

**TWO STEPS BACK, THREE STEPS FORWARD:  
THE STORY OF SOUTH AFRICAN MIGRANTS WORKING IN AUSTRALIA**

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**ABSTRACT**

Although skilled migration has become a targeted and intentional growth and development instrument for a number of countries this has not always translated into the optimal recognition and use of the human capital of the migrants. Since some literature argues a separation between social and economic integration, special attention to the integration of migrants into the workforce is justified. This paper reports the narrative of South African migrants establishing themselves in the Australian workforce. In essence the findings confirm the validity of earlier research while providing a picture of individual and challenges and experiences.

## **TWO STEPS BACK, THREE STEPS FORWARD: THE STORY OF SOUTH AFRICAN MIGRANTS WORKING IN AUSTRALIA**

### **ABSTRACT**

Skilled migration has become a targeted and intentional instrument by a number of countries in an attempt to ensure skill sufficiency and as a driver of continued economic growth and development. Although countries like the United States of America, Canada, New Zealand and Australia have been able to attract significant numbers of skilled migrants through a combination of pull factors, not the least of which government regulations, this has not always translated into the optimal recognition and use of the human capital of the migrants. Since some literature argues a separation between social and economic integration, special attention to the integration of migrants into the workforce is justified. In order to assess the integration though it is crucial to understand the demographics, experience and phases that migrants go through when settling in a new work environment. This paper reports the narrative of South African migrants establishing themselves in the Australian workforce. It determines that this group of migrants seems to predominantly experience aspects of integration in the labour force as reported in other literature, confirming the validity of earlier research while providing a picture of individual and specific challenges and experiences.

### **MIGRATION DRIVERS AND DYNAMICS**

Over the last few decades labour migration across national boundaries has received a renewed importance as governments use targeted migration policies to address skill shortages. The United States, Canada, Australia and New Zealand are examples of countries pursuing skilled migrants to strengthen their workforce capabilities. As a recent example of this, in May 2012 the Australian government approved the recruitment of skilled migrants for a specific mining project. Enderwick et al. (2011) reports on an exponential growth in migration over recent decades to the extent that in 2008 about 3 per cent of the world population are migrants. Although the majority of this is driven by skilled migration into high income and industrialised economies the benefits derived are often sub-par and haphazard. Despite a growing involvement by governments to recruit highly skilled and often educated migrants there is little or no assurance of the productive use of migrants, particularly in the short term when the adaptation and exposure to the host culture is fresh and most challenging. Clydesdale (2011) confirms the nature of a human capital mismatch leading to a sub-par contribution from immigrants despite efforts by governments to target highly skilled immigrants who should theoretically settle well and make a contribution. Watts and Trin (2000) attribute poor migrant productivity to the failure of companies to exploit the advantages that migrants provide. One of the

main difficulties in the acculturation process is that the human capital integral to migrant labour is often misjudged or not acknowledged.

More generally Bernardi et al (2010) highlight the importance of immigration policies, labour market structure, regulation and recognition of ethnic community networks as tools to assist and promote acculturation, specifically into the labour market. While describing the emergence of a biculturalism aptitude in adapting between two different cultures Schwarz and Unger (2010) refer to language, symbols, traditions and heritage as factors that influence the process. Success is claimed to be dependent on a person's ability to shift or change behaviour and cope with aspects of the different cultures and, when required or expected, to 'leave their cultural baggage at the door'.

In addition, aspects of language, heritage and education further contribute to the meaning and dynamics of self and others in a migrant environment. Tannenbaum (2007) points to the personal identity of a migrant being closely connected to feelings of cultural, social and societal safety and connectedness in a person's home society and the subsequent uncertainties and threats associated with the reality of being immersed in a host society. The immigration exercise consists of the valuing of one's own distinctiveness while considering change through the influences of values, norms and rituals of the host society. The latter allows for an identity gain in that an adaptation to norms of the majority are likely to be beneficial and advantageous. Tannenbaum (2007) establishes the immigrant experience of relativity whereby an augmented awareness and appreciation of aspects of the home culture strengthen the formation of the identity. In some instances this implies aspects that were experienced as negative in the home culture now being reassessed as being positive in the host country or vice-versa. In his discussion of factors that influence the relative disadvantaged position of immigrants Kogan (2010) refers to the recognition of education, marital status, age and years since migration. Selvarajah and Masli (2011) established that successful integration of Chinese migrants in Australia is reflected in a strong desire by immigrants to contribute socially and economically to the local society. This, in turn enhances the self esteem and confidence of the migrant and the migrant community as important and integrated contributors to their new society.

