to the respondents. Lastly, this study follows Swedish Research Council's (2017) ethical guidelines by not engaging in plagiarism, fabrication or falsification of data.

4. Empirical results

In Chapter 4, we present the empirical data retrieved from our 23 interviews at eight firms. We let the respondents be heard by including direct citations from the interviews, but also facilitate the reading by embedding our own storytelling. The chapter includes eight subchapters that present our empirical findings from each firm, followed by one final subchapter that provides a summarizing table.

4.1. Company A

Company A is a global manufacturing firm founded in Germany with a long history of working with global mobility (A1HR). A1HR describes that the main purpose of sending assignees abroad is "*[…] to place resources where they are needed, mainly to manage critical projects or to send specialist competency to another unit*". In line with this purpose, A3REP was positioned in Taiwan for four years with the mission to increase operational efficiency and streamline the organization. A2REP, on the other hand, was sent to Germany for six months, with the purpose to develop her business skills and advance her career. Although knowledge sharing and innovation are largely encouraged by Company A's corporate culture (A1HR; A3REP), global mobility is not explicitly a strategy for sharing intra-firm knowledge, but rather a positive side effect (A1HR).

Company A has recently transformed its governance model to be divided by global segments instead of geographical locations, leading to that the level of formalization has decreased: "*Today, the level of bureaucracy and hierarchy is relatively low, although you can still feel some of the German spirit*" (A1HR). A3REP agrees on that Company A has low hierarchy, which facilitates knowledge sharing: "*I think that our structure has a positive effect on spreading knowledge […] We try to encourage lower level employees to come up with new ideas because it is the people on the floor that know what needs to be done and what works and what does not*". In accordance, A2REP believes that both bureaucracy and hierarchy are low, although she finds the German unit to be more formalized than the Swedish one.

As a result of Company A's new governance model, its employees primarily work in global teams, report to a global segment manager and communicate more frequently across borders (A1HR). Although A3REP recognizes that there are benefits with the global governance structure, he also some difficulties: "*I really think that our new structure has led to increased*

efficiency. But sometimes, I can think that we miss out on the human side of things that we had before, like talking to colleagues and coming up with solutions together". Likewise, when A2REP explains that she reports weekly to her segment manager in Germany, she also mentions some disadvantages: "*I think it is quite sad that I do not get to meet my manager or colleagues more often. But we have a meeting once a year in Germany where all people from my segment get together to discuss upcoming challenges and exchange ideas*". Whilst Company A's structure is decentralized based on the global segments, its global mobility function is run centrally from Germany: "*We at HR take care of some local errands that must be done fast, but we need to follow the guidelines and policies from Germany*" (A1HR).

In respect to practices upon repatriation, A2REP expresses that: "*I thought that such a structured company like [Company A] would have prepared a program, but when I came back, it did not happen much*". A1HR similarly recognizes that the firm offers few practices for knowledge management: "*When they come back, they are asked to write a report [...] That is more or less the only instruction that I have received*". A2REP remembers writing the report that A1HR mentions, although she believes that these reports are not managed optimally: "*I think it is a great idea to reflect and write down what you learned. But after that, I do not know what happened. I do not know where to find them*". Weak accessibility of repatriate reports is also acknowledged by A1HR, who seeks to direct more publicity to the reports and improve repatriation, but states that: "*It is hard for me to change and make a mark on things. [Company A] has worked in the same way for many many years. It is just too much of a struggle to try to convince the mobility people in Germany*".

A3REP has not written any report or undergone any practice for formal knowledge management. Yet, he does not find such practices necessary, at least not in his case: "*I do not think it works like that. I think that you spread knowledge all the time in your day-to-day work. My experience from Taiwan is reflected in everything that I do, so it flows out in the organization anyway*" (A3REP). Instead, A3REP shares his repatriate knowledge in more informal ways by providing input in meetings and talking to colleagues, although he recognizes that increased support from managers could make the firm appropriate his knowledge even more: "*I recall that we talked about that I was going to manage a project related to what I did in Taiwan, but it ran out into the sand. I have not heard more about it*". A2REP, on the other hand, is not informally approached by colleagues, due to that: "*I think we have about five Germans in my segment [...] And we talk with each other a lot through our intranet. So, if*

someone wants to know anything about Germany, they approach someone of them instead". Employees networking and learning from each other is in line with A1HR's ambition, who seeks to place repatriates in forums where their knowledge is relevant.

Leadership is also mentioned by A2REP, who describes that: "*My manager was the one that inspired me to go abroad [...] I have always heard him talking about the times that he worked abroad*". However, as A2REP returned to the focal unit, her segment had undergone a reorganization and she was appointed a new manager, which makes her believe that: "*Although my new manager seems really good too, we had to start from scratch and build a relationship. So, the focus was more to get to know each other, rather than to debrief her on my time in Germany*". The reorganization made A2REP feel that it was an inappropriate time to bring up non-critical ideas, leading to that she mainly has personal use of her repatriate knowledge.

4.2. Company B

The Swedish manufacturing firm, Company B, has over the past years reduced its international assignees due to their high cost (B1HR). Company B mainly uses assignees to fulfill critical business needs and offer competencies that are not available at certain locations (B1HR). In the case of B2REP, he was sent on a two-year international assignment to Poland with the purpose to expand a newly opened business. Although Company B's purpose of global mobility differs depending on type of assignment, international assignees are used as tools to spread knowledge and values across the organization, which is aligned with its corporate culture that "*[...] favors and encourages people to come with new ideas*" (B1HR).

Both B1HR and B2REP see Company B's corporate structure as rather hierarchical and bureaucratic, which to some extent obstructs the development of new ideas, as exemplified by B2REP: "*I was part of developing a new IT system in Poland that was very well integrated into the processes over there. But then, when I came home, we had policies in place here in Sweden that made it hard to implement. So no, we do not use it here today*". Furthermore, B1HR describes Company B as a centralized organization, particularly the global mobility function. All global mobility tasks are managed centrally from Sweden by B1HR and corresponding representatives from the two other firms that belong to the same umbrella organization (B1HR). B1HR argues that it is hard to follow the centrally developed mobility policy since it is adjusted to the other two firms that works more extensively with global mobility: "*It is frustrating to*

always have to follow rules from above, when it actually would make more sense for us, with such low number of expats, to make exceptions to the rules".

Company B's low use of international assignees causes that the firm' global mobility management needs to be improved (B1HR; B2REP). Although repatriates are invited to an interview with the receiving units' manager, there is a general lack of repatriation practices over time (B1HR). B2REP somewhat recalls having an interview upon his return: "*It could be that I had some kind of interview when I came back, I do not really remember. But if I did, in was more at my own initiative*". Repatriates also fill in a survey and have a short chat with HR regarding the experience abroad (B1HR; B2REP). Though, B1HR states that: "*This stage is mostly done for us at HR in order to see how satisfied the expats are and how we can improve the process […] We could become much better at picking up these bad experiences and turn them into something good and constructive, instead of just letting them go*".

Both B1HR and B2REP also motivate the firm's lack of practices for knowledge management with unclear roles of responsibilities between HR and the repatriates' department. B1HR recognizes that: "*A key to a successful repatriation is to have a manager with some power and decision-making authority that can ensure that it goes in the right way*". Though, in case of B2REP, he describes that: "*My manager had not sent anyone abroad before, and neither had my manager's manager. They gave the entire responsibility to HR, but HR did not have any clue either of how to do it*". Yet, HR does not take the responsibility of implementing practices either, as put by B1HR: "*We as an organization should maybe offer more support to the expat, because right now we dump a lot of the responsibility on that person's manager*". B1HR also recognizes the risk of delegating all responsibility to the department: "*It is not given that the manager still works with us when the person returns home. Then it is very important that we have a process in place, that exists no matter who is in charge*".

Upon repatriation, B2REP was placed in a position in which he has not made use of his repatriate knowledge: "*Since I came back from Poland, I have not been able to use my knowledge as I have worked with totally different tasks […] When I entered my department, it felt like they barely knew that I had been abroad. I was just another new employee*". Still, colleagues from his former department often approach him with questions on the Polish unit: "*Even though I do not formally work there, I have become the speaking partner*" (B2REP). B2REP furthermore succeeds to disseminate some knowledge since he takes own initiatives,

although it is not integrated into existing routines or operating procedures at Company B. This makes him believe that: "*It would be hard for them if I would leave*" (B2REP). B1HR concludes by stating that: "*I actually do not think that we make the best out of our expatriates. We waste money and resources and use them in a non-optimal way*".

4.3. Company C

Company C is a British service company with extensive experience of working with global mobility (C1HR). Key motives for sending international assignees are to allocate resources to other units and to develop employees, who in turn are expected to retransfer knowledge to sending units (C1HR). Both C2REP and C3REP went on secondments to UK for two years each, with the purpose to build specialized competence that could be brought back to the Swedish unit, whilst C4REP went on a short-term assignment to Netherlands for three months to "*[…] develop herself and gain new competencies*".

Company C seeks to promote knowledge sharing (C1HR; C2REP; C3REP; C4REP), as illustrated by C2REP: "*We work a lot with "sharing" and "collaborating", that characterizes the entire organization*". Although Company C has a relatively formalized corporate structure, its culture outweighs the hierarchy, since employees spread knowledge independent of their hierarchical level (C1HR; C4REP). C3REP similarly states that the structure is "*[…] seemingly hierarchical*", but "*[…] surprisingly decentralized*". Also, C2REP recognizes that Company C has become even more decentralized recently since: "*Nowadays we almost always work in global projects. It does not matter where in the world people sit […] Sometimes I think it is a pity, because I do not get to meet my colleagues and discuss over a cup of morning coffee*". Decisions on global mobility are furthermore managed locally, as all countries have their own decentralized global mobility function (C1HR).

In Company C's Swedish unit, there are different practices for managing repatriate knowledge, as exemplified by C1HR: "*We have different gatherings with the personnel where they can tell what they learnt, what they got to do and what they brought with them*". Though, the respondents' personal experiences of these practices differ in all cases. C2REP "*[…] was involved in different contexts where I shared what I had done in meetings and presentations*". C3REP performed some informal trainings, but has not undergone any formal procedures for sharing his repatriate knowledge, although the firm implicitly expects that he shares. In contrast, C4REP has not gone through any practices for sharing her repatriate

knowledge, but instead for providing feedback on the firm's global mobility management. Such evaluation is a standard procedure at Company C, which seeks to improve future global mobility management (C1HR).

C1HR stresses that Company C uses various methods to increase informal knowledge management, such as creating cross-functional teams and announcing repatriates' experiences internally. Both C2REP and C3REP confirm that they have shared their repatriate knowledge informally at the Swedish unit, as exemplified by C2REP: "*I have definitely become a go-to person for questions regarding my experiences in UK. I get a lot of questions within our network*". Also, C3REP recognizes that: "*It is indirectly spread within the teams where I work.*". He explains that he has become an expert at the focal unit on the UK financial market and therefore daily participates in cross-functional teams and other forums in which his competency is required (C3REP). In C4REP's case, Company C has not taken any initiatives to informally spread her repatriate knowledge, but instead her knowledge on how to become an international assignee: "*They have sent out information on that I am available for questions for the ones going abroad in the future. But sure, they could maybe also announce the competences that I built*".

The repatriate knowledge that C2REP obtained in UK is today integrated into several processes and systems: "*My decisions are colored by my international experience and that has led to changes here in the Swedish unit. But it is not that odd, I mean, I have worked here for 25 years*". In respect to C3REP, he makes daily use of his repatriate knowledge, although he does not perceive that it is embedded in the company: "*If I would quit, a large share of my knowledge would also disappear*". He motivates his success in using his knowledge by that: "*It all comes down to the manager […] My manager was situated abroad before me, he knew what I went through and really appreciated my learnings. So, it is really him that I should thank for putting me in my current role where I can apply what I learned*" (C3REP). Though, Company C has not made any changes based on C4REP's repatriate knowledge.

4.4. Company D

Company D is an international service firm with roots in UK that uses global mobility as a strategy to develop the firm and its employees in the global landscape (D1HR). The main purpose of investing in global mobility is to develop competences, but also to retransfer knowledge to sending units (D1HR). She exemplifies that: "*I recently had a co-worker that*

worked on an assignment abroad in order to build up that same business at home. When these
people come home, they report what they did. It depends on the purpose" (D1HR). Both these
motives for using international assignees are observed in the case of D2REP, who went to UK
on a short-term assignment for four months: "*I went abroad for two reasons. First, my manager*
believed that I should build my personal resume and internal pipeline [...] And then also
because we needed to bring home some specific knowledge from the UK office". Company D's
global mindset is furthermore reflected in its corporate culture, which promotes knowledge
sharing both between individuals and peer units (D1HR; D2REP). In respect to Company D's
corporate structure, it is a "*[...] typically Swedish flat organization*" (D2REP). Company D has
a decentralized pipeline governance model, in which global mobility for the Nordic region is
coordinated primarily from Russia (D1HR).

