

Voices of Critical Skilled Migrants in South Africa

A case study of Gauteng Province¹

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates ways in which South Africa could attract, recruit, retain and integrate critical skilled immigrants into different sectors of the economy to meet its acute shortage of skills needed for growth and development. This study focusses on Gauteng province using a primary qualitative survey. The study finds that South Africa attracts critical skills due to its advanced tertiary level education infrastructure, proximity to the home countries of African skilled migrants, relatively better institutional quality, as well as somewhat better economic outlook and better career prospects at a higher level of skills. On the contrary, high crime levels, social unrest and general anti-foreigner sentiments are factors that make South Africa unattractive to critical skilled migrants. South Africa also needs to transition from a reactive to a proactive policy stance in its immigration policy management for critical skills, improve service delivery and design programmes to properly integrate migrants



into South African society. South Africa's global competitiveness in the hunt for the best and brightest will be greatly enhanced if its attractive attributes are properly leveraged and deterrent characteristics comprehensively addressed.

Keywords: *International migration, Critical skilled migrants, South Africa, Economic growth and development*

INTRODUCTION

The shortage of skills needed for economic growth and development applies to many countries across the globe, of which South Africa is no exception. South Africa's need for additional skills emanates from a number of factors pre- and post-independence. Pre-independence education and racial discrimination were weapons of oppression, which ensured that the majority of the population of South Africa did not have access to the right quality of education. Racial disparities also extended to the type of jobs the majority of the population could or not do as stipulated in the Job Reservation Act of 1959 (Alexander & Simons 1959). This made certain skills and jobs the preserve of a privileged minority until South Africa achieved independence in 1994, and economic participation opened up to the entire population. Post-independence, the country experienced a significant loss of skills of economically active people—most of whom belong to a previously privileged minority population group. The highest net loss was in the professional, semi-professional and technical categories, followed by clerical and sales, managerial, executive and administrative occupations and artisans (Department of Higher Education and Training [DHET] 2014). To date, skilled South Africans continue to emigrate to developed countries such as Australia, New Zealand, the United States of America, Canada and the United Kingdom. Rasool, Botha and Bisschoff (2012) emphasised that the brain drain negatively affects the economic prospects of South Africa and its ability to participate and compete globally. Consequently, several government departments have a requirement for critical/scarce skills in order to achieve efficient and effective service delivery.

Alongside the continuous emigration of skilled South Africans, there are additional structural reasons why South Africa needs to attract skills from the diaspora. First is the lack of productive skills. Globalisation has forced many countries to be competitive which requires skilled human resources, which happens to be a major need in South Africa. Second, as South Africa continues to lose skilled labour to other countries, there must be

a plan of action to replace these skills. Skilled migration is one of the channels through which lost skills could be replaced. Third, the HIV/AIDS pandemic has, without exception, affected South Africa's skilled and professional labour. In addition, although South Africa has a large number of unemployed graduates, they serve as entry-level skilled labour. There is, therefore, the need for highly experienced and highly skilled labour that would ensure knowledge transfer to newly trained graduates in order to elevate them along the skills ladder from entry-level skill to highly skilled.

The objective of this article is to investigate ways in which South Africa could attract, recruit, retain and integrate skilled immigrants into different sectors of the economy. In this regard, this study seeks to enhance a deeper understanding into factors that make South Africa a country of choice for skilled migrants; who are South Africa's competitors in attracting skilled migrants and why; what are South Africa's competitors doing better that could be emulated; and how skilled migrants view South Africa. The experiences of skilled migrants in migrating to South Africa and their view of what needs to change is very critical to this study.

It is envisaged that the findings of the study will highlight key challenges and critical aspects to consider in immigration-related policy formulation and implementation that would enhance South Africa's ability to attract and retain skilled migrants deemed 'critical' to South Africa's development and growth.

RELEVANT LITERATURE

Who is a skilled migrant?