Tannenbaum (2007) established that immigrants report along the lines of challenges, costs, sacrifices or disadvantages and the realities of joys, growth, benefits and improvements. The positives include

aspects of social behaviour (like politeness, tolerance, patience), emotions, (relief, independence, confidence, fortunate, stronger, glad), bureaucracy (easy), and growth (maturity, new language, widened horizons). At the challenge end the most extreme reference was to separation (stranger, lonely, alienated - sometimes compared to death) adjustments (children, language, expectations, decision making), emotions (distressed, anxiety, depression, not welcome, sad) and sacrifices (hardship, loss, displacement)

The International Organisation for Migration (2011) points at the need for a whole of society approach to facilitate migrant integration. This refers to both a national, regional or state and local government involvement and an involvement of non-state actors that complement government efforts. Benefits to be derived from an integrated approach to the integration migrants are likely to be aimed at migrants in the first instance but will indirectly also assist the host society in building an awareness and indirectly adapt to the presence of migrants.

Decisions to migrate and the consequences of migration are various, often unpredictable. In addition migrants face unique challenges in that they need to cope with dual world views and negotiate multiple identity demands (Mahalingam, 2008). This paper considers if a generalist narrative could possibly capture the experience and trajectory of the skilled South African migrant's career after migrating to Australia. It furthermore poses the question if government and employer support and services impact the experience and trajectory at all.

### **FACILITATING MIGRATION**

From a host country perspective Clydesdale (2011) argues the importance of acquiring human capital in the form of immigrants as a source of economic development. Amongst the benefits derived from immigrants he points to anecdotal arguments of accelerated growth, technology transfer, higher exports and an increase in innovation as a result of higher diversity. A generally agreed position though is that nations such as Australia, Canada and New-Zealand have benefited from immigration in-flows.

At the same time governments invest resources and efforts into initiatives to facilitate integration. In the case of Germany Kogan (2010) laments that substantive investment in immigrant support has to date not resulted in improved labour market position outcomes. In the case of Spain all migrants

receive high levels of support, including health care, education and social services (Bernardi et al, 2010). Disappointingly this has not resulted in an uplifted pool of immigrants in the labour market. The importance of the regulatory environment in influencing the migration climate was pointed out by one respondent when referring to sudden changes triggered by the global financial crisis impacting on expectations and the conditions. He stated that:

*“ ... to some extent the country needs me because my skills are on the shortage list. They cannot do without immigrants so that Australia is dependent on my skills.”, and*  
*“...It takes 2 to tango. A frustrating thing is, having said that, is it seems easy for the government to push migrants out again and then when they need them to pull them in again. There is a global economic crisis, the rules were extremely strict and a lot of people were placed in really difficult positions having to pack up and leave within a matter of 28 days having lost their work as a result of the crisis. I felt that was a bit harsh. Now a year or 2 later those people will be in demand again, you will have great difficulty in convincing someone to come here again having had to leave within 28 days a year ago. That was a bit frustrating and I think that is something that they need to revisit.”*

Clydesdale (2011) for example is critical of the New Zealand government migrant recruitment system and points at the shortcoming of not acknowledging cultural similarity. In his view the omission of the determination and valuation of cultural similarity between the migrant's background and the host country undermines that market evaluation of human capital and sets migrants from a dissimilar culture up for failure. Despite best intentions the government apparatus responsible for filtering the human capital appears to be failing as many migrants upon arrival in the host country are finding they cannot apply their skills and need re-qualification to local standards (Clydesdale, 2011). Enderwick et al. (2011) identifies a need for improved understanding of the net impacts of migration and, more particularly the need for carefully nuanced policies that address particular challenges for migrants at specific times. The crux of the migration conundrum is that migrants have less knowledge of the customs and sometimes language, less information and comprehension of job opportunities and less firm-specific training while employers are less likely to have information about migrant capabilities and their productivity.