In order to harvest knowledge that repatriates obtain abroad, Company D uses some practices
for formal knowledge management, although these are altered from case to case (D1HR). Most
practices are however expected to be implemented by department managers, as D1HR
expresses: "*It is not like me from HR follow this up or so, we do not have such directions, but*
instead we have fantastic leaders that share the knowledge that comes back. And then, we often
arrange presentations where we try to make sure that the co-workers can tell about their
findings". Upon D2REP's return, HR asked her to hold a presentation, but since then she has
implemented her learnings into the organization at own initiative. Today, her colleagues
approach her with questions related to her international assignment: "*I also became a go-to*
person, so to say, on what I had seen and what I had experienced" (D2REP). Company D aims
to foster this kind of informal knowledge sharing by, for example, scheduling meetings where
the repatriate can debrief colleagues on the experience abroad (D1HR).

Although Company D does not have any standardized practices for improving its global
mobility management, D1HR acknowledges that Company D learns from every international
assignment, which in turn leads to changes in its global mobility policies. Also, D1HR stresses
that Company D makes use of repatriate knowledge on specific business domains when deemed
as relevant. In D2REP's opinion, it is the individual's responsibility to select and implement
useful repatriate knowledge, which she has done: "*When I came back, I noticed that only some*
ways of working from UK were possible to implement in the projects with our Swedish
customers. Where we could, and where it was appropriate, there it was done". When re-
entering the Swedish unit, D2REP's responsibilities were extended to include more work with

UK, so that she could make use of her repatriate knowledge over time. As she puts it: "*The things I learned, I take advantage of, and still have use for, today*" (D2REP).

4.5. Company E

Company E is a Norwegian manufacturing firm with production units in Asia and business units in Scandinavia and North America (E1HR). The firm currently works limited with global mobility, even though the demand for international assignees has significantly increased (E1HR). The demand has risen as Company E experiences difficulties in developing proper communication between business and production units, despite numerous communication tools and knowledge sharing initiatives (E1HR; E2REP; E3REP). Company E's unit in Norway sees a great value in learning from the production units in Asia: "*We need to learn from them to increase our chances to win the big projects*" (E3REP). In order to attain such input, E3REP went on an eight-year assignment to South Korea to "*[…] establish a factory from start, like building a house stone by stone*", where the management "*[…] expected me to bring knowledge on the South Korean market to the organization*". Similarly, E2REP went on a seven-year secondment to China with the objective to expand and improve the Chinese production unit, where her Chinese background allowed her to serve as "*[…] a bridge between Norway and Asia*".

All respondents consider Company E to be a decentralized organization (E1HR; E2REP; E3REP), where also HR is decentralized and locally present in all countries of representation (E1HR). Though, due to the increased demand for international assignees, E1HR argues that Company E needs to develop a proper global mobility function. To do so, she considers it necessary to collect information and learn from each assignee's experience (E1HR). Moreover, the low extent of group policies makes E1HR perceive Company E as a non-bureaucratic organization: "*It (the bureaucracy) is very low, sometimes a bit too low […] You could say that we are in the initial phase of developing clearer guidelines on group level*". The corporate structure of Company E is also characterized by low hierarchy (E1HR; E2REP; E3REP), as exemplified by E2REP: "*We are Norwegians, so we are not very hierarchical. The decisions are made far down*".

The limited work with global mobility causes that Company E does not have any standardized practices for formal knowledge management (E1HR), and accordingly, neither of E2REP or E3REP has performed any practice since they repatriated. Nevertheless, E3REP argues that

practices for formal knowledge management are not necessary: "*To really use the knowledge that people come back with, it is not about draining that person on knowledge. It is more about making sure that the person gets involved in the right things*". This is also acknowledged by E1HR, who believes that assignees take own responsibility to share: "*The managers that are sent on international assignments have the influence and willingness to share if they believe that it is valuable for others*". E3REP describes how he continuously exercises such influence and spreads his repatriate knowledge: "*I am often called into different meetings, although they are not necessarily within in my area of responsibility […] The others in the management team often ask for my opinion*".

Other employees often ask E3REP questions on his assignment abroad, which is common since: "*We are still so small that everyone is aware of who possesses which knowledge*". Similarly, E2REP describes how she has become a go-to-person for questions on China, but also for non-business related questions: "*You could say that I have become the "China expert" at [Company E], both since I have been there, still work towards that market and since I am half Chinese*". E2REP's network position, experience and relation to both the Chinese and Norwegian unit, makes her believe that it would be difficult for Company E to replace her. E3REP, on the other hand, states that: "*If I would have quit, [Company E] would survive for sure. But the knowledge, I mean, it is not stored in terms of data bits in a data base, it is more in terms of all the strategies that I have made, and others could of course follow my path*".

4.6. Company F
Company F is a global service firm from Sweden with relatively few international assignees, although this number is increasing (F1HR). According to F1HR, Company F's main purpose of working with global mobility is to send expertise from the Swedish unit to foreign units. Even though she recognizes that assignees also return with valuable knowledge, to receive knowledge is not an official purpose (F1HR). In line with Company F's explicit purpose of global mobility, F3REP went to US for four years to offer specialized competency. F2REP was also based in US for two years, but as she already worked in US when Company F recruited her, she had no predefined purpose of her assignment.

Company F actively aims to encourage learning among its employees (F1HR; F2REP; F3REP) and there is an entrepreneurial spirit embedded in the company (F3REP). As part of the corporate culture, both F2REP and F3REP mention leadership as a key determinant of learning

from others. F3REP describes that: "*Both me and our CEO have been situated abroad in our careers. He is very good at embracing individuals with international experience […] If there are questions on US, our CEO asks me. I think it has a lot to do with our management's own experience*". F3REP continues to describe that his manager not only has helped him spread his knowledge, but also taken action to implement his ideas: "*Without his power, it would have been impossible to do the changes that I have done*". Recently, Company F introduced a new reporting structure based on business functions, instead of geographical locations (F1HR). This new corporate structure reduced the need for repatriates, as F2REP states: "*People can be situated at a physical location but is responsible for other regions. So, we communicate over borders all the time. It is not like I am the expert on US in my team, we have people from US that take on that role instead*". As another result of this new structure, all respondents argue that Company F is unbureaucratic and non-hierarchical (F1HR; F2REP; F3REP). Company F is also decentralized, except for the global mobility department that is centrally coordinated from Sweden (F1HR).

Neither of the respondents has gone through any formal processes for sharing their repatriate knowledge (F2REP; F3REP). According to F1HR, the reason is that: "*Since to bring knowledge back is not the official purpose for why we send people abroad, we do not have a program or so in place for when these people return home*". Nevertheless, Company F improves its repatriation work along with that the number of international assignees increases (F1HR). Still, since Company F has not formally managed his repatriate knowledge, F3REP believes that: "*If I would have left [Company F], they would have benefitted from interviewing me about my experiences. I possess certain knowledge that few others have within the firm thanks to my experience abroad*". Informal knowledge sharing is on the other hand more common, which both is encouraged by F1HR and personally experienced by F2REP and F3REP. For instance, F2REP has become a go-to person and is "*[…] often placed in cross-functional teams where this knowledge is required*". To further enhance informal knowledge sharing, Company F has created an internal communication channel with information on international assignees (F1HR), although F3REP seems to not be aware of this channel: "*I do not expect anyone to know what experience I have, we do not have that guidance today*". In F3REP's opinion, HR should bear the responsibility for managing repatriate knowledge: "*All expats that we have at [Company F] have left now. I do not think that we had any activities for taking care of their knowledge, it is something that HR should do*". In contrast, F1HR argues that: "*Each

department is responsible for receiving the knowledge. It is not relevant for my job since I do not know the technical side of it".

Whether Company F makes use of repatriate knowledge differs between the two repatriates. F2REP's knowledge is disseminated to some extent, although at her own initiative, and applied in her daily work since North America is part of her responsibility. However, she recognizes that: "*If this would change, then I think it would take a year or two and then this knowledge that I gained abroad would be gone*" (F2REP). In contrast, F3REP believes that he has succeeded to share and integrate his knowledge, but: "*If I would not have returned to a position within the management team, then it may have been challenging to share my experience. But now I am part of most decisions, and since my frame of reference mostly consists of my international experience, this is automatically integrated*". As a result, Company F has implemented several changes based on F3REP's repatriate knowledge, such as an extended presence of local support, use of English as standardized contract language and adjustment of product design to global conditions.

4.7. Company G

The Swedish construction services firm, Company G, works increasingly with global mobility (G1HR). The firm has several mobility policies, which stretch from strategic assignments and commuter assignments to development assignments (G1HR), where the latter policy includes a flagship program hereafter referred to as Program G. Whilst the two former mobility policies aim to fill critical business needs and transfer specialized competencies between units, Program G aims to prepare young professionals for future leadership roles (G1HR). While being abroad, "*[…] They (the repatriates) are not experts on the task that they are given abroad […] They are at the foreign unit to learn, and to contribute when they get back home*" (G1HR). Both G2REP and G3REP participated in Program G, where G2REP spent one year in US and G3REP spent one year in UK.

G2REP and G3REP find Company G's corporate culture to be friendly, inspiring and developing, which according to G2REP leads to that: "*Our corporate culture has a positive effect on knowledge sharing*". Although the firm has multiple available communication tools for knowledge sharing (G1HR; G2REP; G3REP), lack of time often causes that people do not reach out to other units (G3REP). As G2REP argues: "*You do not have time to spread ideas and ensure that the ideas reach the right people. It is easier and faster to just do it yourself*".

In respect to Company G's corporate structure, it is rather decentralized (G1HR; G2REP; G3REP). However, its global mobility function is run centrally from Sweden, leading to that: "*All countries and units work in the same manner with global mobility […] Within Program G, all business units have to do in the same way*" (G1HR). Moreover, formalization is low, as neither of the respondents perceive the focal unit as hierarchical or bureaucratic (G1HR; G2REP; G3REP), although level of formalization is higher at other foreign units (G1HR).

Company G has more practices for knowledge management for participants in Program G, as compared to for assignees that go abroad for critical business needs, which G3REP motivates with: "*They are normally more senior and very skilled. They find themselves in that kind of forums automatically*". When G2REP and G3REP returned from their international assignments, both were invited to forums, meetings and presentations to speak about their learnings abroad. However, G3REP returned to another department than the one that sent her abroad. She thus held her presentation at her new department, where she could only contribute with limited information since her learnings better corresponded to the tasks at her old department: "*I think some knowledge fell through the cracks […] If I would have returned to the same unit that I left from, I think that they would have followed up in another way*". In G2REP's case, the presentation was requested by his manager, which makes him realize that: "*It is important to have a leader higher up the organization that supports and cares about you*". G1HR and G3REP also highlight the need for supportive managers. Moreover, Company G works with cross-functional teams, networks and alumni groups for former Program G participants to encourage informal knowledge sharing (G1HR). G3REP has made use of such networks: "*I have become the contact person for questions relating to the UK. If someone has questions about reference projects in the UK, they come to me. At least among the people that know that I have been there*". Also, Company G uses practices, such as its talent and performance review, to improve its global mobility management (G1HR).

Both G2REP and G3REP make personal use of their knowledge gained abroad. Whether Company G capitalizes on repatriate knowledge however varies, since some knowledge is lost along with that repatriates resign (G1HR). G3REP says that: "*Others showed great interest to hear about my experience*", although she perceives that: "*A lot of my new knowledge could not be used, so you could say that it partly went to waste*". G2REP, on the other hand, states that: "*It has been pretty poor. It is not like I have got a lot of interviews and that people have cared about what I did*". According to G2REP, the repatriate is responsible for diffusing knowledge,

whilst according to G3REP, both the individual and the organization bear the responsibility, although at different points in time: "*During the first year after returning home, it was more on [Company G]'s initiative to invite me to different settings. Now it is mostly me, on my own initiative, to share my experiences*". In their current managerial positions, both G2REP and G3REP do, at own initiative, implement some changes on project level, as exemplified by G3REP: "*In my current role, I see that the knowledge that I gained abroad actually leads to change, since I am the one implementing the change*". Yet, the input provided to her new department has not been further transferred in the organization or led to any changes: "*I think it stopped there and then*" (G3REP).

4.8. Company H

Company H is a US service provider that works extensively with global mobility (H1HR; H2REP; H3REP). As H3REP explains: "*Company H has a European staffing model. We look at the whole pool of consultants from all over Europe and assign projects to the ones that are available, have the right skills and fulfill the requirements*". Since Company H staffs based on competency, not geographical location, employees seldom work in the country where they live (H1HR; H3REP). Most employees work abroad Monday to Thursday each week, in addition to that 100-200 employees go on longer assignments overseas yearly to either fulfill critical business needs or develop competencies (H1HR). With the aim to accelerate his career, H2REP went on a self-initiated international assignment to UK for nine years. H3REP, on the other hand, has been on multiple shorter international assignments out of critical business needs, where the most recent ones were to Luxemburg and Netherlands for six months each.

H2REP describes that "*[…] knowledge sharing is part of our culture*" and "*[…] we are not afraid of change*". Although all three respondents witness of that Company H's corporate culture is highly focused on learning (H1HR; H2REP; H3REP), Company H does not use global mobility management as a strategy for sharing knowledge (H2REP). Intra-firm communication is though mentioned as a knowledge sharing strategy (H1HR), which according to H3REP reduces the need for repatriates: "*I would not say that your competence is unique for a location. I mean, we are part of global teams where we talk all the time. Of course my colleagues in the Amsterdam office know the Dutch market better than I do.*" Furthermore, all respondents point at that the firm's corporate structure has a positive impact on knowledge sharing (H1HR; H2REP; H3REP). H3REP stresses that Company H is characterized by clear hierarchical levels, although such hierarchy does not affect the corporate culture: "*Our hierarchical structure helps*

us decide who should do what in a project, but it is really not a hierarchical atmosphere in meetings or in the office". The firm is generally decentralized (H2REP; H3REP), but global mobility is centralized in UK (H1HR).