Defining whom a skilled migrant is poses problems for the researcher because skills are not in themselves easy to define, considering that they vary across countries and through time (Rughuram 2007). There is no consensus among social scientists about the definition of 'skills' and the term is often used synonymously with 'ability', 'competence', 'talent', 'human capital' or 'cultural capital' (Nowicka 2014:173). Freitas *et al.* (2012:1) argue that "there is a tendency among experts/analysts to focus on quite a reduced number of 'profitable' or 'valuable' skills, like the ones possessed by engineers, health or IT professionals". They cite examples of other skills, which, although acquired through tertiary education, are rarely considered, for example, the Humanities or Fine Arts. Freitas *et al.* (2012: 1) further argue that the definition of 'skilled migrants' is, therefore "strongly based on the existing demand (by markets, firms, states), instead of on skills *per se*, or the way they were acquired. 'Skills' are thus not neutral or universal,



but depend upon a specific socioeconomic and political context". However, certain common themes ran through the literature that skilled migrants are those who have acquired formal tertiary qualifications, usually a degree (Chaloff & Lameitre 2009; Rughuram 2007; Todisco *et al.* 2004). In certain cases, those who possess vocational skills are included as skilled workers, a definition that is "partly influenced by contemporary labour market conditions" (Rughuram 2007:430). Apart from degree-possessing workers, skilled migration in a broad sense covers workers "who have well-defined characteristics and distinctive features concerned with their particular professional sector" (Todisco *et al.* 2004:118).

In summation of the above, there are three key categories, which determine who a highly skilled immigrant is, namely education, occupation and wage level.

- Educational attainment: the level of educational attainment (e.g. years of schooling or completed secondary/tertiary education) is used as a proxy for "highly-skilled" immigrants (International Centre for Migration Policy Development [ICMPD] 2005: 2). This is usually done for the purposes of operationalising the concept of "highly-skilled" for statistical purposes.
- Occupational criteria: Some countries have a special work visa regime, which accommodates applicants whose occupation is part of the list of occupations drawn by the host government as critically needed. Australia and Canada utilise this approach in their recruitment of critical skills through online point systems (Chaloff and Lameitre 2009).
- The wage level of the job to be held is used in certain countries as an indicator of the skill level. An example is that of Tier 1 of the United Kingdom migration programme, where candidates for migration need not have a job offer, so points are awarded on the basis of the salary earned in the country of origin (Chaloff & Lameitre 2009).

In the South African context, the Immigration Act (No. 13 of 2002) does not specifically define who a skilled migrant is. However, South Africa has a critical skills list that identifies which skills are critical to South Africa's economy and need to be imported. A cursory look at these skills indicates that they border around educational qualification and occupational criteria.

To give a clear focus and direction to this study, we focus on South Africa's critical skills list to determine whom a critical skilled person is for the purpose of this study. In this study therefore, a critical skilled migrant refers to a migrant with the requisite qualifications, work experience and English language proficiency who falls into one of the specific

critical skills categories as stipulated by the Department of Home Affairs (DHA) of South Africa and documented as such with the requisite critical skills visa or business visa.

Drivers of skilled migration

Skilled migration is driven by a combination of push factors related to the home country and pull factors associated with the host country. Mahroum (2000) states that there are different push and pull factors for skilled migration, which differ according to their varying circumstances and agency.

Table 1: Examples of skilled migrant categories and types of influencing factors

| Group | Type of push and pull factors |
|--------------------------|---|
| Managers and executives | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Benefits and remuneration • Economic factors (supply and demand mechanisms) • The state of the national economy |
| Academics and scientists | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Bottom-up developments in science • Nature and conditions of work • Institutional prestige |
| Entrepreneurs | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Governmental (visa, taxation, protection etc.) policies • Financial facilities • Bureaucratic efficiency |
| Students | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Recognition at a global level • Accessibility problems at home • Intercultural experience |

Source: Mahroum (2000)