### **MIGRANT HUMAN CAPITAL**

Not surprisingly the entrance of labour into a foreign market raises a number of issues in relation to the suitability of the human capital embedded in the labour source as well as the various policies and regulations that govern the flow of labour. Theories of human capital accumulation and transferability often serve as the basis of the development of government migration policies and

frameworks. According to Kogan (2010) the interpretation of policy makers and that of industry often provides counterproductive outcomes. Godin (2008) suggests that part of the driver for the gap in recognition is that companies require more than education and are looking for specialised knowledge in a specific field or area. Immigrants are labelled as not having relevant work experience, poor language skills and poor social skills, therefore contributing to both the perception and the reality of depreciated human capital (Selvarajah and Masli, 2011). Enderwick et al. (2011) also capture the notion that labour markets strongly value local qualifications and experience, possibly proxied by years of residence. Recent migrants therefore are likely to operate at a discounted value of human capital. Clydesdale (2011) hints that it appears that employers in some cases use the immigration process to reduce their wage bill and in the process distort the value of the human capital.

Kogan (2010), in reference to the German migrant labour force, notes unequivocally that prospects of immigrants in the German labour market are weaker than native labourers. The conclusion reflects the comparison of labour with similar levels of human capital and implies the existence of ethnic disadvantages, possibly some form of discriminatory pressures in the labour market. The reference to ethnic disadvantages may sound strong but Kogan (2010) also established that immigrants from Western and Northern European countries, i.e. socially and economically similar, have a much better recognition of their human capital and therefore labour market opportunities compared to Latin America, African and Asian immigrants. Godin (2008) claims that immigrants can be discriminated against based on nationality or immigrant status. In a worst case environment these persist over time and could potentially translate in permanent inferiority, often evidenced in wage disparities. Clydesdale (2011) puts it that human capital of immigrants may not be fully transferable, exacerbated by the fact that formal qualifications do not necessarily translate in human capital in a different environment. Similarly, Godin (2008) claims that migrants that experience integration barriers are willing to modify their behaviour and temporarily forgo the ideal job to accept low-paying employment or poorer working conditions.

The 'inferior value' of human capital in the host country implies that immigrants end up in lower strata of occupational hierarchy and productivity and could be labelled counterproductive (Kogan, 2010). In an effort to rebuild social, economic and family networks immigrants often are willing to

accept a first job that does not correspond with their pre-migration socio-occupational standing (Godin, 2008), sometimes reflecting their own assessment of the recognition of human capital in the new labour environment. In the worst case scenario Bernardi et al. (2010) highly educated and highly skilled immigrants might be precluded from the possibility of accessing occupations that correspond to the level they achieved and performed at prior to migration. Clydesdale (2011) adds to this by noting that the inability of migrants to secure appropriate employment is often on the basis of a solid commercial rationale where the necessity of language and inter-cultural communication skills is deemed non-negotiable in a service sector.

Additional obstacles to enter the labour market at the appropriate level, or in some instances even industry are sometimes purposely put in place through legal regulations or in extreme cases such as in Germany a priority law where suitable German nationals are at all time preferred over immigrants (Kogan, 2010). Bernardi et al. (2010) points at the bureaucratic impediments and often time consuming process for official recognition of qualifications.

As is often the case, educational qualifications gained in one country are deemed to have little or no relevance to another if they are not adequately recognised (Kogan, 2010). In essence, qualifications are at risk of being devalued. In some instances of legal or regulatory context the partial or non-recognition could be justified. In other instances the underlying reasons for non-recognition are more subjective. Formal qualifications may for example confer lower or different competencies that do not meet the industry requirements (Bernardi et al, 2010). On facilitating the integration process Godin (2008) confirms that new immigrants often turn to the ethnic society of co-migrants to accumulate work experience and increase their human capital in the local labour market before moving up the labour market. In a number of professional career cases, such as health and law, a highly regulated labour market environment further limits opportunities for well qualified and experienced immigrants. Another layer contributing to the substandard assessment of human capital is the language proficiency of immigrants. Essen (2006) determines that unsatisfactory German language proficiency among highly qualified immigrants correlates to the lack of progress in labour market gains and leads to the interpretation of ethnic penalties. Although language reflects only on aspect of cultural similarity, in the context of complementing or undermining human capital it plays a very significant role. Research

has established that language is crucial to promote social assimilation (Dustmann, 1995). Bernardi et al. (2010) also contemplate the lack of language fluency representing a significant handicap for recognition of skills and competencies. They furthermore refer to ethnic penalties in terms of occupational attainment capturing occupational disadvantages for immigrants from culturally dissimilar groups.