Company H does not have any practices in place to manage repatriate knowledge, which is confirmed by the cases of H2REP and H3REP. According to H2REP, practices solely for repatriate knowledge management are not necessary: "*Continuous knowledge sharing is so deeply rooted in our organization that many formal processes that you maybe find at other companies are not needed in our case. Instead, it takes place automatically in a very organic way*". There are though several general knowledge sharing tools available for all employees, such as meetings, virtual calls, slack channels, career advisors and presentations (H2REP; H3REP). A common tool is the "*[…] knowledge data base in which all projects that we do are published, indexed and categorized*" (H2REP). Both H2REP and H3REP find this web-based cloud to be valuable, but H3REP recognizes that: "*It is not often that people go to the cloud and search for fun […] I would like to see documents better spread within the organization. I can feel that, many times, we lose track of what projects we have done*". In addition, Company H uses some practices to receive feedback on global mobility management, which lead to changes in the firm's expatriation policies (H1HR).

While formal knowledge management is rather infrequent, informal knowledge management is largely encouraged (H2REP; H3REP). Networking is the most common strategy, as exemplified by H2REP: "*The purpose of making everyone return to the home office on Fridays is for people to discuss projects, socialize and exchange experiences. The ambition is that this should be done informally, rather than everyone filling in a paper of what you have learned during the week*". Although knowledge indeed is shared among organizational members to some extent, H3REP argues that expertise gained abroad in previous projects, seldom can be utilized in future ones as local contexts often differ a lot. In H2REP's opinion, it is the employees' responsibility to ensure that knowledge is disseminated and used. He moreover believes that Company H succeeds in storing and maintaining knowledge of its repatriates, but only as long as they stay within the firm since "*[…] it is often in that person's head*" (H2REP).

4.9. Summary of empirical findings

Table 3 below summarizes our key empirical findings, which are divided into our three theoretical constructs with their respective variables. As indicated by the first column in Table 3, corporate culture, all firms claim to have cultures that promote knowledge sharing, particularly by having high intra-firm communication and leadership that encourages knowledge sharing. Firms' purposes of working with international assignments vary and only two firms consider global mobility an explicit strategy for sharing knowledge. As presented in the second column in Table 3, corporate structure, five of the firms are non-formalized. Although three firms have hierarchical structures, these structures do not generally appear to impede knowledge management. Also, the majority of firms are decentralized, except for the global mobility function that often is managed centrally. Among the decentralized firms, four have a global governance model and teams.

The third column in Table 3, practices for formal knowledge management, shows that types and presence of practices range from firms that have no repatriate specific practices at all, to firms that have multiple practices, although these are altered from case to case. When implementing practices for formal knowledge management, five firms experience some kind of ownership conflict caused by unclear roles of responsibilities. As seen in the fourth column in Table 3, practices for informal knowledge management, most firms use this kind of practices, and some even explicitly prefer this kind over practices for formal knowledge management. Although firms use practices for formal and informal knowledge management, they often implement practices inadequately, which has caused weak accessibility to repatriate knowledge in five cases. Moreover, in addition to managing repatriate knowledge on specific business domains, most firms have established practices that aim to improve their global mobility management.

Lastly, the fifth column in Table 3, organizational learning, presents our findings related to dissemination and institutionalization. The empirical data is here divided by respondent and reflects how well repatriate knowledge of each repatriate has contributed to organizational learning within that firm. Almost all repatriates make personal use of their knowledge. Though, firms' use of their knowledge varies extensively, from being only partly used, to being fully integrated into organizational systems. In addition to that repatriates' knowledge on specific business domains in some cases contributes to organizational learning, repatriates' feedback and experiences are used to improve the firms' global mobility management.

Table 3. *Summary of empirical findings*

Company	Orientation towards learning		Practices for KM		Organizational learning
	Corporate culture	Corporate structure	Practices for formal KM	Practices for informal KM	
A	• Culture promoting KS (A1HR; A3REP) • High intra-firm communication (A2REP) • Leadership promoting KS (A2REP) • GM not used as strategy for KS (A1HR) • Purpose of IA to send knowledge (A3REP) • Purpose of IA to develop competency (A2REP)	• Low bureaucracy and hierarchy (A1HR; A2REP; A3REP) • Global governance model (A1HR) • Decentralized MNC (A1HR) • Centralized GM in Germany (A1HR)	• Summarizing report (A1HR; A2REP) • Weak accessibility (A1HR; A2REP) • Ownership conflict, new/old manager (A2REP)	• Preference for informal KM (A3REP) • Continous meetings (A3REP) • Application of RK in projects and daily work (A2REP; A3REP)	• Personally uses RK in daily work, informally shares RK to some extent in her team, serves as go-to person and wrote a summarizing report (A2REP) • Uses and shares RK in daily work, serves as go-to person, makes decisions based on RK and RK is therefore spread in the organization. Planned to manage project based on RK, but project is not yet realized (A3REP)
B	• Culture promoting KS (B1HR) • Lack of leadership promoting KS (B2REP) • Purpose of IA to send knowledge (B2REP)	• High bureaucracy and hierarchy (B1HR; B2REP) • Centralized MNC (B1HR) • Centralized GM in Sweden, managed by umbrella organization (B1HR)	• Interview with manager (B1HR; B2REP) • Ownership conflict, HR/department and old/new department (B1HR; B2REP) • Evaluation of GM (B1HR; B2REP)	• No repatriate specific practices for informal KM	• Does not use RK in new position due to different tasks. Informally spreads some RK, serves as go-to person and is still an informal speaking partner with foreign unit. RK would be lost if he would resign (B2REP) • Improves GM based on feedback, but not used optimally (B1HR)
C	• Culture promoting KS (C1HR; C2REP; C3REP; C4REP) • Purpose of IA to send and receive knowledge (C2REP; C3REP) • Purpose of IA to develop competency (C4REP)	• High hierarchy (C1HR; C3REP; C4REP) • Global teams (C1HR; C2REP) • Decentralized MNC (C2REP; C3REP) • Decentralized GM (C1HR)	• Practices differ from case to case (C2REP; C3REP; C4REP) • Meeting (C2REP) • Presentation (C2REP) • Evaluation of GM (C1HR; C4REP)	• Cross-functional teams (C1HR; C3REP) • Announcement of repatriate as go-to-person (C1HR; C4REP) • Weak accessibility (C4REP) • Informal trainings (C3REP) • Application of RK in projects and daily work (C2REP; C3REP)	• Formally and informally spreads RK, serves as go-to person, uses RK in daily work and has implemented several changes based on RK (C2REP) • Informally spreads RK and uses RK in daily work, serves as go-to person. RK would be lost if he would resign (C3REP) • Does not use RK in daily work, does not spread RK and has not implemented any changes based on RK (C4REP) • Improves GM based on feedback (C1HR)
D	• Culture promoting KS (D1HR; D2REP) • GM used as strategy for KS (D1HR) • Purpose of IA to develop competency and receive knowledge (D2REP)	• Low bureaucracy and hierarchy (D2REP) • Decentralized MNC (D1HR) • Centralized GM in Russia (D1HR)	• Practices differ from case to case (D1HR) • Presentation (D2REP) • Ownership conflict, HR/department (D1HR)	• Continous meetings (D1HR) • Application of RK in projects and daily work (D2REP) • Informal evaluation of GM (D1HR)	• Uses RK in daily work. Formally and informally spreads RK, serves as go-to person. Has transformed RK to fit local conditions and implemented some changes based on RK (D2REP) • Improves GM based on feedback (D1HR)

Abbreviations: GM=Global mobility, IA=International assignment, KM=Knowledge management, KS=Knowledge sharing, MNC=Multinational corporation, OL=Organizational learning, RK=Repatriate knowledge

Table 3. *Summary of empirical findings (cont'd)*

Company	Orientation towards learning		Practices for KM		Organizational learning
	Corporate culture	Corporate structure	Practices for formal KM	Practices for informal KM	
E	• Culture promoting KS (E1REP; E2REP; E3REP) • Low intra-firm communication (E1HR; E2REP; E3REP) • GM used as strategy for KS (E3REP) • Purpose of IA to send and receive knowledge (E2REP; E3REP)	• Low bureaucracy and hierarchy (E1HR; E2REP; E3REP) • Decentralized MNC (E1HR; E2REP; E3REP) • Decentralized HR, no GM (E1HR)	• No repatriate specific practices for formal KM (E1HR; E2REP; E3REP)	• Preference for informal KM (E1HR; E3REP) • Continous meetings (E3REP) • Application of RK in projects and daily work (E2REP) • Informal evaluation of GM (E1HR)	• Uses and informally shares RK in daily work, serves as go-to person. Has adapted job tasks to RK (E2REP) • Uses and informally shares RK in daily work, serves as go-to person. Formulated strategies based on RK (E3REP) • Improves GM based on feedback (E1HR)
F	• Culture promoting KS (F1REP; F2REP; F3REP) • High intra-firm communication (F2REP) • Leadership promoting KS (F2REP; F3REP) • GM not used as strategy for KS (F1HR) • No purpose of IA (F2REP) • Purpose of IA to send knowledge (F3REP)	• Low bureaucracy and hierarchy (F1HR; F2REP; F3REP) • Global governance model (F1HR) • Decentralized MNC (F1HR) • Centralized GM in Sweden (F1HR)	• No repatriate specific practices for formal KM (F1HR; F2REP; F3REP) • Ownership conflict, HR/department (F1HR; F3REP)	• Preference for informal KM (F1HR; F2REP; F3REP) • Cross-functional teams (F2REP) • Announcement of repatriate as go-to-person (F1HR) • Weak accessibility (F3REP) • Application of RK in projects and daily work (F2REP; F3REP)	• Uses and informally shares RK in daily work, serves as go-to person. Has adapted job tasks and responsibilities to RK. RK would be lost if she would resign (F2REP) • Uses and spreads RK in daily work through decisions. Has implemented several organizational changes based on RK (F3REP) • Improves GM based on feedback (F1HR)
G	• Culture promoting KS (G2REP; G3REP) • Low intra-firm communication (G1REP; G2REP; G3REP) • Leadership promoting KS (G3REP) • Purpose of IA to develop competency and receive knowledge (G2REP; G3REP)	• Generally low hierarchy (G2REP; G3REP), but differs between units (G1HR) • Decentralized MNC (G1HR; G2REP; G3REP) • Centralized GM in Sweden (G1HR)	• Practices differ from case to case (G1HR) • Forums (G2REP; G3REP) • Meeting (G2REP; G3REP) • Presentation (G2REP; G3REP) • Ownership conflict, new/old department (G3REP) • Evaluation of GM (G1HR)	• Cross-functional teams (G1HR) • Networks (G1HR) • Weak accessibility (G3REP) • Application of RK in projects and daily work (G2REP; G3REP)	• Personally uses RK and has implemented some changes on project level (G2REP) • Personally uses and informally shares RK, serves as go-to person. Has implemented some changes on project level. Some RK has been lost since it was not applicable in new role with changed job tasks (G3REP) • Improves GM based on feedback (G1HR)
H	• Culture promoting KS (H1REP; H2REP; H3REP) • High intra-firm communication • GM not strategy for KS (H1HR) • Purpose of IA to develop competency (H2REP) • Purpose of IA to send knowledge (H3REP)	• Relatively high hierarchy (H2REP; H3REP) • Global governance and staffing model (H1HR; H3REP) • Decentralized MNC (H2REP; H3REP) • Centralized GM in UK (H1HR)	• No repatriate specific practices for formal KM (H2REP; H3REP) • Cloud storage of previous projects (H2REP; H3REP) • Weak accessibility (H3REP) • Evaluation of GM (H1HR)	• Preference for informal KM (H2REP) • Networks (H2REP) • Application of RK in projects and daily work (H2REP; H3REP)	• Personally uses RK, which indirectly is used in projects. Informally shares RK through networking. Formally documents every project, although information is not widely used. RK would be lost if he would resign (H2REP) • Personally uses RK, which indirectly is used in projects. Informally shares RK through networking. Formally documents every project, although information is not widely used (H3REP) • Improves GM based on feedback (H1HR)

Abbreviations: GM=Global mobility, IA=International assigment, KM=Knowledge management, KS=Knowledge sharing, MNC=Multinational corporation, OL=Organizational learning, RK=Repatriate knowledge

5. Analysis

In Chapter 5, we analyze and discuss our empirical findings in relation to our theoretical framework. The chapter is divided into our two variables of absorptive capacity, orientation towards learning and practices for knowledge management, and analyze each variable's impact on organizational learning. Based on our analytical findings, we then provide a summary and revise our conceptual model.