Push and pull factors are basically two sides of the same coin. A higher quality of education or health system in a host country compared to the home country of the migrant serves as push factors for skilled migration from the home country and pull factors towards the host country. The same could be said of employment opportunities, better remuneration packages, professional career development opportunities, economic instability, the standard of living, social stability, technological development, unfavourable national policies (such as tax rates) and the general quality of life (Rasool *et al.* 2012). Table 1 gives examples of push and pull factors that are likely to attract different categories of skilled immigrants. Other push and pull factors are random, unexpected and unique to the home country of the migrant and the host country respectively. Such typical push factors unique to the home country could be natural disasters, sudden conflict or cultural/ethnic discrimination (Mahroum 2009). Events of this nature trigger



unforeseen movement of people across borders, comprising of all categories of migrants. Unexpected pull factors for skilled labour in the host country could be the discovery of a natural resource, which creates new opportunities for specialised skills or a change in policy, such as tax rebates, that makes a country more attractive to private capital or entrepreneurs of a particular kind. Other less random pull factors unique to the host country are licencing requirements, access to financial services, the ease of starting a business and favourable labour market laws.

Benefits of skilled migration

Migration impacts on development in both the home country of the migrant and the host country. There is increasing recognition that skilled emigrants can be considered a potential asset to their home countries, able to act as agents of development and to strengthen co-operation between their home countries and host countries (Sims 2009).

According to Sims (2009) migration impacts on development in the home country in four main ways:

- Through the sending of remittances, which boosts home country incomes;
- Through returned migrants and skills transfer, whereby emigrants gain more skills, knowledge and technological expertise overseas which they are then able to re-apply upon return to their home country;
- Through network development, by which emigrants and diaspora communities are able to further the development of their country through gaining new commercial or strategic contacts while overseas;
- Through incentivisation, whereby the prospect of being able to emigrate encourages people in developing countries to raise their skill levels and thereby raises the overall skill levels in those countries. This mostly applies to migrants from sending countries that have bilateral agreements with host countries to periodically send labour to work in specific sectors of the host countries' economies.

In the host country, migrants also contribute to development in a number of ways. Sims (2009) further outlines a number of ways in which migrants impact on development in host countries.

- As workers, immigrants contribute to gross domestic product (GDP). Their presence may also affect the wages and employment opportunities of native workers, alter the country's income distribution and change the incentives to invest in schooling and in companies.

- As entrepreneurs and investors, immigrants create jobs and promote innovation. This has implications for the demand for labour and hence for wages and employment opportunities. In addition, it may change productivity levels and the rate at which the destination country's economy grows.
- As consumers, immigrants demand goods produced both domestically and abroad. This demand may alter GDP, productivity and inflation, as well as the country's balance of trade and its exchange rate.
- As taxpayers and public benefit users, immigrants may either help or hurt the government's budget and change the quality of public services that are delivered.

It is clear as per the channels outlined above that skilled migration has many benefits. The literature shows that migrants contribute more through tax payments and social contributions than they receive in individual benefits, as they contribute in financing public infrastructure (OECD 2014). Immigrants' also tend to save as they have to rebuild their security in a new country. Rasool *et al.* (2002) point out that skilled immigrants do not only contribute to economic growth but also create jobs and reduce the costs of worker training through the transfer of skills to local labour. In most cases, migrants bring new skills and abilities and they supplement the stock of human capital of the host country, for instance, skilled immigrants in the US contribute to research, innovation and technological progress (OECD 2014). Immigration can encourage local skills development and transfer of experience and expertise. Immigration can boost integration into a globalised economy. It can also foster other benefits, such as cultural understanding and the development of foreign relations (South African Civil Society Information Service [SACSIS] 2009). However, migrant workers contribute to the labour market in both high and low skilled occupations. In general, young migrants are more educated than immigrants that are near retirement and therefore contribute to reducing dependency ratios. Immigrants fill up jobs that are regarded as unattractive and lacking career prospects mostly despised by locals (OECD 2014). Skilled migrants are favoured more than other migrants, such as humanitarian migrants due to their fiscal contribution.

Patterns of migration to South Africa

People from all over the world have been migrating to South Africa since pre-colonial times. However, since independence in 1994, the nature and scale of migration have changed significantly as potential migrants from the rest of the African continent, Asia and the Indian sub-continent were permitted by the new dispensation to migrate to South Africa (Crush & Williams nd). Segatti (2008) indeed indicated that the post-apartheid international migration movements towards South Africa are characterised by three demographic features, namely the diversification of migrants' origins, an increase in the



proportion of younger migrants and the feminisation of migration. However, for Segatti (2008), the most significant change since democratisation is the vast influx of both permanent and temporary African and Asian migrants into South Africa. The incoming migrants have added to an already existing population of migrants in South Africa, mainly Southern African labour migrants drawn to the country by the labour needs of the mining industry from the early days of colonialism. The mixed flow of migrants who have entered South Africa since the 1990s include both skilled and unskilled economic migrants, business people and political refugees and asylum seekers (Crush & Williams nd).