A final layer contributing to a depleted human capital assessment refers to the losses that immigrants invariably suffer. Tannenbaum (2007) refers to the loss of culture, the loss of internal sense of harmony, loss of significant personal and professional connection, identity and networks, loss of one's 'inner compass' and often the loss of the mother tongue as factors that depreciate the human capital of an immigrant.

### **MIGRANTS, LABOUR MARKETS AND EMPLOYMENT**

The International Organisation for Migration (2011) postulates the importance of ensuring the gainful employment and productivity of migrants as part of the process to achieve full participation in the host society. As employees, immigrants are likely to bring valuable knowledge and skills into the labour market (Enderwick et al., 2011). The reality of immigrants entering a new and different labour market includes coping with an unfamiliar labour environment, rebuilding social networks, questioned credentials and pre-migration work experience, discrimination and often bridging a language divide (Godin, 2008). Labour market integration is therefore both determined by individual characteristics of the person and, equally, by the interaction of the individual with the work environment. According to Citrin et al. (2001) the idea of integration includes an adaptation of immigrant attitudes, behaviour and practices such as business and trade. In addition, Mahalingam (2008) argue that migrants on the one hand try to make sense of the host culture, norms, practices, values and social hierarchies while simultaneously being informants and educators of home culture customs, practices and values. Godin (2008) argues that immigrant integration in the local labour market is most prominent for affluent, educated, experienced people and those who have a high level of language proficiency. In New Zealand for example migrants from ethnic minority backgrounds face significant problems finding employment (Clydesdale, 2011).



For a working immigrant the labour market, or more specifically the workplace represents a contact zone for cultural exposure. In addition, migrants deal on a daily basis with contrasting and often conflicting attitudes, values, practices and expectations derived from dual frames of reference. Phinney (2010) argues that this unique set of challenges develop multicultural maturity and potentially facilitate and improve integration or assimilation. Clydesdale (2011) determines the importance of local business knowledge as an aspect that immigrants lack when they enter the host country and the improved performance and position of migrants in the labour market over time.

The handicap of this is that immigrants are unable to transition into an equivalent labour market and end up in a lower segment of the labour market, often with limited mobility. Unless the immigrant is willing to invest in acquiring suitable human capital the limitation may have permanent consequences. Bernardi et al (2010) concluded along similar lines determining that immigrants in Spain maintained comparable employment levels to locals but were overall appointed in lower spheres of the labour market, often despite being qualified well beyond requirements. As most immigrants are selected for their human capital characteristics, or indeed rely on them for securing an income, it is essential to view their employability profile in the context of social adaptation (Godin, 2008). In a labour market context Dustmann (1995) establishes that migrant workers do adjust very well to labour market requirements. This capability is predominantly attributed to the desire of migrants to acquire human capital. The argument further identifies the need for migrants to both gain a clear understanding of the labour market and the need for intensive contact with behaviour, values and expectations of the host country.

Godin (2008) postulates that most migrants are able to find a job consistent with their pre-migration socio-occupational status after a time of assimilation in the labour market. These include the development of local work experience that translate to progressions in seniority and earnings.

Kogan (2010) argues that better educated immigrants represent higher quality migrants, often counteracted with nuances of demands in the labour market. In terms of years since migration the argument put forward is that immigrants have the capacity to make incremental adjustments over time to allow them to counteract obstacles and overcome limitations and gradually acculturate and improve their position in the labour market. The longer a migrant lives in an environment, the more opportunity

there is to absorb knowledge, behaviour and values and the more likely prospects are for successful assimilation (Dustmann (1995). Kogan (2010) established that longer tenures in the host country facilitated skilled immigrants to move up in the labour market. Clydesdale (2011) puts it in the context of the immigrant making a full contribution to the economy and flags that this takes time. Bhatia and Ram (2001) postulate that old and new immigrants are socially and historically positioned to each other and therefore establish a 'sameness' cluster, both in terms of expectations and experiences. In addition, part of the identity of the individual migrant is referenced by relationships to an already established co-migrant society in the new country (Cohen 2010).