5.1. Orientation towards learning's impact on organizational learning

5.1.1. Corporate culture

5.1.1.1. General values and strategies promoting knowledge sharing are insufficient

Our empirical results indicate that all case study firms have corporate cultures that favor knowledge sharing, which is illustrated by, for example, encouragement of new ideas, desire to learn, entrepreneurial mindset and openness to change. In addition to such knowledge sharing values, most respondents refer to various internal strategies that promote intra-firm knowledge sharing, such as cooperation and communication. The general values and strategies promoting knowledge sharing found among the firms do, in line with Berthoin Antal (2001) and Daghfous (2004), seem to enhance organizational learning from intra-firm knowledge as they lead to internal changes (Argote & Miron-Spektor, 2011). For instance, Company A uses global meetings as a knowledge sharing strategy to exchange ideas and expertise between peer units, which leads to changes and improvements within its organization.

Nevertheless, our empirical findings indicate that the positive impact that general values and strategies promoting knowledge sharing have on organizational learning (Daghfous, 2004; Berthoin Antal, 2011), can be problematized in the context of repatriation. We conceptualized global mobility as a strategy that firms can use to share intra-firm knowledge, as implied by e.g. Bonache and Brewster (2001), Bonache and Zárraga-Oberty (2008) and Suutari and Brewster (2003). Though, in reality, only two firms denote global mobility as a knowledge sharing strategy. Most firms instead claim to use international assignments as means to either fulfill critical business needs or offer career opportunities to its employees. Thus, while theory portrays global mobility as a clear strategy to share knowledge (ibid), few firms seem to share this perception.

This reasoning is particularly evident when comparing the purposes of the international assignments in our sample. For example, F1HR explains Company F's lack of practices with that its official purpose of international assignments is to send expertise overseas, not to retransfer it to the focal unit. Since practices for knowledge management can facilitate organizational learning (Hoe & McShane, 2010; Minbaeva et al., 2003; Zahra & George, 2002), Company F's lack of practices may therefore reduce the firm's chance to learn from their repatriates. This link between purposes of international assignments and learning outcomes is also visible at Company C. At this firm, C2REP and C3REP had outspoken purposes to retransfer knowledge and C4REP had a self-development motive. C2REP and C3REP were consequently asked to disseminate knowledge upon their return, while C4REP was not. Since dissemination is a precondition for institutionalization (Argote & Miron-Spektor, 2011), C4REP was therefore not given the opportunity to move forward in the organizational learning process and learning thus ceased at individual level (Cohen & Levinthal, 1990). Though, to C2REP and C3REP, Company C offered the opportunity to disseminate, and even implemented organizational changes based on C2REP's knowledge, which is an act of institutionalization according to Crossan et al. (1999), Dodgson (1993) and Fiol and Lyles (1985).

This analytical discussion thereby supports Daghfous' (2004) and Berthoin Antal's (2001) finding that general values and strategies promoting knowledge sharing have a positive impact on organizational learning. However, the theoretical vision of global mobility as a knowledge sharing strategy put forward by Bonache and Brewster (2001), Bonache and Zárraga-Oberty (2008) and Suutari and Brewster (2003), does not correspond with the firms' application in practice. Since repatriation seldom is defined as a method to diffuse knowledge, we instead find that repatriates not necessarily consider diffusion to be part of their mission, leading to that organizational learning may be hindered. So, we find Oddou et al.'s (2013) arguing that MNCs need global mindset to learn from assignees to be insufficient. Instead, we empirically find that corporate culture must be contextually adjusted, which better aligns with Lazarova and Caligiuri (2001), who emphasize that firms need cultures that support repatriate management. Though, as Lazarova and Caligiuri (2001) do not elaborate this argument or specify how this support should be designed, we would like to complement their theory with our finding that firms should explicitly define global mobility as a corporate strategy to share knowledge and add knowledge sharing as a pre-defined purpose of international assignments, in order to enhance their learning outcome from repatriates.

5.1.1.2. Level of intra-MNC communication impacts need for repatriates

When discussing corporate culture, communication is mentioned as an important and efficient tool to spread ideas internally within MNCs. Our empirical results align with literature on absorptive capacity that find frequent intra-MNC communication to strengthen relationships between units and in turn facilitate transfer of knowledge between them (Ali et al., 2018; Cohen & Levinthal, 1990; Oddou et al., 2009; Van den Bosch et al., 1999; Volberda et al., 2010). For example, Company H's subsidiaries communicate on a daily basis, which the respondents at Company H see as a facilitator of intra-MNC knowledge sharing.

However, our empirical results imply that the level of intra-MNC communication affects the need for repatriate knowledge at the focal unit. We identify three cases in which repatriates perceive that their knowledge is redundant, since focal unit employees directly approach colleagues in foreign unit instead of them. At Company H, that has extensive intra-MNC communication, H3REP explains that her colleagues in Amsterdam are more knowledgeable on the Dutch market than she is, leading to that Swedish employees directly ask Dutch employees instead of mediating questions through her. A2REP and F2REP present similar arguments as they both claim that their repatriate knowledge is not valuable enough to share, due to the frequent communication between their respective foreign and focal unit. Following this logic, two of the firms, Company E and G, have relatively low intra-MNC communication, which in contrast appears to increase the need of repatriate knowledge. Company E struggles with communication issues between business and production units and highly values E2REP's and E3REP's repatriate knowledge, where E2REP even believes that it would be hard to replace her due to her specialized knowledge on Company E's Norwegian and Chinese relationship. Likewise, Company G suffers from poor communication between peer units due to time deficiency. Here, G3REP serves as a go-to person for questions on UK, leading to that Swedish employees seldom approach UK employees directly.

Thus, in light of repatriation, well-developed and well-used internal communication channels seem to substitute repatriates, since repatriates then are seen as excessive intermediaries. Our empirical data therefore indicates that intra-MNC communication has negative effect on firms' organizational learning from repatriate knowledge. Since previous research on intra-MNC knowledge sharing has not considered this potential downside (e.g. Grant, 1996; Song, 2014), researchers may arguably have had a too narrow mindset and glorified communication. Similarly, research on repatriation also illustrates communication as a positive action taken by

firms (e.g. Berthoin Antal, 2001; Gupta & Govindarajan, 2000; Lazarova & Tarique, 2005; Sanchez-Vidal et al., 2018). Even though there exists extensive literature on the intersection of international assignees and intra-MNC communication (e.g. Brewster & Suutari, 2005; Kostova et al., 2016), we do not manage to identify any study that critically discusses the potential negative impact that communication has on organizational learning from repatriate knowledge. Further examination of this finding could thereby provide value to practitioners as it can help them to more efficiently allocate firm resources and determine in what instances it is most suitable to send international assignees. For example, by recognizing that repatriates become more significant for organizational learning when intra-MNC communication is low, firms can prioritize to send assignees between units that have relatively poor internal communication. If firms, on the other hand, choose to use assignees when communication between foreign and focal units is high, they should bear in mind that the substitution effect between communication and repatriate knowledge may limit their possibility to draw maximum benefit from repatriates.

5.1.1.3. Leadership should favor global mobility management

Our empirical results delineate leadership as a central determinant of organizational learning in accordance with previous literature (e.g. Burmeister et al., 2015; Oddou et al., 2009; Oddou et al., 2013; Reiche et al., 2011). Several respondents also agree with Gupta and Govindarajan (2000), Oddou et al. (2009) and Oddou et al. (2013), on that it is particularly valuable with managers that have own international experience. A2REP, C3REP and F3REP all refer to their managers' previous experiences abroad as sources of inspiration and facilitators to spread knowledge. For instance, F3REP believes that his repatriate knowledge is embraced and appreciated by his manager, which he motivates by his manager's own international background. In contrast, B2REP argues that a potential reason for the poor use of his repatriate knowledge is that neither his manager, nor manager's manager, has gone on assignments overseas.

When scholars, such as Burmeister et al. (2015) and Reiche et al. (2011), describe how leadership contributes to learning, they primarily focus on how managers can encourage employees to spread knowledge. That managers can support the dissemination stage is found in our empirical results, where, for example, both C3REP and G2REP explain their success in sharing repatriate knowledge by the support received from their respective manager. Though,

in their cases, managerial support appears insufficient to perform the institutionalization stage. This is seen by the fact that C3REP's repatriate knowledge would be lost if he would resign and is thus not independent of its origin (Crossan et al., 1999). Similarly, G2REP's repatriate knowledge has only led to changes on project level and is therefore not fully integrated into the organizational memory (López et al., 2005; Walsh & Ungson, 1991). Instead, for leadership to contribute to institutionalization of repatriate knowledge, it appears important that managers not only encourage dissemination, but also have decision-making authority. For instance, F3REP describes that without the power of his manager, the CEO of Company F, it would have been impossible for him to implement changes on organizational level. His organizational changes, such as adjusted contract language and modified product design, exemplify how institutionalization can take place as the changes have improved future organizational behavior through better knowledge and understanding (Fiol & Lyles, 1985). This finding is also discussed by B1REP, who explicitly mentions the closest leader's power and decision-making authority as key determinants to successful repatriate knowledge management.

Managerial support can therefore lead to increased learning, as suggested by several researchers within the field (Gupta & Govindarajan, 2000; Oddou et al., 2013; Reiche et al., 2011). In our case, we see indications of that leadership promoting knowledge sharing has a positive impact on absorptive capacity, which further initiates the organizational learning cycle when knowledge is disseminated (Hoe & McShane, 2010). Burmeister et al.'s (2015) previous finding that managers are influencers who can facilitate use of repatriate knowledge by valuing and promoting repatriate knowledge, also correspond with our findings, where G2REP statutes an example of when the manager ensures that repatriate knowledge is used at group level. Yet, we find that for repatriate knowledge to be appropriated at organizational level, the repatriate's manager must not only be supportive, but also have power and authority to realize change within the firm. Although these characteristics are briefly covered by Burmeister et al. (2015) and Oddou et al. (2013), these authors adopt distinct perspectives and therefore do not thoroughly investigate how such different leadership characteristics affect different stages of the learning cycle. Studying managers' influence on absorptive capacity through the lens of organizational learning theory thus confirms past academic work (Burmeister et al., 2015; Gupta & Govindarajan, 2000; Oddou et al., 2013; Reiche et al., 2011), whilst also adding the notion of that different leadership features have different learning outcomes. Consequently, to maximize organizational learning, firms should staff strategically and ensure that repatriates are allocated managers that both promote knowledge sharing and have authority to implement

change. Our findings also suggest that firms can enhance learning by assigning repatriates managers with international experience, and furthermore promote them to managerial positions in teams with repatriates in the future.

5.1.2. Corporate structure

5.1.2.1. Formalization is outweighed by corporate culture

Ali et al. (2018) and Van den Bosch et al. (1999) find formalized, i.e. bureaucratic and hierarchical, corporate structures to restrict knowledge diffusion and change management. Accordingly, Berthoin Antal (2001) comes to the same conclusion when organizations learn from their repatriates. However, even though these authors find explanatory power of formalization on organizational learning, we find rather limited empirical support for this theory. Five out of our eight case study firms describe their corporate structures as unbureaucratic and non-hierarchical. Though, only few respondents draw causal inference between their employers' level of formalization and their ease to share and implement ideas. From one point of view, A3REP considers the low hierarchy at Company A to make it easier for employees to apply knowledge, since decisions can be made by anyone in the organization, independent of hierarchical level. From another point of view, B2REP experiences it as hard to integrate repatriate knowledge into existing routines due to Company B's strict corporate policies.

Although the empirical evidence from these few respondents implies that formalized corporate structures might hamper organizational learning, we see signs of that corporate culture can offset the negative effect of formalization on organizational learning. Company H serves as an example of this finding, where both H2REP and H3REP argue that Company H has a clear hierarchical structure. Still, they find that Company H's prominent corporate culture makes the atmosphere in office and meetings to not be perceived as hierarchical. Similarly, both C1HR and C4REP find Company C's strong and collaborative corporate culture to outweigh the firm's relatively hierarchical structure, since organizational members feel comfortable to diffuse knowledge independent of their hierarchical level.

Our empirical findings thereby align with previous theory, both that finds a negative influence of formalization on organizational learning (Ali et al., 2018; Berthoin Antal, 2001; Van den Bosch et al., 1999), and that finds a positive influence of corporate culture on organizational

learning (Berthoin Antal, 2001; Daghfous, 2004; Lazarova & Caligiuri, 2001; Oddou et al., 2013). However, to the best of our knowledge, only Berthoin Antal (2001) incorporates both corporate structure and culture as determinants of organizational learning from repatriate knowledge, although she does not investigate the simultaneous effect or compare the impact of the two determinants. Our finding of that a formalized corporate structure might be offset by an advantageous corporate culture, though suggests that these two determinants of absorptive capacity should be observed in conjunction in order to account for potential interaction effects.

Notably, Berthoin Antal (2001) empirically studies determinants of organizational learning at two German firms, where she describes the firms' corporate structures and cultures as rather formalized, strict and rigid. Nordic structures and cultures are often more flexible and open than the German ones, as exemplified by A2REP who finds Company A's German unit to be more formalized than its Swedish unit. This does not only hold true for comparisons between Sweden and Germany, as highlighted by G1HR, who perceives all of Company G's foreign units as more formalized than its Swedish one. Company C and H, the two firms in our sample that imply that culture outweighs structure, are both foreign firms. The offsetting effect between corporate structure and culture identified at Company C and H, can therefore possibly be explained by that their focal units have Swedish cultures, but still global formalized structures caused by their international origins. The case study firms in Berthoin Antal's (2001) study seemingly had both formalized structures and cultures, and not formalized structures but non-formalized cultures, as in our case. Thus, it is therefore possible that Berthoin Antal's (2001) empirical results deviate from ours, which may explain why this potential offsetting effect was not recognized in her study. To further examine how this offsetting effect impacts organizational learning, the phenomenon must thus be studied in different contexts and cultures.