There are various reasons for the rise in international migration to South Africa, including deteriorating economic conditions, political tension, marginalisation of minority ethnic groups, civil war and ecological deterioration in some sending countries (Adepoju 2006). The existence of social networks in both South Africa and the sending countries is an important factor facilitating migration to South Africa. South Africa's dominant economic position in the region has made the country one of the preferred destinations for immigrants from the region, the African continent and Asia. In addition, high rates of emigration from South Africa have led to increasing opportunities for foreign skilled migrant workers (Todes *et al.* 2010).

Research shows that data on migration into and within South Africa is poorly collected, weakly analysed and often misleading (Human Sciences Research Council [HSRC] 2014). The main sources of migration data in South Africa are the Statistics South Africa (Stats SA) census, household surveys and border statistics, administrative data and population register. It has been argued that the Department of Home Affairs (DHA) data on temporary and permanent permit applications and renewals is useful to describe some of the characteristics of the immigrants in South Africa (Stats SA 2012). However, the number of immigrants revealed in the data of a specific year is not a measure of all immigrants in South Africa in that specific year. Since migration is highly selective, gender, age and skill/educational level are among the prominent personal characteristics of an individual that may contribute to the decision to migrate into another country. Such detail has not been captured by the DHA since 1994 and is thus a limitation in the available data on immigrants (Stats SA 2014).

Apart from the immigrants gaining access to South Africa with temporary or permanent resident permits, low-skilled migrants without any work permits, contract workers working on mines and farms under bilateral agreements, and asylum seekers and refugees also form part of the South African migrant population. Although skilled migration has seen a plethora of scholarly literature at a global scale, studies on skilled migration to South Africa is scanty and migration data is poorly kept. Studies on the voices of

skilled migrants in South Africa and their opinion on what they believe should change to enhance South Africa's competitiveness in the global hunt for the best and brightest are non-existent. This study, therefore, fills this gap in the literature on migration to South Africa.

DATA AND METHODOLOGY

A qualitative exploratory approach with purposive sampling was used in this study. The study was conducted mainly within the Gauteng Province. Purposive sampling was necessitated by the fact that the sampling universe is largely unknown and poorly documented. Consequently, the respondent selection criteria were pre-determined. This involved a pragmatic assessment of stakeholders whose knowledge and experience could provide important insights into addressing the study questions. The sampling approach was both multi-staged and stratified with the aim of achieving heterogeneity among strata and homogeneity within a stratum.

Sampling framework

The first level of stratification was based on nationality, where the focus of this study was on foreign-born skilled migrants working in South Africa, the main target of this study. The second level of stratification related to categorisation of skill, and whom a critical skilled person is, focussing solely on what is defined as a critical skill in DHA's list of critical skills, which is based on qualification and occupation. This influenced which types of interviewees were selected for FGDs and key stakeholder interviews. Additionally considered were private sector industry bodies, international organisations, embassies of targeted countries in the first strata and organisations involved in the recruitment of or research on skilled migrant workers. Low-level skills and to some extent mid-level skills were excluded from this study. The study, however, recognises that who is defined to be a critical skilled migrant depends on the labour force needs of the host country acquiring those skills. To ensure focus and maximise relevance to the South African context, the scope was limited to the list of critical skills listed by the DHA. South Africa has a large pool of low to mid-level skilled migrants, especially from African countries. This pool of skilled migrants is excluded from this study, as well as refugees and asylum seekers.

This study was conducted mainly within the Gauteng Province. Skilled immigrants working in sectors such as Information Technology (IT), academia, engineering, the medical field(s) and selected industry associations were involved in this study. An



employment agency, two embassies and an immigration lawyer also participated in the study.