Generally it appears that the labour environment tends to have a preference of working in a management context that is known and facilitates an instant rapport, one of fellow nationals. Zeira (1976) establishes that differences in the management context in terms of leadership style, decision making and motivation lead to ineffective interaction. Likewise, Chang (1985) determines that cultural differences are a common source of problem where managers attempt to optimise performances.

### **METHODOLOGY**

As used and described by Selvarajah and Masli (2011), the technique in this research is phenomenological methodology employing case study analysis. The methodology examines life experiences aimed at understanding them and deriving meaning. This is traditionally done by systematically collecting and analysing narrative materials using methods that ensure credibility of both data and results. According to Langbridge (2008) phenomenological researchers hope to gain understanding of the essential truths of the lived experience. This method is seen as appropriate as the study is investigative and explores the gradual development and adaptation of labour market integration as experienced by immigrants. Tannenbaum (2007) endorses the subjective research paradigm in exploring participant's point of view and interpretations of their own stories, own justifications of transitions, actions, emotions and memories throughout the immigration process.

In addition, postal questionnaires are not an appropriate instrument due to the traditional low response rates and the difficulty to establish the length of stay of an immigrant in Australia. We employed a snowball approach to identify interviewees, initially relying on personal networks to lead us to the

next contact. All members of the research team are migrants to Australia themselves and therefore have a relatively significant starting point for this research approach.

The qualitative approach used enables a focus on the inner world of individuals who underwent the adaptation to the Australian working environment. Overall it facilitates the thematisation of data and a focus on essentials within a conceptual framework. As postulated by Tannenbaum (2007) the interpretations of the realities of the respondents enables the generation of hypotheses explaining various phenomena. In addition, the portraying of social life is argued to be best presented through subjective or reflective accounts.

Similar to Bhatia and Ram (1998), the intention of the interviews is to present a window in the individual life narratives developed by migrants who have been immersed in the transformation brought about by migrations. Counterposing narratives from diverse backgrounds allows the appreciation of social, political constructs of gender, ethnicity, race and nationality. These highlight ambivalences, contradictions and specificities confirm the individuality of the experiences yet facilitate the identification of trends and tendencies amongst clustered groups. The narratives reveal the complex processes involved as immigrants navigate themselves between cultures. The approach is deemed highly relevant and appropriate as O'Sullivan-Lago et al. (2008) confirms that identity is constructed in dialogical and narrative terms and is interdependent with the cultural context.

The population under study consists of migrants to Australia from a range of countries (South Africa, United Kingdom, Singapore, India and China) who migrated to Australia less than a decade ago. All were primary or joint decision makers in the migration exercise and first time migrants. This paper reflects on a sub-set of the respondents (South African migrants) as an investigative study of a relatively small and limited sample of seventeen interviews. South African immigrants were selected to participate in in depth interviews to provide an understanding of the migration drivers and experiences and a particular focus on the acculturation to the Australian working environment. The sample size is deemed sufficient on the back of claims by the International Organisation for Migration (2007) that experiences of individual migrants are a valuable source of information to aid understanding of the challenges of integration and for developing effective strategies to address these challenges.

As in the case of Selvarajah and Madji (2011) this study utilised interviews that took between 60 and 90 minutes each at the premises of the interviewees. The interview was based on an open ended yet structured questionnaire that included questions on personal motives, family demographics, national identity, social and work environment acculturation experiences and outcomes. The interviews were all conducted in English, taped and transcribed. Mirroring the approach by Tannenbaum (2007) this study adopted the use of direct questions where specific aspects of the migration or work experiences were not forthcoming in the interview. This approach ensured that all participants did address the central focus topics of this study. All interviews ended with an invitation to list the most frustrating and enjoyable aspects of migrating to Australia and a final question on intentions in respect of Australian citizenship.

Based on Dustmann's (1995) approach, the variable used to reflect the extent of integration of the migrant is based on a question asking the respondent to specify on continuum from being purely a national of their home country and being a committed Australian.

### **FINDINGS**

Demographics of the respondents reported on in this paper are summarized in table 1. In essence the respondents are all migrants from South Africa, all married and all, except two retirees, are currently employed. The sample consists of 11 males and 6 females aged between 36 and 59 with a median age of 46 years. The sample included 11 Afrikaans speaking households and 6 English speaking households. Of the employed respondents 11 were employed in a job that matched their employment in South Africa and 4 were employed in jobs that are different from their previous employment. The majority of the migrants (15) had spent less than 10 years in Australia of which ten had spent less than 5 years in Australia. All respondents indicated they had visited Australia prior to migrating. While all respondents had a qualification, nine had a bachelor degree or higher qualification.