5.1.2.2. Centralized mobility function larger barrier than centralized MNC
Ali et al. (2018), Lane and Lubatkin (1998) and Volberda et al. (2010) argue that centralized corporate structures obstruct knowledge sharing since decision-making authority and autonomy of individual MNC units is reduced. Since no respondents describe centralization's direct influence on their ability to spread and apply repatriate knowledge, we are not able to confirm or refute this reasoning. There is also too large variance in the firms' levels of organizational learning to accurately link centralization to organizational learning for each individual firm as all firms, except for Company B, have decentralized corporate structures.

However, we do find empirical implications that align with Ali et al. (2018), Lane and Lubatkin (1998) and Volberda et al. (2010) when studying centralization of the department responsible for global mobility. Only two of our eight case study firms have decentralized global mobility functions, namely Company C and E, of which neither mentions any difficulties of managing repatriate knowledge due to the decentralization of their mobility departments. The remaining six firms have centralized global mobility, either at the focal unit, at another unit in the home country or at a foreign unit. Out of these six firms, Company F and G have mobility functions situated at their Swedish focal units and neither experiences that its centralization per se impedes organizational learning from repatriate knowledge.

At the remaining four firms with centralized global mobility functions, centralization of global mobility though appears to impact absorptive capacity of repatriate knowledge. One example is Company A that strictly follows rules and policies from its corporate-wide mobility division in Germany. A1HR desires more authority to improve repatriation activities, particularly to increase publicity of summarizing repatriate reports, which thereby could improve organizational performance and consequently organizational learning (Fiol & Lyles, 1985; López et al., 2005). However, the German mobility division complicates diffusion of the reports, which causes that the organizational learning process stops at acquisition, as other organizational members at Company A cannot access repatriate knowledge. The case of Company A therefore confirms the argument presented by Ali et al. (2018), Lane and Lubatkin (1998) and Volberda et al. (2010) of that distant decision-making impedes implementation of change and hence organizational learning (Crossan et al., 1999).

Company B, on the other hand, has global mobility situated in Sweden, but at another unit than the focal one. Company B needs to follow corporate-wide global mobility policies that are standardized for all subsidiaries within its umbrella organization. Due to that the subsidiaries largely differ in experience and use of international assignees, B1HR argues that its corporate-wide practices are often inappropriate to implement at the focal unit. Company B's organizational learning is thus impeded, since lack or low use of practices for knowledge management can limit the firm's possibility to disseminate and institutionalize repatriate knowledge (Hoe & McShane, 2010; Minbaeva et al., 2003; Zahra & George, 2002). Company B therefore demonstrates that it is not only desirable for focal units to have a locally present global mobility function, but also authority to make own decisions based on local circumstances. Thus, Ali et al.'s (2018), Lane and Lubatkin's (1998) and Volberda et al.'s

(2010) argument that units also need to be autonomous in order to implement change, is also applicable for global mobility functions when managing repatriate knowledge.

So, our empirical results hold small variances in firms' centralization and weak causality between centralization and organizational learning, which causes that we do not find support of that centralization of the entire MNC impedes learning from repatriates. However, our results indicate that it is more essential for the MNC to have a present and autonomous global mobility function at the focal unit. As suggested by Argote and Miron-Spektor (2011), Berthoin Antal (2001) and Sun and Anderson (2010), firms need to be aware of and prescribe interventions to overcome barriers that impede organizational learning. In this case, a potential intervention to overcome the barrier posed by a centralized mobility function, is to allow each MNC unit to bear responsibility for its own international assignees. If that is not possible due to e.g. resource restrictions, a potential solution could be to decouple repatriate knowledge management from more administrative tasks, such as relocation assistance and tax. Following Wong's (2001) suggestion that HR management can be an efficient learning strategy, firms should then strategically choose which global mobility tasks that should be run centrally or locally. By doing so, focal unit employees with authority can adapt practices for repatriate knowledge management to local circumstances and consequently increase the chances to learn from repatriate knowledge.

5.1.2.3. Governance model based on functions, rather than geography

When studying the case study firms' corporate structures, we recognize that some firms have shifted from governance models based on geographical locations, to governance models based on global functions. In connection to this finding, we also see that firms increasingly work in global teams. According to our empirical results, global governance models and global team constellations impact firms' absorptive capacity and in turn organizational learning in two main ways. First, we find that global governance models and teams tend to replace repatriates. For instance, Company A has shifted to a global governance model based on segments, which has led to that employees communicate more frequently across borders. As a result, employees directly approach the German office with questions on the German market, instead of approaching A2REP who went on an international assignment to Germany. F2REP similarly expresses that there are more suitable colleagues in her team than herself to manage issues regarding US, leading to that she does not use her full potential as a source of expertise. Global

governance models and teams therefore apparently increase intra-MNC communication, that in turn reduces the need for repatriate knowledge, as discussed in Chapter 5.1.1.2. Thus, global governance models and teams are contributing factors to why we do not agree with Ali et al. (2018), Cohen and Levinthal (1990) and Volberda et al. (2010) on that frequent communication leads to increased learning.

Second, we find that global structures and teams decrease informal knowledge sharing and thus also organizational learning from repatriate knowledge. To exemplify, working in global teams causes that C2REP cannot informally discuss new ideas with co-workers over a cup of coffee. Likewise, its new global structure makes A3REP believe that Company A misses out on various opportunities, such as continuous contact with colleagues. However, Company A, as well as Company H, aim to compensate for their global structures and teams by actively creating forums that enable face-to-face informal knowledge sharing. Though, the manner in which Company A invites its employees to a global workshop once a year, or Company H invites its employees to an informal networking event every Friday, does not completely satisfy the definition of informal knowledge sharing as a spontaneous and unstandardized act (Mueller, 2015). Since Company A and H implement proactive practices to encourage informal knowledge sharing, organizational learning is facilitated to some extent, as suggested by Hoe and McShane (2010) and Liao et al. (2003). However, that informal knowledge sharing should occur frequently (Hoe & McShane, 2010), is not achieved through such sporadic initiatives and, consequently, repatriate knowledge is not fully appropriated.

Our empirical observations thereby imply that global governance structures and teams decrease the value attached to repatriate knowledge and the occurrence of informal knowledge sharing. When establishing our conceptual framework, Ali et al. (2018), Lane and Lubatkin (1998) and Volberda et al. (2010) inspired us to incorporate centralization as an explanatory variable of absorptive capacity. However, we might have been too naive and erroneously imagined that firms' level of centralization is either decentralized to centralized, without considering other possible corporate structures, such as global governance models and teams. When developing our theoretical framework, we purposively ignored the vast literature that exists on global governance models and teams (Brewster & Suutari, 2005; Kostova et al., 2016), since we thought that it would not provide value to our study. Nevertheless, since global structures and teams turn out to impact firms' absorption of repatriate knowledge, the literature streams on repatriation and global structures and teams are closer related than we anticipated. This implies

that the relationship between these variables deserves more attention in future research. It also implies that firms need to be aware of the manners in which global governance models and teams can constitute barriers of organizational learning, since barriers can cause that the learning process is interrupted, or not initiated at all (Argote & Miron-Spektor, 2011; Berthoin Antal, 2001; Sun & Anderson, 2010). In order to reap maximum benefit from repatriation, firms could, for example, prioritize to send assignees in between units where intra-MNC communication is relatively poor and put more effort into actively implementing practices for knowledge management.

5.2. Practices for knowledge management's impact on organizational learning

5.2.1. Types of practices

5.2.1.1. Preference for practices for informal knowledge management

Theory on absorptive capacity recognizes that firms can increase their organizational learning by implementing practices for both formal knowledge management (Inkpen, 1998; Lazarova & Tarique, 2005; Minbaeva et al., 2003; Oddou et al., 2009) and informal knowledge management (Hoe & McShane, 2010; Liao et al., 2003; Mueller, 2015). All case study firms indeed use some practices for managing repatriate knowledge, although their distribution between the two types deviates from what is suggested by e.g. Hoe and McShane (2010). More research attention is dedicated to practices for formal than informal knowledge management (Hoe & McShane, 2010; Mueller, 2015). Though, in practice, seven out of our eight case study firms use practices for informal knowledge management, whilst only five use practices for formal knowledge management. Accordingly, several respondents explicitly prefer practices for informal knowledge management, whilst no respondent makes equivalent expressions of practices for formal knowledge management.

Hoe and McShane (2010) find that informal knowledge management generates higher organizational learning than formal knowledge management, since the former takes place more spontaneously and frequently. In line with Hoe and McShane (2010), the repatriates more frequently share knowledge informally than formally. For instance, informally answering questions from colleagues occurs continuously, whereas formally holding a presentation only occurs at one single point in time. The spontaneity trait of informal knowledge processes causes that it is generally hard for firms to encourage and govern informal knowledge sharing (Hoe & McShane, 2010; Mueller, 2015). However, we do not find any empirical implications of that

firms find it hard to stimulate informal knowledge sharing. Instead, there is a consensus in the preference for informal knowledge management among both repatriates and HR representatives.

Hence, our empirical findings reveal that firms generally have highest presence of, and preference for, practices for informal knowledge management, which opposes theory that illustrates informal knowledge management as a less prioritized complement (Hoe & McShane, 2010). Our empirical results though indicate that the usefulness and outcome of the two types of practices is multifaceted, which makes Hoe and McShane's (2010) recommendation to use practices for informal knowledge management a simplification. As will be discussed throughout Chapter 5.2, different types of practices are found to treat different stages of the organizational learning cycle, which motivates a combination of types to maximize learning from repatriate knowledge. We also argue that firms should adapt this combination to a number of contextual circumstances, as well as avoid certain identified implementation issues.

5.2.1.2. Different types of practices spur different stages of organizational learning cycle

Although firms can use practices to facilitate all stages of organizational learning (Hoe & McShane, 2010; Liao et al., 2003; Mueller, 2015), we find that the practices implemented by our case study firms mainly are concentrated to the dissemination stage of organizational learning. In order to facilitate this discussion, we present Figure 5 below that compiles the firms' most common practices and relates each practice to its corresponding stage of organizational learning. We use theoretical definitions of acquisition, dissemination and institutionalization (e.g. Crossan et al., 1999; Hoe & McShane, 2010) to estimate to which stage in the learning cycle that each practice has potential to impact. In the rest of this chapter, we then compare the practices' theoretical impact shown in Figure 5, with the practices real impact when implemented by our case study firms. In that way, we can examine how different types of practices enable organizational learning from repatriate knowledge.

Individual level — Group level — Organizational level

Acquisition | **Dissemination** | **Institutionalization**

Practices for formal KM:

- Summarizing report (A1HR; A2REP)
- Interview with manager (B1HR; B2REP)
- Meeting (C2REP; G2REP; G3REP)
- Presentation (C2REP; D2REP; G2REP; G3REP)
- Forums (G2REP; G3REP)
- Cloud storage of previous projects (H2REP; H3REP)

Practices for informal KM:

- Announcement of repatriate as go-to-person (C1HR; C4REP; F1HR)
- Informal training (C3REP)
- Networks (G1HR; H2REP)
- Application of RK in projects and daily work (A2REP; A3REP; C2REP; C3REP; D2REP; E2REP; E3REP; F2REP; F3REP; G2REP; G3REP; H2REP; H3REP)
- Cross-functional teams (C1HR; C3REP; F2REP; G1HR)
- Continuous meetings (A3REP; D1HR; E3REP)

Figure 5. *Practices' impact on organizational learning (Compiled by authors)*

Abbreviations: KM=Knowledge management, RK=Repatriate knowledge

As seen in Figure 5 above, focal units do not have practices in place that foster acquisition of knowledge since, as previously mentioned, acquisition is assumed to take place automatically as the repatriate re-enters the focal unit. However, all firms have some kind of practices for dissemination of knowledge, which aim to transfer knowledge from specific individuals to organizational groups (Argote & Miron-Spektor, 2011; Berthoin Antal, 2001; Crossan et al., 1999; Sun & Anderson, 2010). To exemplify, when a repatriate holds a formal presentation or coordinates an informal training session, repatriate knowledge is spread to other organizational members. Transfer from group to organizational level then depends on how other employees use the knowledge that the repatriate shares with them (Crossan et al., 1999). For instance, after the repatriate disseminates knowledge through a formal presentation or informal training session, the responsibility to make use of the repatriate knowledge shifts to the audience. Though, we find several empirical cases when others fail to take such responsibility and the organizational learning process is thus abrupted at the dissemination stage. For example, B2REP's interview with his manager did not lead to any organizational changes, since his manager did not further institutionalize his knowledge. This implies that dissemination practices not necessarily or automatically lead to institutionalization of knowledge.