Data collection techniques

Key informant interviews and focus group discussions were used to engage targeted respondents to seek information on their perspectives and experiences in migrating to South Africa as critical skilled labour. In total, 24 skilled immigrants were interviewed. In addition, a focus group was also conducted with academics in one of the country's leading tertiary institutions. Focus group discussions were conducted with industry associations in the medical field, research and academia, IT and engineering in South Africa and other stakeholders. Their views on plausible solutions to identified challenges were also solicited.

FINDINGS

A thematic approach was used to analyse qualitative data. Table 2 summaries the results of the study in terms of how South Africa compares with other immigration destinations from the perspective of skilled migrants in Gauteng province.

Table 2: Pull factors and deterrents of skilled migration to South Africa

| Country | Pull Factors | Deterrents |
|--|--|---|
| South Africa | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Economic diversity – high skill jobs • Education infrastructure • Opportunities for further intellectual development • Proximity to home country (in Africa) • Institutional quality • Political neutrality of career and future prospects | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Degree of openness • Xenophobic attacks • Social unrests/volatile society • Crime is high • Black African discrimination • General dislike for foreigners, whether critical skill or not • Complicated documentation processes • Reactive policy stance • No integration programmes |
| Other Countries: Canada, New Zealand, Ghana, Nigeria, Cote d'Ivoire, Kenya, Cameroon, Botswana, DR Congo, Argentina, United Kingdom | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ease of documentation • Ease of hiring • Quality of health care • Openness to foreign cultures • Good programmes to integrate migrants into society • Income • Ease of remitting money even when studying • Proactive policy stance | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Distant location and harsh weather • Growing anti-immigration sentiments led to changes in government in some developed countries |

Source: Authors' analysis of qualitative data collected.

What made you leave your country of origin?

Interviewees explained that due to high levels of literacy in their home countries, most highly skilled workers find it difficult to access jobs because of intense competition for limited opportunities. Some of the respondents also indicated that they were ‘pushed’ from their countries by factors such as “bad governance” or “political instability”. The quality of physical and technological infrastructure is poor in their home countries and good technology is very expensive to access in some instances.

Why did you choose South Africa?

When asked “what about South Africa attracted you as a skilled migrant?”, most respondents replied that they were attracted by economic and job-related opportunities at their level of skill due to South Africa’s shortage of critical skills. However, a few responses provided other reasons, which include “better education facilities for my children”, “level of modernised infrastructure highly linked to global systems”, “better quality of life” as well as “personal rather than professional reasons”. Another very relevant factor cited by respondents related to South Africa’s close proximity to their countries of origin. Furthermore, “South Africa offers the opportunity to be politically neutral as a critical skill, whereby the sustainability of one’s career is not dependent on the need to belong to a particular political divide or be politically active”. This enables critical skilled migrants to focus solely on their careers and its development without the fear of a politically driven uncertain future. This makes South Africa a “greener pasture” for skilled migrants.

Which other countries did you consider and why?

Additional migration destinations that were cited in this study by critical skilled migrants were developed countries. These include the USA, United Kingdom, Australia, Canada, New Zealand, Netherlands and Greece. These countries are preferred to South Africa for reasons such as better quality of education, no hindrance to upward professional mobility and well-designed programmes to attract and integrate new migrants into society. Consequently, these developed countries are seen as more welcoming to migrants and have more favourable policies towards migrants, including clear pathways to citizenship and easy social integration and cohesion. A higher level of appreciation is accorded to skilled migrants, they are more peaceful and have better job opportunities than in South Africa. However, the main setback of these developed countries is the fast-growing anti-immigration sentiments from the extreme right political divide, worsening threat of terrorist attacks and harsh weather and distance from home, especially for some critical skilled Africans.