At first glance there is no clear relationship or trend between the self-nominated level of integration and any of the other variables. This is however not the focus of the paper and therefore not reported on

Table 1: Demographics of respondents

Gender	Age	Home Language	Status	Ac Qual	Years in Oz	Visited before	Occupation Match	Integration rating
M	39	English	Married	Degree	8	1	Y	6
M	44	Afrikaans	Married	MBA	3	1	Y	3
M	44	Afrikaans	Married	B Ing	3	1	Y	3
M	57	Afrikaans	Married	Dipl Banking	1	2	NA	1
F	54	Afrikaans	Married	Dipl Typing	1	2	NA	3
M	59	English	Married	Dipl Instr Eng	25	1	Y	5
M	48	Afrikaans	Married	N4	3	1	Y	8
M	36	English	Married	Cert IV Building & Construction	21	1	N	5
F	43	Afrikaans	Married	Grd 12	3	2	N	5
M	44	Afrikaans	Married	Hons Degree	5	3	Y	3
M	50	English	Married	Dipl Metallurgy	5	1	Y	3
M	47	Afrikaans	Married	Degree	4	1	Y	6
M	51	Afrikaans	Married	D.Com.	6	2	Y	5
F	35	Afrikaans	Married	Hons Degree	3	1	N	2
F	38	Afrikaans	Married	Degree	4	1	Y	7
F	52	English	Married	D.Ed.	9	2	Y	4
F	41	English	Married	Diploma	3	1	N	4

This paper reports on a first cut of the responses in respect of their experience of securing and settling in to the first job and later integration into the Australian labour force. It focusses on delivering a narrative and storyline of South African immigrants seeking to progress their careers and working lives in Australia. As stated earlier, literature (Dustman 1995, Godin 2008) argues that social integration takes place separately from economic integration, therefore justifying the focus on the employment process and experience as a distinct aspect of overall migration.

### **Work is crucial (Importance of work integration)**

The focus on the job environment is deemed crucial both from the perspective that most migrants either migrated in the skilled migrant category or on the Australian employer sponsored visa, implying a high level of a desired skill unavailable in the Australian labour market at the time. A number of respondents pointed out the importance of work when asked to identify challenges upon arrival in Australia.

*“The place where I spend most of my time is my workplace, I think that is where it’s most prominent to me..”, and*  
*“...for me personally the major challenge would have been in the working environment, having moved countries...”, and*  
*“... and I was concerned about finding a job, just the financial implications of going back a few years...”*

### **Two steps backwards.... (Dislocation)**

More prominently and along similar lines in identifying challenges in migrating to Australia seven of the seventeen respondents referred to the reality of ‘starting from scratch’. Although the references in having to restart a life in another country also occurred in non-work related areas it was prominent in work related references and included remarks such as:

*“... actually in a worse start position than where I was (in South Africa)”, and*  
*“... coming here you’re at the bottom of the ladder again and have to start working your way up again.”, and*  
*“... not an understanding of what you have already achieved and you feel like you’ve got to start from scratch in Australia.”*

The migration into the Australian workforce does not translate into a progression of careers in that respondents who migrated with a job in hand indicate that the necessity to become familiar with the relevant industry dynamics, regulations and terminology also implies a starting from scratch position.

### **... with or without a job or experience (at all levels)**

As pointed out by Godin (2008) the lack of specialised knowledge in specific areas was expressed as follows:

*“... But, coming to Australia I thought I could just continue where I left off .... You’ve actually lost some things as well and that’s when you start going downhill a bit I think...”, and*  
*“I meant the challenge for me was ... to up skill myself, to open up and learn a whole new field ... I did have to learn an entire new system, education system, legal system and new jurisdiction ...”*

For respondents that came without a job in hand this reality was even harsher as evidenced by statements along the lines of:

*“To get a work was difficult because I did not have any qualifications, my experience did not count and the fact that I am older counted against me”, and*  
*“When I got here I thought well this is the land of opportunity and then when I tried to find a job I couldn’t find a job ... I couldn’t understand”*

In some instances the respondents expressed a strong sense of differences in work environment to the extent that aspects were incomprehensible, echoing findings by Zeira (1976) and Chang (1985).