As observed in Figure 5 above, a few practices for formal knowledge management also have potential to institutionalize repatriate knowledge at organizational level. To exemplify, to document repatriate knowledge in a summarizing report or a web-based cloud has such potential, since these practices store and retain knowledge, which López et al. (2005) and Walsh and Ungson (1991) mention as necessary to integrate knowledge into the firm's organizational memory. However, none of the few above-mentioned practices for formal knowledge management, has succeeded to fully institutionalized knowledge at our case study firms. For instance, even though Company A stores A2REP's repatriate knowledge in a report, other employees at Company A do not use A2REP's documented knowledge due to poor accessibility. Similarly, Company H stores H3REP's insights gained from previous projects in a web-based cloud, but these are not used by others due to difficulties in transforming the knowledge into new contexts. H3REP underlines that storage of repatriate knowledge not automatically or necessarily leads to institutionalization as it is not always possible to integrate knowledge from one context to another, which is well aligned with Crossan et al. (1999) who stress that group members need to interpret and select information to properly make use of it.

We also find that some practices for informal knowledge management have potential to institutionalize knowledge. For instance, when repatriates participate in cross-functional teams or apply repatriate knowledge in projects and daily work, repatriates can by themselves ensure that it results in organizational changes, which according to Argote and Miron-Spektor (2011) implies that it is institutionalized. By observing cases where repatriate knowledge is fully institutionalized, such as some cases in Company C, E and F, it becomes clear that the successful institutionalization principally can be explained by practices for informal knowledge management. C2REP, E3REP and F3REP all succeed to introduce change on organizational level by making decisions in their daily work based on their overseas experience. Considering the cases of C2REP, E3REP and F3REP, it thus appears that practices for informal knowledge management with potential to spur institutionalization are more efficient as they give authority to the repatriate to use the knowledge, compared to practices for formal knowledge management that leave authority in the hands of other employees.

For repatriate knowledge to be institutionalized, it is however not sufficient to receive decision-making authority, but knowledge must also become independent of its origin and guide organizational behavior (Crossan et al., 1999). This is evident in E3REP's case, who not only makes daily use of his knowledge, but also introduces strategies that successors can follow. In

contrast though, several other repatriates, such as C3REP, H2REP and F2REP, state that their repatriate knowledge would be lost if they would resign, even though they use practices for informal knowledge management. This implies that it is not sufficient to allow assignees to apply repatriate knowledge in teams, projects and daily work. Instead, firms must ensure that initiatives result in outcomes that are not tied to specific individuals and be accessible at organizational level (Crossan et al., 1999; Dodgson, 1993; Fiol & Lyles, 1985). To do so, we find that some practices for formal knowledge management can be used as complements to facilitate storage and accessibility of repatriate knowledge.

So, our empirical findings show that most practices implemented by our case study firms treat dissemination, and less institutionalization, even though practices theoretically have potential to facilitate all stages of organizational learning (Hoe & McShane, 2010). That practices mostly are used to disseminate, implies that they move in the sphere of knowledge sharing theory as these practices, as well as knowledge sharing theory, primarily aim to improve the transfer of knowledge from sender to receiver (Gupta & Govindarajan, 2000; Minbaeva et al., 2003; Szulanski, 1996). Few practices also have potential to institutionalize knowledge, which thus align with organizational learning theory, as these practices contain the additional dimension of requiring an organizational change (Argote & Miron-Spektor, 2011; Crossan et al., 1999; Dodgson, 1993). Among the practices that have potential to institutionalize repatriate knowledge, our empirical results show that practices for informal knowledge management are the most efficient type. However, practices for formal knowledge management may still be needed in order to decrease dependency on specific individuals.

5.2.1.3. Practices for managing knowledge on global mobility

When reviewing the types of practices implemented by our case study firms, it appears that firms not only use practices to harvest repatriates' knowledge, but also their personal experiences of going on overseas assignments. In this sense, the repatriate is not only a transmitter of knowledge related to specific business domains, as depicted in previous research (Bonache & Brewster, 2001; Burmeister et al., 2015; Suutari & Brewster, 2003), but also a transmitter of lived personal experiences of being an international assignee of the firm. Our empirical findings show that six out of eight firms have some kinds of practices to absorb these personal experiences, such as interviews, surveys, feedback systems, informal conversations, and talent and performance reviews. Several firms, such as Company A and C, also announce

information on employees that have gone abroad in order to enable others to approach them with questions on the firms' global mobility management.

In multiple cases, firms' practices to capture knowledge on global mobility result in changes and improvements in accordance with e.g. Crossan et al. (1999) and Dodgson (1993). For instance, by using questionnaires, talking to repatriates and following their development, Company G improves its global mobility management. Company D and H achieve similar result by using practices for informal knowledge management and have updated their global mobility policies based on feedback. This analytical finding therefore indicates that there are multiple ways to tap into repatriates' knowledge on global mobility, where practices for both formal and informal knowledge management are efficient means to improve organizational learning. Instead, and as acknowledged by E1HR, the most important is that firms listen to their repatriates to get insight into how to improve future operations. Thus, we are not able to determine whether practices for formal or informal knowledge management are most efficient to learn from knowledge on global mobility. Hoe and McShane's (2010) reasoning that firms should prioritize practices for informal knowledge management therefore seems inadequate for knowledge on global mobility.

Hence, not only practices for managing repatriate knowledge on specific business domains have positive effect on absorptive capacity, as found in previous research (Inkpen, 1998; Lazarova & Tarique, 2005; Minbaeva et al., 2003; Oddou et al., 2009; Zahra & George, 2002), but also practices for managing repatriate knowledge on global mobility. Even though previous studies observe how different characteristics of knowledge impact organizational learning (e.g. Bonache & Zárraga-Oberty, 2008; Fink & Meierewert, 2005), they do not distinguish between these two identified types of knowledge. Also, although previous research aims to optimize firms' capacity to learn from assignments overseas (Berthoin Antal, 2001), it disregards how previous repatriation experiences contribute to build global mobility knowledge bases. Consequently, our conceptual framework to some extent builds on deficient theoretical findings, leading to that we exclusively conceptualized how focal units organizationally learn from repatriates' knowledge on specific business domains, and therefore fell short in admitting how HR departments learn from repatriates' knowledge on global mobility management.

5.2.2. Allocation of practices

5.2.2.1. Need for different practices shifts depending on point in time of repatriation

As previously argued, despite the general preference for practices for informal knowledge management among both firms and research (e.g. Hoe & McShane, 2010), we find it advantageous to use both practices for formal and informal knowledge management. Though, our empirical results indicate that firms should allocate these two types of practices at different points in time of repatriation, i.e. whether the repatriate recently returned to the focal unit, or has been home for a longer period of time. We find that the reason for why the two types of practices are efficient and suitable at different points in time can be explained by their distinctive characteristics (Hoe & McShane, 2010; Mueller, 2015). Practices for formal knowledge management are generally pre-arranged, rapid and efficient as knowledge is disseminated simultaneously as the practice occurs (ibid). To exemplify, Company G executes various practices for formal knowledge management shortly after repatriates return to the focal unit, leading to that both G2REP's and G3REP's repatriate knowledge was instantly disseminated at group level. Practices for informal knowledge management, on the other hand, are spontaneous, unstandardized, voluntary and casual (ibid), which implies that firms perform these practices over a longer time span. For instance, although both C3REP and E3REP repatriated several years ago, Company C and E still informally appropriate their knowledge.

The characteristics of practices for informal knowledge management (Hoe & McShane, 2010; Mueller, 2015), imply that this type is generally implemented when firms have access to the repatriate and sufficient time at their disposal, which might not always be the case. Several respondents and researchers (e.g. Brewster & Suutari, 2005; Nery-Kjerfve & McLean, 2012; Reiche et al., 2011; Stroh et al., 2000; Yeaton & Hall, 2008) point at the high turnover rates that exists among repatriates. That repatriates resign in turn causes that firms might not have sufficient time and access to informally exploit their knowledge. For instance, Company C and E fully rely on practices for informal knowledge management for C3REP and E3REP, which increase the firms' vulnerability if C3REP and E3REP would resign. That firms risk to lose repatriate knowledge due to resignations, is also highlighted by the multiple respondents that believe that their expertise would be lost if they would quit. Though, as previously discussed, our sample is not entirely representative since all repatriates are still employed at the focal unit that sent them overseas. Whilst in reality, approximately 20 to 50 percent of repatriates resign within the first year of repatriation (Nery-Kjerfve & McLean, 2012). So, as none of the case

study firms have lost repatriate knowledge due to early resignations of these specific repatriates, the magnitude of this risk may therefore even be downsized in our empirical data.

To reduce the risk of losing repatriate knowledge due to resignations, our empirical findings implicate that firms can exploit the distinct characteristics of formal and informal knowledge management. The speed and efficiency of formal knowledge sharing (Hoe & McShane, 2010; Mueller, 2015), point at that practices for formal knowledge management generally are efficient to disseminate knowledge, which also is illustrated in Chapter 5.2.1.2. Since dissemination is needed to initiate the organizational learning cycle (Argote & Miron-Spektor, 2011; Berthoin Antal, 2001; Crossan et al., 1999; Sun & Anderson, 2010), practices for formal knowledge management are suitable to implement shortly after repatriation. This is also explicitly suggested by some respondents, such as F3REP, who argues that Company F would have benefitted from interviewing him about his experiences upon his return if he would have resigned. Still, although practices for informal knowledge management are more time demanding, they should be implemented simultaneously as these generally better institutionalize knowledge, as demonstrated in Chapter 5.2.1.2. To optimally manage practices to increase absorptive capacity and hence organizational learning, firms should thereby introduce practices for formal management close to repatriation and complement these with practices for informal knowledge management that span over a longer period of time.

5.2.2.2. Need for different practices varies depending on repatriate's hierarchical level
In addition to allocating different types of practices at different points in time of repatriation, our empirical results indicate that organizations should adjust their allocation of practices to the hierarchical level of each repatriate. When observing the firms that succeed to institutionalize repatriate knowledge, a common denominator is that all repatriates are top managers. A first example is Company E, that almost exclusively send out top managers on international assignments, which makes E1HR regard practices for formal knowledge management as unnecessary. According to her, managerial repatriates take own responsibility to spread know-how and influence organizational decisions. Both top managers E2REP and E3REP reflect this mindset, and E3REP even explicitly states that Company E does not need to formally extract information from international assignees. Company F illustrates a similar case as the firm institutionalizes top manager F3REP's repatriate knowledge solely by informal means, and F3REP explicitly argues that his managerial position enables him to integrate repatriate

knowledge into business decisions. Consequently, Company F has realized several organizational improvements based on learnings from F3REP's assignment overseas, such as established local support functions, which e.g. Dodgson (1993) commends as signs of institutionalization.

At Company G, G3REP explains that repatriates of high hierarchical level easily find themselves in forums for informal knowledge sharing and thus crave less support from the firm. Though, in her middle managerial position, G3REP has diffused knowledge among colleagues and implemented some changes in projects. Still, she has not made full use of her knowledge due to her current role, which implies that she has disseminated, but not institutionalized knowledge at organizational level (e.g. Fiol & Lyles, 1985; Sun & Anderson, 2010). G3REP's reasoning thereby reflects how firms' tendency to learn gradually increases with repatriates' hierarchical level. Furthermore, this finding is particularly visible at Company C, that seems to adjust its practices according to hierarchical level of its repatriates. Top manager C2REP, institutionalizes his repatriate knowledge at organizational level by mostly informal means as his repatriate knowledge is integrated into various procedures (e.g. Crossan et al., 1999). Middle manager C3REP, disseminates his knowledge also by using informal means, so that it is spread among employees at group level (e.g. Berthoin Antal, 2001). Associate C4REP, however, has not performed any practices for formal or informal knowledge management, leading to that her knowledge stays at individual level as she only makes personal use of it (Cohen & Levinthal, 1990). Similarly, the only other associate in our sample, A2REP, experiences that Company A pays low attention to her repatriate knowledge and that more practices for formal knowledge management would be suitable to overcome dissemination and institutionalization barriers.

These empirical examples illustrate how respondents generally perceive standardized practices for formal knowledge management to be less relevant for repatriates of higher hierarchical level, as these employees naturally participate in forums to informally disseminate knowledge and have decision-making authority to institutionalize change. To the contrary, repatriates of lower hierarchical level request practices for formal knowledge management to higher extent, since they face larger barriers to disseminate knowledge. As accentuated by Berthoin Antal (2001) and Schilling and Kluge (2009), barriers can interrupt or impede all stages of the learning cycle, which is seen in our empirical examples as poor allocation of practices generally results in that repatriate knowledge of non-managerial employees is kept at individual or group level. Therefore, organizations need to offer additional support to these repatriates by implementing

more practices for formal knowledge management, as this type of practices is efficient to initiate the organizational learning cycle and more governable by the organization (e.g. Campbell & Cairns, 1994; Hoe & McShane, 2010).

Our finding that different types of practices suit repatriates of different hierarchical levels is, to the best of our knowledge, not discussed in previous research. Researchers who suggest firms to proactively introduce practices to facilitate dissemination and institutionalization of knowledge (e.g. Inkpen, 1998; Lazarova & Tarique, 2005; Oddou et al., 2009), do not implicate that assignees of diverse hierarchical levels desire different practices. In a similar vein, researchers who emphasize that firms need to offer managerial support to repatriates (e.g. Burmeister et al., 2015; Gupta & Govindarajan, 2000; Oddou et al., 2013), neither make such implication. Thus, academia predominantly treats repatriates as a homogenous group and largely neglects variances in repatriates' characteristics and needs. In that way does our analytical finding point at that previous theory that studies practices in the context of repatriation may be too generalized and simplified. Since firms need to make a coordinated effort to tap into the knowledge of their repatriates in order to benefit from investments made in their learning (Berthoin Antal, 2001), firms then need to bear their hierarchical distinction in mind and critically allocate practices accordingly.