Labour market entry, integration and related issues

In terms of labour market-related issues, only a few critical skilled migrants knew of any well-established programmes for attracting and recruiting critical skills to South Africa. However, none of the study participants was recruited through these programmes. Other countries surveyed had a number of well-packaged online-based systems and physical head hunting mechanisms for poaching the skills they needed from other countries. This brings to the fore that whilst South Africa's competitors take a proactive stance in competing for the best and brightest, South Africa's policy stance towards acquiring critical skills is reactive in nature and not competitive. Upon arrival, there is no orientation nor mechanisms to properly integrate them into South African society nor sensitise society to their presence and relevance to communities. Indeed, study participants described the South African job market, for example, as "discriminatory and xenophobic" and that "it seems not everyone here is comfortable with immigrants even if they have critical skills". One of the reasons given by critical skilled migrants for alternative destinations cited in this study was the fact that they had well-established mechanisms for integrating them into society, and that these alternative countries were more open to foreign cultures and had higher levels of social cohesion than South Africa. This puts South Africa at a huge disadvantage compared to other competing destinations in the hunt for global talent. It also emerged from this study that it is becoming increasingly difficult to be hired as a critical skilled migrant due to the current drive for transformation. Study participants stated that:

Preference nowadays is being given to locals due to laws that have been enacted, e.g. B.E.E.;

...in several competitive jobs priority is given to South African nationals sometimes with fewer skills;

... as a migrant you are not the first choice until a South African cannot fill the position then you can be considered.

As a result, less qualified local skills are preferred in high-level positions, giving priority to South African nationals first. This seems to resonate with other international practices whereby a job will go to a migrant only after it has been established that no local skill is capable of performing the required functions. However, what did not emerge in the other countries surveyed in this study is whether a less qualified local will be employed at the expense of a critical skilled migrant. Closely related to this is the issue of meritocratic remuneration, whether the earnings of critical skilled migrants are commensurate to their level of skill and specialisation, and competitive compared to other destination

countries. This study revealed a differentiated view on the issue as some of the critical skilled migrants felt that their remuneration was acceptable by South African standards, however, when converted to foreign currencies or the need arises to remit, then it appears to be inadequate due to the depreciation of the Rand. A study participant indicated that remuneration depends on the type of employment and commented as follows: "It depends on the job you get, sometimes out of options you take any job that comes along, so you might not get what you deserve". This raises the issue of brain waste, a major concern for critical skilled migrants, whereby one is employed at a level significantly below one's level of expertise due to limited opportunities. In line with this view, another study participant perceived foreign skills attraction to South Africa in a negative light and also experienced discrimination at the workplace: "Skills are attracted almost to receive cheap labour. Discrimination is very high in the workplace (at least where I have worked) either on the basis of race or nationality". Personal and professional growth opportunities emerged as very important to skilled migrants in South Africa. Migrants have experienced opportunities to grow personally and professionally in South Africa in diverse ways. While some of the study participants described their growth opportunities as "very limited" or "satisfactory" others had positive experiences to share with the researchers. An interviewee noted that "South Africa is the first country I have worked in where my employer is responsible for my personal and professional development" while another interviewee remarked that "once recruited it becomes easy to grow professionally". Interviewees further alluded to the fact that South Africa offered substantial opportunities for research funding although in some cases the funds are restricted to South African citizens only, researchers from African origin or only developing countries. This makes critical skilled migrants from developed countries feel excluded.

Finance and investment opportunities available to critical skills in South Africa

With respect to the financial aspects of the lives of critical skilled migrants, their experiences were mixed. Whilst some were able to easily remit home, had access to financial services and able to invest in financial instruments and property, others found it difficult or just impossible to do so. The differentiating factor here was the nature of documentation the critical skilled migrant holds. The results of this study show that the level of difficulty reduces significantly as one's documentation moves from a critical skills visa to permanent residency and then to citizenship in South Africa. In comparison to other countries, a valid visa that is not yet expired is adequate to remit money home from any licensed financial service delivery outlet. Besides the immigration status of a migrant worker, factors such as the high rates of transactional fees were also impacting on remitting money. For example, an interviewee stated the following:



I do not send money, as the entire banking side of life in South Africa is pretty complicated and discouraging. Starting with the difficulty to exchange money (banks opening files to monitor that), the commission paid each time, exorbitant charges for electronic transfers even to the neighbouring countries...

On the other hand, some interviewees noted that remitting money has become easier due to advanced technology, but that the “sharp depreciation of the Rand has made it more expensive to remit money”.