Statements confirming this include:

*“I was struggling to come to grips why they do things a certain way and what I’m doing wrong and things like that start to realise and you think, well, what’s wrong. You realise something is wrong but you don’t quite know what..”, and*  
*“I think for me the most frustrating thing is the workplace because I don’t have a handle on how to resolve it. I can’t figure it out!”*

### **Just get a job... (Relocate first)**

As argued in literature (Godin, 2008, Kogan 2010), not surprisingly a number of migrants were willing to accept an initial employment under less than ideal conditions for various reasons, sometimes a poor understanding of the actual working conditions, sometimes an intent to get some Australian experience under the belt. Examples of this behaviour include:

*“...I found that working in that environment meant travelling away from home and spending extended periods of time away from home and that did not work out for me very well ... I decided that making a career change would ensure that I lived and worked in the same city” (spent 20 months in the first job), and*  
*“I would have been on a drive in drive out roster, so there would be periods where I would be away from home ... that never even popped it’s head above the water in my previous (South African) career.”, and*  
*“...I decided to do 10 days of relief teaching, just to get some experience here (in Australia)...”, and*  
*“...building up a work repertoire in Australia ... shows the next employer that you understand enough about the rules and conditions and so forth.”.*

### **... establish yourself... (learn)**

In addition, in line with Tannenbaum’s (2007) findings, the notion of being a newcomer to the environment and subsequent absence of established networks further pinpoint the need to also start this aspect from scratch. A number of respondents deplored the loss of track record, recognition, reputation and acknowledgement of their skills. This is evidenced in statements such as:

*“... for me it was about re-establishing myself in the working market, compared to where I was already well established in South Africa, and everyone knew what I could deliver ... nobody knows what you are capable of...”*  
*“... I somehow had this perception that I have to prove myself to make it work, and*  
*“... at the end of the day they start to see your value and they start to trust you more and more ...”, and*  
*“You know there is frustration in that in that sense not knowing, not having anybody to talk to, not having anything to fall back onto, not having anything to base it on, you know, you feel like you are on your own ...”*

### **... be positive ... (attitude)**

Despite the underlying notion of restarting a career and re-establishing a professional presence respondents overall did not consider this an insurmountable obstacle. On the contrary, respondents

expressed a peculiar level of confidence in their ability to overcome this adversity, partly based on their belief that their experience and subsequent skill set is transferrable in the following sense:

*“... I was confident that I would get a job eventually...”, and  
 “... I just have to bring my side and show them I can do it which is not difficult...”, and  
 “.. to me business analysis and business planning, the concepts, whether you are in South Africa, Australia, Canada, whichever country you are in, I mean mining is mining, the principles that apply in South Africa will apply here and do apply here ... ”.*

#### **... and apply yourself. (contribute)**

The relative confidence is most likely a function of the realization and commitment to invest extra effort in the new employment environment as expressed through:

*“... you need to work hard and be ruthless to get ahead... ”, and  
 “... We had to make it work and that drove us to make sure that for me, my performance at work must be of a high standard ... to make a mark, make a difference, to be valuable you tend to do a bit more than the average Aussie ... ”, and  
 “... to make sure that we make it and in doing so you do more than what is expected of you ... ”*

#### **Use your experience ... (skills/capabilities)**

In addition, the relative confidence is likely to also be a function of extensive experience in a work environment that is deemed to mostly be similar and transferable. Statements to this effect include:

*“I’ve been at a great advantage and I suppose because of that I’ve been able to use my prior knowledge and experience to ... I did come with experience, I was already active ... so could play a more constructive, active role ...”, and  
 “It’s very comparable, it’s very similar ... and similar to what I have experienced and what has been expected here ...”, and  
 “I was actually the most experienced and most senior person in that group of the company ... “, and  
 “... I could use my transferable skills and knowledge and resources and my qualifications to up skill myself ...”*

#### **... and take three steps forward. (Integrate)**

Finally, confirming extant literature (Dustman 1995, Clydesdale, 2011) it appears that over time, as migrant establish themselves and become accustomed to their new environment, the lost value is recouped through reaching a comparable or improved position and set of abilities in the workforce.