5.2.3. Implementation of practices
5.2.3.1. Weak accessibility to repatriate knowledge
By observing the use of practices for knowledge management in our sample, we find that practices occasionally are inadequately implemented by firms, leading to that practices cannot reach their full potential to disseminate or institutionalize repatriate knowledge. We find that both practices for formal and informal knowledge management sometimes suffer from implementation issues, where examples of improperly implemented practices for formal knowledge management are seen in the cases of Company H and A. Company H has a web-based cloud to make past project history available to all employees, but this formal knowledge sharing tool does not reach its target audience. In like manner do Company A try to diffuse repatriate knowledge through summarizing repatriate reports, however, neither of A1HR or A2REP knows where to access these reports. Examples of inadequately implemented practices for informal knowledge management are found at Company C and F. With the objective to enhance informal knowledge sharing, both firms internally announce information on repatriates

in order to raise other employees' awareness of who to approach with certain questions. Yet, due to low diffusion and insufficient information, the practice does not reach desired effect at neither of Company C or F.

While some respondents, such as H3REP and A1HR, realize that repatriate knowledge needs to be more accessible by others in order to serve as a source of organizational learning, research tends to depict practices as efficient learning tools, without considering potential implementation issues (e.g. Cohen & Levinthal, 1990; Inkpen, 1998; Lazarova & Tarique, 2005; Minbaeva et al., 2003; Zahra & George, 2002). However, our empirical data shows that practices per se do not help firms to absorb knowledge. For instance, repatriate knowledge does not provide value to an organization if it is stored in a report, a web-based cloud or an individual's mind, unless it is used to improve actions and contribute to better organizational performance (Fiol & Lyles, 1985; López et al., 2005). Thus, as stressed before, knowledge must first be disseminated in order to be institutionalized (Campbell & Cairns, 1994; Crossan et al., 1999; Dodgson, 1993), which points at the importance of making repatriate knowledge accessible to other organizational members.

Moreover, it should be emphasized that weak accessibility of repatriate knowledge in the identified cases of Company A, C, F, and H, can be explained by inappropriately implemented practices. Yet, almost all other firms also suffer from weak accessibility of repatriate knowledge, although this problem cannot be explained by poorly used practices, but rather by complete absence of practices. To exemplify, the vast majority of the repatriates serve as go-to-persons, but only Company C and F announce information on repatriates and, in line with e.g. Liao et al. (2003), thus proactively encourage this form of informal knowledge sharing to take place. The fact that almost all repatriates in our sample serve as informal points of contact to others, motivates why firms should implement practices to support their employees in this kind of sharing, all while taking into account the described potential pitfalls.

5.2.3.2. Ownership conflicts of practices

Our empirical material does not only highlight that practices occasionally are inadequately implemented, but also that practices sometimes are not implemented at all due to internal disagreements of which individual or department that bears responsibility of the implementation. By observing the use of practices at our case study firms, we identify three

scenarios in which unclear ownership of practices causes that repatriate knowledge is not optimally absorbed. The first identified scenario pictures a conflict of whether HR or the repatriate's department is responsible to implement practices for managing repatriate knowledge. At both Company B and F, repatriates generally claim that it is HR's responsibility to introduce practices, whilst HR representatives claim that the responsibility lie on the repatriate's manager. At Company D, HR partly takes ownership of practices by inviting the repatriate to hold a presentation, but leaves the ultimate responsibility to the repatriate's manager. However, in D2REP's case, no further practices have been used to embrace her repatriate knowledge other than the presentation requested by HR, which points at that there is a conflicting view of practices' ownership.

The second scenario is observed when the repatriate is sent abroad by one department, but returns to another, which causes unclear ownership of practices between departments. We find several empirical examples of this scenario, such as B2REP who entered a new team upon repatriation, in which his repatriate knowledge is not used. The new colleagues perceive B2REP as just another new employee, which led to that B2REP has not been asked to share his experience or undergone any practices at neither department. G3REP, on the other hand, held a presentation at the new department, but not at the old one, leading to that Company G lost part of her repatriate knowledge since the information provided in the presentation was not relevant. Instead, G3REP believes that the learning outcome would have been better if she would have held the presentation at her previous department.

The third scenario is identified when the manager who initiates the international assignment resigns while the repatriate is abroad. Then, we find that the repatriate is often appointed a new manager who does perceive to have ownership of repatriation practices. For instance, upon repatriation, A2REP was appointed a new manager who did not ask A2REP to specifically share her repatriate knowledge as they instead dedicated time to build a new relationship. As a result, A2REP mainly uses her repatriate knowledge herself at individual level. Accordingly, B1HR recognizes the complication posed by this third scenario and emphasizes the importance to establish standardized repatriation routines that are in place, independent of manager in charge.

Our three identified ownership conflicts between HR and department, between new and old department, and between new and old manager, all illustrate how unclear roles of

responsibilities can cause repatriate knowledge to fall between the cracks. A common denominator for all three scenarios, is that such conflicts cause that repatriates must take own initiatives to share and implement change. When ownership conflicts occur, organizational learning does therefore no longer depend on the organization's absorptive capacity, but rather on the individual's motivation and ability, as suggested by Minbaeva et al. (2003). However, since organizational learning is not a random process, but a capability that firms can control (Dodgson, 1993), it is of outmost importance for firms to ensure that organizational learning is not exclusively determined by the repatriates' own willingness and ability to contribute. As Berthoin Antal (2001), Fink and Meierewert (2005) and Schilling and Kluge (2009) argue, firms must instead govern and coordinate their efforts to exploit this underestimated resource of the firm, which includes to clarify and pre-define ownership of practices.

5.3. Summary of analytical findings and revised conceptual model

Based on our analytical findings discussed throughout this chapter, we revise and reconceptualize our original conceptual model. Figure 6 below is an updated version of the holistic view of our conceptual model in Figure 2, that builds on Berthoin Antal's (2001) international assignment cycle. Repatriate knowledge flows are found to be more complex than we first anticipated, as repatriates possess two different types of knowledge that are critical to the firm. As conceptualized, we find that repatriates re-enter focal units with knowledge on specific business domains, as illustrated by the long orange arrow in Figure 6, that after penetrating absorptive capacity can result in organizational learning. Though, as not foreseen, we also find that repatriates return with knowledge on global mobility, as illustrated by the shorter green arrow in Figure 6, that after penetrating absorptive capacity can contribute to learnings that is used in upcoming international assignments. Our analytical finding that global mobility departments use repatriates' personal experiences and feedback to improve future global mobility management, suggests that the inner international assignment cycle (Berthoin Antal, 2001), also can be seen as a cyclical closed-loop process. In that way do two parallel organizational learning processes occur simultaneously at the focal unit, one for repatriate knowledge on specific business domains and one for knowledge on global mobility.
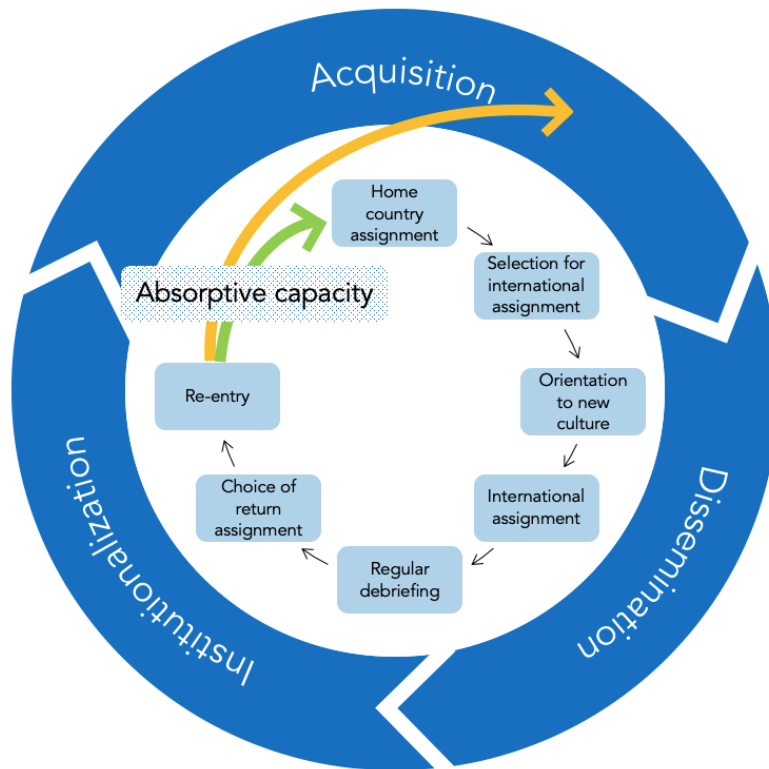
Figure 6. Revised conceptual model, holistic view (Compiled by authors, based on Figure 2. Conceptual model, holistic view)

Zooming in on the absorptive capacity component, Figure 7 below is an updated version of the detailed view of our original conceptual model in Figure 3. Figure 7 summarizes our main analytical findings by outlining how the different variables of absorptive capacity enable organizational learning from repatriate knowledge. Since we conceptualized absorptive capacity to be a determinant with positive impact on organizational learning, our findings are presented so that they have a positive effect on absorptive capacity, and in turn organizational learning. The discussion following Figure 7 clarifies the relationships between individual variables and organizational learning, whilst our conclusion in Chapter 6 presents contributions and implications.
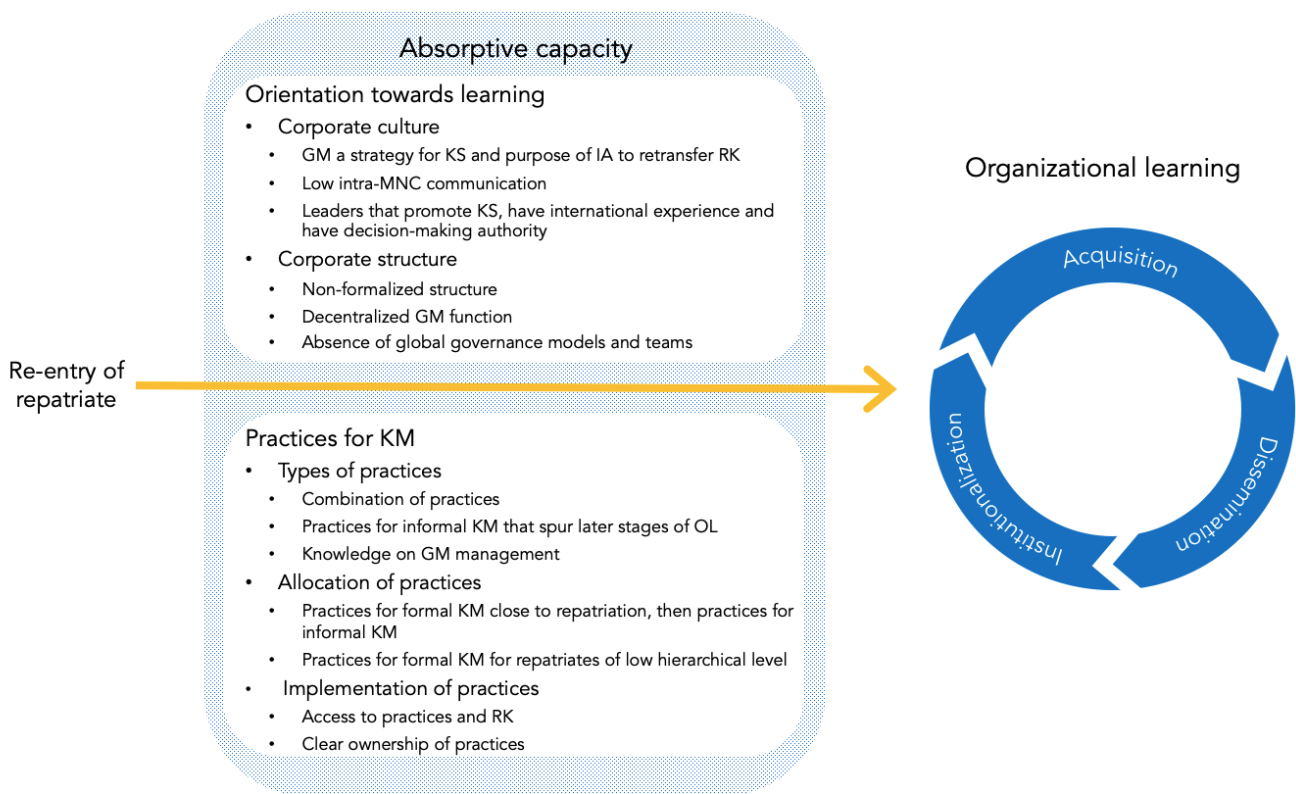
Figure 7. *Revised conceptual model, detailed view (Compiled by authors, based on Figure 3. Conceptual model, detailed view)*

Abbreviations: GM=Global mobility, IA=International assignment, KM=Knowledge management, KS=Knowledge sharing, OL=Organizational learning, RK=Repatriate knowledge

In our analysis, we find that it is not sufficient to have a corporate culture that promotes knowledge sharing to learn from repatriates. Instead, global mobility management needs to be an explicit strategy for knowledge sharing, and re-transfer of knowledge needs to be a pre-defined purpose of the international assignment, in order to favor organizational learning. We find high intra-MNC communication to negatively influence organizational learning from repatriate knowledge as repatriates may become excessive intermediaries when employees directly communicate between units. Furthermore, leaders that promote knowledge sharing can help firms disseminate repatriate knowledge, but to fully institutionalize knowledge, managers need decision-making authority and desirably also own international experience.

