



'Excellence, Migration and Equality Policy: Managing Unintended Consequences'

Policy Brief

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*There is a tension between the agenda of excellence and that of equity...
these issues have not been resolved (Kahn et al. 2004).*

Summary

The empirical work with South African scientists exposed a range of concerns about the relationship between equality and mobility which are not so much connected with mobility rights as the employment rights of scientists in South Africa (and the role they play in encouraging exit and discouraging return). Much of the research on highly skilled migration refers to the importance of *national context* to an understanding of migration decision-making. Although these national employment policies were not explicitly designed to shape mobility they do so in practice – as an unintended consequence (externality effect). We are referring here to the post-apartheid employment context and the complex effects of ‘affirmative’ action measures.

Migration research and any policy recommendations deriving from it needs to pay careful attention to national context. Although policy lessons can be learnt, outcomes and policies are not necessarily transferable in any direct or simplistic sense.

The findings are grounded in the narratives of our respondents; capturing this level of complexity and nuance required a biographical approach.

Qualitative and biographical approaches form an essential component of research in the field of migration.

The interviews convey an image of South African scientific employment as both remarkably complex and in the midst of transition. The long term effects of apartheid coupled with recent policy changes impact on migration behaviour shaping who leaves, who stays and who returns with important implications for sustainable capacity-building.

Although formal policies have changed, entrenched attitudes and persistent socio-economic inequalities continue to have a marked indirect impact on migration. The intersection of race with financial status influences residential location and shapes access to education and exposure to crime.

Respondents identified concerns about the specific consequences of post-Apartheid employment policy on migration behaviour referring to the ‘tactics’ that employers used to ‘circumvent’ post-Apartheid employment equality policies. This included policies such as the use of Afrikaans as the teaching medium (which was perceived by some as a form of indirect discrimination). Others referred to the avoidance of the full impact of reform by increasing reliance upon external sources of funding. In a small number of cases respondents spoke of more direct forms of pressure designed to restrict policy implementation including forms of bullying or harassment designed to restrict the participation of black people in formal applications processes.

Policy change does not have a simple and direct effect on employment conditions and opportunities. Evidence suggested a clear policy lag in the South African context reflecting informal means of avoiding or circumventing policy. As a result forms of prejudice and discrimination targeted at the black and coloured population continue to shape migration behaviour encouraging this group of researchers to leave the country.

Contextualising experiences is important not only in terms of current national context; respondents experiences have a temporal dimension reflecting historical policy and socio-cultural contexts. Respondents' accounts need to be located within specific time frame. Many respondents referred to the impact that the new policy environment (in the 1990s) had had on their employment opportunities in South Africa and their migration decision-making at that time.

Biographical approaches need to ensure that migrants' experiences are located within the time period they are referring to and have experience of. This is a critical element of contextualisation with important implications for policy exchange processes.

The over-whelming majority of both black and white respondents expressed strong support for the need for policy change. They also raised a number of key concerns around the 'externalities' connected with the new policy environment (and the introduction of affirmative action). Two broad groups of issues emerged. The first concerned the effects of affirmative action on the mobility of the people it was designed to promote – namely black and coloured men and women and the second, its effects on the mobility of the previously advantaged group (white men).

One element of policy backlash concerned the effects that tokenistic appointments had on the perceived quality of 'previously disadvantaged' groups. The profound effects of Apartheid on the 'gap' between educational opportunity of black and white people in the scientific recruitment pool and the dramatic shift in policy post-Apartheid has increased the potential for appointments to be influenced by colour.

Respondents suggested that the consequent employment of less experienced people in senior positions is likely to cause problems in terms of immediate performance and can compound preconceived and prejudicial views around competence.

Affirmative action may lead to forms of tokenism and distort the relationship between credentials (merit) and recruitment or progression. This influences migration behaviour.

The second concern was that affirmative action effectively discriminated against white men, reducing their career opportunities and encouraging them to migrate. They believed that the current policy climate was not conducive to effective return and professional re-integration. This shaped their own migration behaviour and had a damaging effect on scientific capacity in South Africa.

The specific approach to the introduction of affirmative action in South African employment policy (and its effects on merit-driven and transparent recruitment) is reported to be an important determinant of both outward moves and returns.

South African policy extends affirmative action to women (irrespective of colour). Employment policy, in common with migration policy, tends to assume that people are individuals. In practice, both career and migration decision takes place in a relational context with individual responses framed by considerations about partners and children.

Many scientists have partners who are also scientists. Affirmative action policy impacts on these dual science situations creating complex incentives and challenges.

South African women in the UK felt that their employment opportunity had been enhanced by employment equity policies increasing the opportunities for return and professional reintegration (especially if they were not white). On the other hand, the fact that they had partners who were white and male often tipped the balance in favour of developing their careers outside of South Africa.

Affirmative action generates unintended outcomes when considered in the specific (but common) context of dual science couples. Household decision-making in these contexts will often imply that women are also deterred from returning to South Africa. The policy also restricts the ability of other foreign nationals (if they are white) to locate themselves in South Africa. This reduces opportunities for internationalisation (and the relative attractiveness of South Africa as a working environment).

Conclusions

Affirmative action policies in South Africa have added further complexity to an already highly distorted employment context. These processes, in turn, impact on migration behaviour shaping who leaves, who stays and who returns. To the extent that migration into and out of South Africa is motivated by racial considerations, this distorts any linear relationship between excellence (merit) and mobility.