*“... you establish yourself, you get into the whole motion to get to know the Australian way of project execution ... “, and*

*“... and I’ve been able to work myself back into a (role equivalent to the one held pre migration). So eventually got to the place where I left off in South Africa.”, and  
 “... and I suppose that’s also why it’s been quite easy for me to get promotion and move quite quickly from one level to the next ... and doing a 2 year stint at a higher level.”*

#### **Support and understanding helps. (Facilitate)**



An acknowledgement of the role of employers included a reference to a need for acknowledging the difficulties faced by migrants and the positive role employers can play. In a few instances where respondents were recruited by Australian companies as part of the migration, the support provided was interpreted as making a significant impact on the integration process

*“... it would certainly help a lot if companies recognise that there is that gap because I don't think anyone recognises what adjustment people go through. I've spoken to a lot of fellow immigrants and not only from South Africa, even people from the UK surprisingly ... find it difficult here.”, and “A lot of that I must say had to do with the employer. They helped a lot with the initial administration documentation, giving us guidance where to go for whatever we needed to do so their induction session was well structured and they gave us a lot of free time and advice to get things in place.”, and “... the first job I had here was for a small consulting company and the boss that I had there was an amazing guy to work for, he had a lot of understanding for not just the work environment ... knowing that we were immigrants ...”.*

## CONCLUSION

The Australian economy is not only built on migrants but retains a selective, skill driven migration policy as one of the core elements of ensuring continuing growth, in line with the argument put forward by Clydesdale (2011). Over the last two decades skilled migrants from South African have taken up the opportunity to progress their lives and working careers in Australia. This paper confirms that the existing literature describing migrant integration in the workforce applies in a contemporary 21<sup>st</sup> century setting.

The average South African migrant is predominantly skilled through education, as claimed by Gubjadu and de Jong (2009) and some work experience, married with dependents and an ability to secure a work in Australia that overlaps with the career path set in South Africa. They take work serious (have to make it work) and are realistic about the crucial role of a work for both the betterment of the family and their own social interaction. In line with Dustmann's (1995) findings, all respondents had prior knowledge of Australia through at least one visit prior to migrating.

Upon arrival in Australia, South African immigrants experience the feeling of being dislocated and 'start all over again', either because of a different regulatory, system and protocol environment or because they have to find a work. Some find the work environment and protocols incomprehensible at first. For the former, the expectation of seamlessly continuing a career path does not materialise and leads to frustration and disappointment. For the latter there is the reality of having to accept an inferior appointment in order to gain some Australian experience. The loss of networks, recognition

and track records is core to the inability to continue careers. In this environment they are unable to produce at full capacity.

Despite the let down, South African immigrants focus on getting that first job to cement their relocation. Once employed the combination of personal attitude with a willingness to learn and apply established skills translates in a career progression well beyond the industry pace. . As postulated by Godin (2008) this paper confirms that over time, the combination of resolve, skills and the re-establishment of a network results in career progression meeting or exceeding their expectations.

Although the Australian companies recruiting South African immigrants are unable to remove the differences in business environments they can assist in educating and supporting new migrants to assimilate in their new environments. It appears that a little support, morally mentally and through training would go a long way in allowing South African immigrants to re-launch their careers in Australia. From an employer perspective it appears that there is an opportunity to assist newly appointed migrants to achieve full integration in the labour force, and therefore a higher productivity, at an earlier stage, thus increasing the return on the appointment.

The narrative explaining the integration of South African immigrants in the Australian labour market largely confirms existing research. As indicated at the outset of the paper, the larger research project aims to investigate the experiences of a more diverse group of migrants and caution should be exercised in generalising findings of this paper to any other migrant group or labour market. Since this paper reports on a culturally homogeneous group it is unable to comment relative to experiences by other migrants. Future research focussing on the narrative expressed in this paper relative to other migrant groups may shed further light on the relative experience of groups that are deemed to be culturally similar and dissimilar to Australia. Likewise, a comparison of the narrative to the social integration would add further value in determining the distinct nature, or otherwise, of these two aspects of migration. Finally a more in depth analysis based on gender, age, language and other demographics would further allow to determine if migrants can be clustered merely on the basis of country of origin or not. Overall the importance of understanding and enhancing migrant experiences, challenges and behaviour will retain an importance in the continuing globalised business and economic environment.

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