Which factors make South Africa unattractive to critical skilled migrants?

The findings of this study reveal a number of factors that make South Africa unattractive and uncompetitive to critical skilled migrants. There is a low level of social cohesion in South African society in general and specifically between locals and foreigners. This has been attributed to historical injustices that persist and South Africa not being very open to foreign cultures, especially from other African countries. South Africa is seen as being more accommodating to foreigners from other regions of the world compared to foreigners from Africa. Social unrest is another factor that makes South Africa unattractive to critical skilled migrants. Social unrests mostly emanate from service delivery protests but unfortunately sometimes climax with attacks on foreign businesses. The perception of most interviewees is that the level of social unrest in South Africa is high as evidenced by the increasing number of violent protests over the years. South Africa experienced 691 violent protests between 2009–2014 compared to 105 protests from 2004–2008. The two most striking years were 2012 and 2013 in which 173 and 155 protests happened respectively². Some interviewees were of the view that the frequent xenophobic attacks on migrants is a strong example of social unrest that poses a direct risk to migrants, irrespective of their level of skill.

The level, nature and frequency of crime also stood out as a source of discomfort that makes South Africa unattractive as a migration destination for critical skilled migrants. One respondent rationalised the reasons for the crime problem as follows: “In my mind, the level of crime we are experiencing is a result of the social and economic injustices and inequalities, and high levels of poverty in the country. Internationally where economic or political crisis exists, crime increases substantially.”

Economic and social discrimination is seen as characteristic of South African society in general. An interviewee captured this sentiment as follows: “It is not only towards foreigners but also among South Africans”. This seems to suggest that social and economic

discrimination is not exclusively against foreigners but a feature of South African society as a whole. Economic discrimination is seen by critical skilled migrants as subtle and sometimes difficult to detect due to the confidentiality attached to remuneration packages. This makes any potential comparisons difficult. What also stands out in this remark is that this particular interviewee thought that economic discrimination is no worse for skilled migrants than what one could expect in other countries. On the contrary, social discrimination is encountered on a daily basis as part of the societies in which they live.

The ease and cost of documentation to South Africa and the difficulty of the administrative processes involved in processing the required documentation also featured strongly as a deterrent factor. In this regard, South Africa emerged as a more difficult country to access than other competing destinations surveyed in this study. The majority of study participants indeed described the process associated with the facilitation of their employment in South Africa as “overly lengthy and cumbersome, costly and discouraging.”

In addition, the permit is only granted for a limited period implying that the migrant has to embark again on a similar procedure after the permit has expired. Some of the study participants perceived services provided by the DHA in a negative light as an interviewee, for example, remarked:

Home Affairs (immigration officials) including at South African embassies in many African countries are not well versed with South Africa's immigration policies. The errors they are making are very costly to people applying for different types of visas. They must stop being hostile towards migrants.

A related challenge is that critical skilled migrants recruited by South African firms are left on their own to process the documentation required to take up these employment offers in South Africa

Again, South Africa's migration policy keeps evolving, making it less predictable compared to competing destinations. This unpredictability of South Africa's changing migration policy makes long-term planning difficult for skilled migrants and their families.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUDING REMARKS

This study attempted to highlight what makes South Africa preferred to other competing destinations, and the policy measures needed to mitigate South Africa's constraints whilst making it more globally competitive in the hunt for global talent.



The findings of this study show that South Africa has some advantages over developed and developing countries in attracting critical skills. Some of these advantages include close geographical proximity to African countries, better physical and technological infrastructure compared to developing countries and at par with developed countries, and the opportunity for critical skilled migrants to work freely without any political interference. South Africa's education, health infrastructure and institutional quality further place it above many developing country counterparts. These positive attributes serve as factors that South Africa should emphasise in marketing itself, alongside well-designed and proactive programmes targeted at specific critical skills needed for economic growth and development. In contrast, the level of crime, social unrest and low level of social cohesion, coupled with economic and social discrimination, difficult and costly migration processes and procedures and barriers to upward professional mobility serve as constraints that weaken South Africa's competitiveness and need to be addressed in a holistic and comprehensive manner. Other factors such as access to financial services, ability to remit money home or invest become easier as the migrant's documentation progresses from a critical skills visa to permanent residence and onwards to citizenship in South Africa.

