

# Career development during COVID: Increased migration aspirations of South African University students

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**The** purpose of this qualitative research study is to explore COVID-19 effects on South African university students and graduates' experiences of career development and migration aspirations, using Stellenbosch University as a case study. Qualitative interviews (N=30) were conducted with university students and thematic analysis was used. Participants felt that the restrictive COVID measures increased unemployment levels in South Africa and young adults' difficulties in transitioning to the world-of-work. Increased levels of migration aspirations were mentioned by participants to facilitate access to sustainable employment in a global workforce. This study provides useful information and recommendations for international career researchers and practitioners on how to integrate COVID life experiences in career development trajectories.



## Introduction

Migration in South Africa (SA) is a multi-layered and a contentious issue, with a flux of migrants and students from other African countries entering SA. However, outgoing movements are far less, with Afrobarometer research (Mataure, 2013) stating that 67% of South African youth (between 15 to 34 years of age) wanted to stay in SA (Statistics SA, 2019). Specifically, international student mobility is under-researched, and it is a growing concern of higher education institutions (HEIs) that SA university students are not applying for existing international mobility programmes. Whilst, limited mobility could be linked to unequal socioeconomic backgrounds, there is no research yet that examines what effects COVID-19 had on the mobility and migration aspirations of

SA university students and young graduates. In the present research, the unifying theory of *Migration System Theory* (Kritz et al., 1992) was used. The core tenet of this theory is that migration contributes to changes in both the receiving and sending country, at a macro level (economic, political and cultural systems, and institutions) and micro level (individual relations, kinship, and friendship systems) (Kritz et al., 1992).

## Research goals

The current research study aimed to answer the overarching research question of what effects COVID-19, and the stringent lock down measures, had on the migration aspirations of SA university students and young graduates. In the light of these COVID effects, the present research has the following specific issues to examine: students career development in the face of the COVID pandemic; and students' perceived costs of migration aspirations.

## Migration and mobility definitions

In this research, migration and mobility are time-based and involve crossing borders, based on economic goals of gaining professional opportunities that include training or employment (Cao et al., 2012). In the current research, the term mobility refers to a type of movement that students undertake in pursuing higher education (HE) opportunities. Mobility is often defined as a movement of a shorter time frame, with students returning to their home country or hometown after their education or training is complete (King et al., 2010; Souto-Otero et al., 2013). In contrast, migration is seen as a longer-term movement linked to gaining employment and/or career opportunities (Castelli, 2018; Milusheva et al., 2017). SA youth has been described as

nomadic, with mobility and migration movements being undertaken to attend HEIs and to gain employment in different SA provinces (Hall et al., 2015). The nomadic behaviour of students is evident in the sample.

Students' mobility decisions and destination choices are influenced by the lack of financial resources with South African students choosing countries with lower living and financial costs. Unfavourable exchange rates exacerbate financial strain, resulting in 11.6% of African students being internationally mobile (Beine et al., 2013). In SA, the demand for HE is outpacing offerings, resulting in SA student engagement in online HE, local and international, even before COVID began. Therefore, SA students can be described as 'glocal' students who seek an international education by engaging in new forms of cross-border, hybrid and online HE programmes, whilst staying in their home country (Gesing & Glass, 2018). Many SA students are first-generation students aiming to ensure short-term mobility, which would lead to upward social and economic mobility, regardless of regional conflicts, economic crises, and pandemics.

## COVID-19 pandemic developments in SA

The first COVID-19 wave was detected in SA in March, 2020 (Mkhizi, 2020) and the first national lockdown began shortly afterwards. Over three months, essential services (i.e., healthcare workers, financial services, and retail workers with permits) were the only active businesses, transport services were limited, and SA borders were closed (Bullen & Singer, 2020). Restrictions, such as alcohol and cigarette bans, and limited movements in public spaces, were enforced by heavy legal penalties. The economy was severely disrupted by the lockdown. These lockdown restrictions continued as the second wave emerged from the *Beta variant*. At this time, many countries imposed travel bans on SA, which had political and economic impacts (Statistics SA, 2021). Thereafter, the *Delta variant* led to the third wave (NICD, 2021), and again imposed travel restrictions limited international travel. Currently, the emergence of the *Omicron variant* has resulted in the fourth wave (WHO, 2021). As a result, a travel ban was imposed that was comparable to those during Apartheid, and

this resulted in further strain on the SA economy (Warah, 2021). The economy was badly affected by the lockdown and travel restrictions, which resulted in 47.9% of businesses trading capacity halted or shut down and 36.4% had retrenched staff (Statistics SA, 2020). Prior to the pandemic, 63% of unemployment rates were found in SA youth (i.e., age range 15-24), but this number of unemployed youth increased by 17% between July 2020 and September 2021 during the pandemic (Statistics SA, 2021).