In respect to corporate structure, we see that formalization negatively impacts absorptive capacity and hence organizational learning from repatriate knowledge, although this potential impact appears rather low. Corporate culture even tends to outweigh potential restrictions posed by bureaucracy and hierarchy, which indicates that corporate culture is a more significant

determinant than corporate structure in the context of repatriation. Moreover, we do not find support for that centralization of MNCs impacts the ability to appropriate repatriate knowledge and therefore exclude centralization from our revised conceptual model. However, we identify that centralization of global mobility functions affects organizational learning from repatriate knowledge, namely that present global mobility with decision-making authority facilitates learning. Although we find low support for formalization and centralization, we find global governance models and teams to be more critical determinants in our setting. Our analytical findings show that global governance models and teams both reduce the need for repatriate knowledge and naturally obstruct informal knowledge sharing between organizational members, which consequently impede organizational learning.

Based on our findings related to practices, we update our original distinction between practices for formal and informal knowledge management. In our revised model in Figure 7, we instead divide our analytical findings into three categories, namely types of practices, allocation of practices and implementation of practices. Firms generally prefer practices for informal knowledge management over practices for formal knowledge management, which is partly justified since the former generates higher organizational learning. However, we argue that this reasoning is a simplification of reality since there are various contextual circumstances that must be acknowledged, which points at that a combination of practices for formal and informal management is most efficient. Practices for formal knowledge management mostly appear efficient to disseminate knowledge, whilst the informal ones tend to more successfully institutionalize knowledge. As described in connection to Figure 6, we furthermore observe that firms not only use practices to learn from repatriates' knowledge on specific business domains, but also from their knowledge on global mobility.

Since types of practices have different characteristics, we find that they should be allocated differently depending on certain circumstances. First, practices for formal knowledge management are useful close after repatriation, in contrast to practices for informal management that are more suitable to use over a long period of time. Second, practices for formal knowledge management are more vital for repatriates of lower hierarchical level, compared to for managerial repatriates. We moreover find that practices per se do not contribute to organizational learning, since two implementation issues can obstruct the learning process, namely that improperly implemented practices can result in poor access to repatriate knowledge and that ownership conflicts can result in that practices are under-used.

6. Conclusion

In Chapter 6, we conclude our analytical findings and answer our research question. Then, we put our findings into perspective by discussing theoretical and practical implications. Lastly, we present limitations with our study and provide suggestions for future research.

6.1. Findings

To meet the challenges posed by the global and knowledge driven business landscape, MNCs make heavy investments in global mobility Still, MNCs often fail in taking care of their homecoming international assignees and, as a result, turnover rates among repatriates remain high. In order to increase the value of MNCs' investments in global mobility, we adopted an organizational perspective of the focal unit and studied how firms may further harvest knowledge that repatriates acquire during assignments abroad. To do so, we thoroughly examined absorptive capacity as a potential determinant of firms' organizational learning from repatriate knowledge. By conducting a comparative multiple case study of eight firms with 23 interviews, we empirically tested our conceptual framework that adapts generic theories on absorptive capacity and organizational learning to the context of repatriation. We thereby sought to provide guidance to firms on how they can govern their capacity to absorb repatriate knowledge, as well as to contribute to the deficient literature on absorptive capacity's impact on organizational learning in the repatriation setting. Consequently, in this study, we aimed to answer the following research question:

How does absorptive capacity of the focal unit enable organizational learning from repatriate knowledge?

To address our research question, we conceptualized absorptive capacity to be composed of two explanatory variables, namely, orientation towards learning and practices for knowledge management. Orientation towards learning, our first variable of absorptive capacity, is found to have relatively low influence on how firms learn from repatriates when corporate culture and structure are not adjusted to repatriation. Previous findings of how firms' orientation towards learning impacts organizational learning from general knowledge, are not sufficiently specific or nuanced to be applicable for repatriate knowledge. Instead, corporate culture becomes a more significant determinant of organizational learning when global mobility is explicitly defined as a strategy to share knowledge, and when repatriates' managers have own international

experience. Corporate structure is in similar manner contextually dependent, as centralization only is identified as a barrier to manage repatriate knowledge when the global mobility function is centralized, not the MNC as a whole. We also find implications of that a more conservative orientation towards learning can be favorable in the context of repatriation, since high intra-MNC communication and global governance models and teams, tend to impede organizational learning. Thus, we challenge previous theory of that intra-MNC communication positively relates to organizational learning.

Practices for knowledge management, our second variable of absorptive capacity, is found to be more multifaceted than we first conceptualized, since it is insufficient to solely determine whether practices for formal or informal knowledge management are most efficient. Instead, practices should similarly be contextually adapted to manage repatriate knowledge, but also further adjusted to a number of identified circumstances. Practices for informal knowledge management can, in line with previous theory, both disseminate and institutionalize repatriate knowledge, which is needed to reach organizational learning. Practices for formal knowledge management, on the other hand, mainly treat dissemination. Yet, we find motives for why firms should combine both types. In this respect, we criticize previous theory for generalizing and treating repatriates as a homogenous group, since we find that different types of practices should be allocated to repatriates of different hierarchical levels and at different points in time of repatriation. Furthermore, we find that practices not necessarily or automatically lead to learning. In fact, most firms have practices in place, although implementation issues, such as ownership conflicts and weak accessibility, often obstruct organizational learning.

To conclude, absorptive capacity of the focal unit has positive impact on organizational learning in the context of repatriation, although orientation towards learning and practices for knowledge management must be contextually adapted and purposively implemented to enable organizational learning from repatriate knowledge.

6.2. Implications for theory

In addition to providing our findings, this study contributes to theory in three main ways. First, by perceiving international assignments as dyadic knowledge transfer processes and taking an organizational perspective of the focal unit, we provide empirical contributions to the relatively under-researched literature stream on repatriation. Our contributions shed light on unexplored areas within repatriation and provides a more nuanced view of how the repatriation context distinguishes from other contexts. Second, by observing repatriate knowledge management through the lens of organizational learning theory, we complement existing theory that predominantly adopts a knowledge transfer perspective. Particularly we extend the international assignment cycle by Berthoin Antal (2001), both by conceptualizing organizational learning as a cyclical process that requires institutionalization of knowledge, and by adding a parallel learning process that occurs as firms learn from repatriates' knowledge on global mobility. With the link between the research fields on organizational learning and repatriation, we improve the research community's knowledge on the intersection of these fields. Lastly, by adopting an explanatory approach and inspecting the underlying determinants of why MNCs generally fail to learn from repatriates, we prolong existing theory that identifies this issue without uncovering potential explanations. Especially by considering absorptive capacity as a determinant of organizational learning from repatriate knowledge, we apply existing theories into a new context and thus broaden the application of the concept of absorptive capacity.

6.3. Implications for practice

For MNCs to further enhance their learning outcomes of global mobility, we propose that firms should make a coordinated effort to tap into their repatriates' knowledge. Since it up until now has remained unknown how firms can coordinate such effort, we compile the list below that can serve as guidance for firms in their repatriation work.

- Firms should define global mobility as a strategy for sharing knowledge and retransfer of knowledge as a purpose of international assignments.
- Firms should prioritize sending international assignees between units with relatively poor internal communication.
- Firms should staff repatriates in teams led by managers who promote knowledge sharing, have decision-making authority and preferably own international experience, making former international assignees suitable candidates for managerial roles.
- Firms should emphasize to create a culture that favors knowledge sharing if they have formalized corporate structures.
- Firms should decentralize global mobility. If not possible, they should at least manage repatriate knowledge management locally and autonomously.
- Firms should compensate for decreased informal knowledge sharing posed by global structures and teams by putting extra effort into implementing practices for knowledge management.
- Firms should use feedback from repatriates to improve their global mobility management.
- Firms should implement practices for formal knowledge management immediately when repatriates return, and use practices for informal knowledge management over a longer period of time.
- Firms should particularly implement practices for formal knowledge management for repatriates of lower hierarchical levels.
- Firms should ensure that repatriate knowledge is easily accessible by employees.
- Firms should make it clear which unit, department or manager that bears responsibility to implement practices.

6.4. Limitations and future research

Although this study provides a deeper understanding of how absorptive capacity enables MNCs to learn from repatriate knowledge, some limitations must be acknowledged, which in turn can be used as guidance for future research. First, some empirical limitations may impact the transferability of our findings, which confirms that they only apply to participating cases. Due to the pandemic outbreak of Covid-19, we had to amend our ambition to include a higher number of respondents. Yet, we still achieved both breadth and depth in our analysis and based our conclusions on empirical support gained from multiple sources. We also developed sampling criteria on both firm and individual level, which, for instance, only include repatriates that continue to be employed by the organizations that sent them abroad. Since many repatriates resign close after repatriation (Nery-Kjerfve & McLean, 2012; Oddou et al., 2009; Stroh et al., 2000; Yeaton & Hall, 2008), this sampling criterion may have caused positively biased results. Considering these empirical limitations, it could be beneficial for future research to include a larger sample that also includes repatriates that have resigned upon repatriation. Also, since we find repatriates to be a more heterogenous group than anticipated, it could be of interest to strategically sample repatriates of diverse hierarchical levels and repatriates that are situated at different points in time of repatriation.

Second, this study is also characterized by some theoretical limitations as our conceptual framework only includes selected constructs. To select single definitions of absorptive capacity and organizational learning was necessary in order to discuss the constructs in a clear and concise manner. However, this delimitation excluded other possible explanatory variables of absorptive capacity, as well as other potential perspectives of organizational learning. Considering these theoretical limitations, we suggest future research to look into variables of absorptive capacity that are fully dismissed or only slightly touched upon in this study. For instance, we did not incorporate global governance models and teams as a variable in our original conceptual framework, since it emerged during the empirical data collection. Though, since our empirical results point at that this variable has explanatory power in the context of repatriation, we suggest future research to further investigate this finding.

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Appendix A. Interview guide, repatriates

Introduction
- What do you work with at *[Company Name]*?
- What are your main tasks and areas of responsibility in your current role?
- Where, when and for how long was your international assignment?
- What was the purpose of your international assignment?
- What did you mainly learn during your international assignment?

Orientation towards learning
- How do you perceive *[Company Name]*'s corporate culture?
- How does *[Company Name]* use values and strategies to promote knowledge sharing?
- How does *[Company Name]*'s corporate culture impact how you make use of the knowledge that you gained abroad?
- How do you perceive formalization within *[Company Name]*, i.e. bureaucracy and hierarchy?
- How do you perceive centralization within *[Company Name]*, i.e. allocation of decision-making authority and autonomy of units?
- How does *[Company Name]*'s corporate structure impact how you make use of the knowledge that you gained abroad?

Practices
- After returning from your international assignment, did *[Company Name]* ask you to formally share or use the knowledge that you gained during your international assignment? If so, how?
  (e.g. documentation, debriefing, workshop, presentation, meeting, mentorship)
- After returning from your international assignment, did *[Company Name]* ask you to share or use the knowledge that you gained during your international assignment in any other, more informal way? If so, how?
  (e.g. cross-functional teams, co-location, announcement of you as a go-to person)

Organizational learning
- Do you find it easy or difficult to share and use the knowledge that you gained abroad? Why?
- How does *[Company Name]* disseminate the knowledge that you gained abroad?
- How does *[Company Name]* make use of the knowledge that you gained abroad?
- Has *[Company Name]* made any changes or improvements based on the knowledge that you gained abroad? If so, how?
- What would happen with the knowledge that you gained abroad if you would resign?

Appendix B. Interview guide, HR

Introduction
- What do you work with at [*Company Name*]?
- What are your main tasks and areas of responsibility in your current role?
- How do you work with *[Company Name]*'s global mobility?
- Could you briefly describe how *[Company Name]* works with global mobility?

Orientation towards learning
- How does *[Company Name]*'s corporate culture impact knowledge sharing?
- What values and strategies does *[Company Name]* have to promote knowledge sharing?
- What is *[Company Name]*'s purpose of working with expatriates?
- Does *[Company Name]* use global mobility as a strategy to share knowledge?
- How is formalization within *[Company Name]*, i.e. of bureaucracy and hierarchy?
- How is centralization within *[Company Name]*, i.e. of allocation of decision-making authority and autonomy of units?
- How is the centralization of *[Company Name]*'s global mobility function?
- How does *[Company Name]*'s corporate structure impact knowledge sharing?

Practices
- Does *[Company Name]* have any practices for formal knowledge management in place to tap into the knowledge that expatriates bring back to *[Company Name]*? If so, which?
(e.g. documentation, debriefing, workshop, presentation, meeting, mentorship)
- Does *[Company Name]* have any other practices in place to facilitate informal knowledge management between expatriates and other employees? If so, which?
- (e.g. cross-functional teams, co-location, announcement of repatriate as a go-to person)

Organizational learning
- In general, how do you perceive that *[Company Name]* embraces and makes use of the knowledge that expatriates bring back to *[Company Name]*?