South Africa's immigration policy as formulated and implemented is seemingly oblivious of the intensity of the global hunt for the best and brightest, including the world's strongest economies. Although South Africa has different types of visas for incoming critical skills, the findings of this study reveal that South Africa's critical skills migration policy is more reactive in nature than proactive, in comparison to other competing migration destinations. Countries such as New Zealand, United Kingdom, Canada and the USA whose "grocery shops" for critical skills are African countries, have online point systems and other well-diversified proactive headhunting mechanisms for acquiring the skills they need from other countries. South Africa, on the other hand, waits for suitable applicants to apply based on their published critical skills list after which they are processed at respective embassies around the world, a process described as difficult, costly, user-unfriendly and inconsistent by critical skilled migrants who participated in this study. Critical skilled migrants also speak of frequent changes to South Africa's migration policy, most of which are unannounced, making it unpredictable and difficult for long-term planning by skilled migrants and their families. This calls for some consistency in South Africa's skilled migration policy formulation and implementation. In comparison, Botswana frequently dialogues on a monthly basis with its private sector to establish skill gaps that need to be filled from external sources and uses its embassies around the world as headhunting and recruitment outlets for skills that are needed back home. These additional skills are needed after local capacity has been exhausted or is unavailable to fill such positions. As long as skilled immigrants face barriers to enter the labour market due

to equity requirements, it is likely to create a brain waste. The resultant development is likely to be an outflow of critical skilled migrants from South Africa to more competitive and favourable destinations. There is also a sense of disjoint between written policy and practice, as well as the conflict between different policies in South Africa with respect to attracting critical skills for economic growth and development.

As much as South Africa clearly articulates its need for critical skills in specific sectors of its economy in the DHA critical skills list, the National Development Plan and several State of the Nation addresses, what actually pertains in reality in terms of implementation and practice sends contrasting signals as to whether critical skills are really needed or not. An increasing drive for transformation has seen less qualified natives being employed in high-level positions in place of well-qualified migrant labour. This seems to pitch policies aimed at attracting critical skills into South Africa against the drive for transformation, which is gathering momentum by the day. South Africa needs to find a useful balance between the two policies. One way of doing so would be to establish mechanisms through which skills could be transferred from the critical skilled migrant to develop local capacity within a stipulated timeframe as part of the contractual obligations of the critical skilled migrant. Again, there are no programmes in place to ensure the transfer of skills from employed skilled migrants to native skills in South Africa, missing a brilliant opportunity for skills development.

The absence of well-managed and coordinated recruitment programmes translates into lack of programmes and structures to integrate skilled migrants into society for peaceful and mutually beneficial co-existence and social cohesion. South Africa, in collaboration with local government representatives and migrant associations, should begin to look into programmes and mechanisms for addressing social integration of migrants. It will go a long way to diffuse social tensions and mitigate the eruption of xenophobic violence in South Africa.

In more developed migration corridors such as USA-Latin American corridors, China-East Asian corridors and Australia/New Zealand-Pacific Islands corridors, Remittance Country Partnerships and other forms of Labour Migration Agreements exist between home countries of migrants and their host countries. These partnerships cover seasonal labour migration to specific sectors of host country economies. Documentation, such as specific work permits and business licenses, are issued and are renewable on an annual basis after the skilled migrant has provided proof of tax compliance. Remittances of money back home for specific community development projects are rewarded with tax rebates or import duty rebates on personal property imports. Different temporary and permanent migration agreements, arrangements and measures to ensure that home



countries of migrants become developed over time, alleviates the burden of immigration on the host country. The idea is that once the quality of life improves in the home country of the skilled migrant, the need to remain in the host country declines significantly. Such agreements currently seem farfetched for the South African immigration landscape, however, it could be looked into as a long-term plan.

NOTES

- 1 This article was extracted from the Fieldwork Report of the Critical Skills Attraction Study by the Democracy Governance and Service Delivery Unit (DGSD) of the Human Sciences Research Council (HSRC).
- 2 www.municipaliqu.co.za

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