## Methods

### Participants

Qualitative data stems from a research project that aims to examine migration aspirations in Stellenbosch University students and alumni (N=30). The demographic characteristics of the sample, and an overview of their orientation to migration is provided in Table 1.

### Procedure

Permission to conduct and publish this research was obtained from the relevant ethics committees, as a joint venture between Stellenbosch University and the University of Neuchâtel to promote international student mobility in Sub-Saharan African Students. There were numerous challenges and delays due to COVID-19 and participants were invited by email to take part in the interviews. A research interview was conducted via zoom for 30- 60 minutes. Participants responded to structured questions that asked about their future aspirations of mobility and migration in given time frames. Further semi-structured questions explored reasons for any previous international mobility experiences, and perceived costs and benefits of any future migration aspirations. Thereafter, questioning explored the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on migration aspirations.

### Data analysis

A thematic analysis (Braun & Clark, 2006) was conducted to search for dominant qualitative themes, using the migration systems theory to analyse the macro and micro level linkages (Kritz et al., 1992). This provides a cross-sectional examination that can only provide a description at a particular point of time and cultural context. Nonetheless, we believe that these findings will be of wider interest.

**Table 1. Sample demographics and migration orientation**

	f	%		f	%
<b>Age</b>			<b>Gender</b>		
20-29 years	22	74	Female	20	67
30-39 years	7	23	Male	10	33
40-49 years	1	3			
			<b>Hometown</b>		
<b>Race</b>			Western Cape	12	40
White	14	47	Eastern Cape	4	14
Black	9	30	Gauteng	7	23
Coloured	5	17	KwaZulu Natal	1	3
Indian	1	3	Limpopo	2	7
Other	1	3	Northern Cape	1	3
			Other	3	10
<b>Academic level</b>			<b>Faculties</b>		
Bachelors	11	37	Agrisciences	2	7
Honours	6	20	Arts & Social Sciences	14	47
Masters	7	23	EMS	5	17
PhD	5	17	Engineering	1	3
Diploma	1	3	Law	1	3
			Sciences	4	13
<b>Current status</b>			Medicine	1	3
Current students & employed	7	23	Education	2	7
Graduated & employed	4	14			
Current student & unemployed	18	60			
Graduated & unemployed	1	3			
<b>COVID increased mobility aspirations</b>			<b>Continents considered:</b>		
Yes	20	67	Africa	2	6
No	9	30	Europe	15	50
			Asia	3	10
<b>Perceived COVID restrictions on mobility</b>			Oceania	3	10
Yes	23	77	South America	2	7
No	7	23	North America	5	17
<b>Movement timeframe</b>			<b>Previous mobility experience</b>		
Within 2 years	8	27	Mobile	13	43
2-5 years	9	30	Non-mobile	13	43
5+ years	3	10	Online	4	14
Sometime in future	9	30			
Never	1	3			

## Results

In the table below, the dominant themes and sub-themes are identified. The results will be presented according to two main overarching themes.

**Table 2. Themes and sub-themes identified**

Themes	Sub-themes
<b>1. Increased migration aspirations</b>	
<b>2. Perceived costs of migration</b>	2.1. Abandoning SA 2.2. Current conditions in SA 2.3. Psychological costs

### 1. Increased migration aspirations

Participants were seeking financial stability because they had witnessed or were affected by job loss either directly or indirectly. Their increased migration aspirations came from an awareness that the job market had become even more competitive and that they needed to get experience, or a competitive advantage over other job applicants by exploring overseas opportunities to progress in their career trajectories. This is evident in the following excerpts: ‘...I’m probably not going to be able to do it in SA. So I need to find European or overseas employment’ (P.20); and ‘...if you’re from a small town in the Free State, you’re not going to get a microbiology post there’ (P.12).

International exposure was seen as an ‘asset’ (P.18 & P.23), or ‘invaluable’ (P.22) to ‘just seize more opportunities’ (P.26, P.27 & 28) to develop a skill set attractive to employers in the SA context or overseas because ‘[international exposure]...seem[s] like a lot of potential if it’s on [your CV]’ (P.3 & 29), and ‘it tells your future employer that you have grit that you want to broaden your horizons, you want to learn constantly, and you can move outside of your comfort zone’ (P.10). Interestingly, COVID seemed to reinforce migration aspirations in participants (n = 9, 30%) and to cause a new interest in moving overseas in others (n = 20, 70%). Therefore, the sub-theme of increased migration aspirations explains how participants were considering new avenues for gaining skills to become

employable by looking outside of SA. However, the pandemic and travel restrictions caused participants to face increasing difficulties to realise their migration aspirations.

### 2. Perceived costs of migration aspirations

**Sub-theme 2.1 abandoning SA**, related to participants’ strong connection to SA as seen in the following excerpts: ‘patriotic feeling’ (P.11); ‘love SA’; ‘...love my town’ (P.6); and ‘I think that I would sort of be seen as more of a traitor than anything else [for leaving SA]’ (P.11). The dominant sentiment that participants shared was the intention to return to SA in following comments: ‘Bring it back home’ (P.29); ‘definitely want come back after that’ (P.9); ‘...So I would want to come back ...[to] maintain contact with my family’ (P.13), and ‘I always want to come back to SA’ (P.20).

**Sub-theme 2.2 was frustration about the current conditions in SA**, which included stringent lock downs that strained the SA economy, high crime rates, electricity black outs, government corruption and looting and rioting incited by political unrest. In the following excerpts we can see these recent events increased future migration aspirations: ‘...I just want to escape the political landscape that is SA, and I just want to create opportunities for my career on my family’ (P.1); ‘...And I really see that SA is really not in a good place at the moment’ (P.20); ‘we have things like we are experiencing load shedding, we have so much

corruption in our government' (P.16); and lastly, '...with the rand continuing to fall, and all of this... economic upheaval in the country... it does make international sort of movements, more appealing. And, of course, like raising kids, somewhere very safe... I don't feel safe to live in a free standing home, you know, in our country' (P.11).

**Sub-theme 2.3 was psychological costs**, and this came from the awareness of leaving social contacts and family behind. It is illustrated by the following excerpts '...it might be bad [going overseas] because I have a family this side' (P.28); '...I've never been without my family, I still have fear of moving' (P.30), 'the social interaction part can be very challenging for mental health for expatriates' (P.13), 'coming from a South African background, [to overcome] an inferiority complex' (P.25), and '...and I am now going somewhere I don't know the culture. Am I going to cope with whatever that world throws at me when I'm all alone?' (P.17).

## Discussion

In this discussion we would like to incorporate macro and micro linkages that are involved in the career development and migration aspiration processes of the South African youth in the current sample. The current situation in SA includes looting, increased crime, political unrest, increased unemployment and COVID-related economic strain, and these factors act as macro linkages that influence Stellenbosch University students and graduates to develop increased migration aspirations at the micro linkage level. The increased migration aspirations are viewed as a way to get gainful employment and work experience in order to return to SA in the future. However, there are other micro linkage factors such as social relationships and patriotism that may hinder individuals from undertaking migration processes if these psychological costs are viewed as greater than the benefits of leaving the current detrimental situational factors in SA.

The migration systems theory model is useful because the link is emphasised between migration and development (De Haas, 2010), which allows a broader perspective that views development as not only economic in nature but also social. Therefore, it can be argued that migration has the ability to influence

the socio-economic development of the country of origin. It can encourage subsequent migration, enhance the individual's human and social capital, and improve an individual's employability. This research has clearly shown how the COVID pandemic has blurred the micro, cross-domain boundaries, whilst strengthening the macro, transnational boundaries. Changes to the micro and macro boundaries represent important mechanisms in how COVID-19 impacts on individual vocational behaviour and career outcomes (Cho, 2020).

## Limitations, recommendations and conclusion

This study has several limitations. Firstly, the case study at a single university in SA means that the results need replication at other HEIs to ensure transferability. Secondly, the COVID-19 restrictions in SA were stringent and research is required in other developing-world countries that had very restrictive measures to assess if similar reactions are visible amongst university students and graduates. Thirdly, qualitative research has limitations based on the individual subjective experiences that are contextually situated in a unique historical period. Nonetheless, we believe this qualitative study provides a valuable perspective on the effects of the pandemic on young people's migration aspirations in the search for sustainable employment opportunities.

Stellenbosch University students and graduates in this sample faced formidable challenges in entering a difficult labour market (Statistics SA, 2021). The most significant findings were that these young people had increased migration aspirations and increased motivation to seek career advancement opportunities, although travel restrictions made the realisation of migration aspirations increasingly difficult. We encourage future research studies to assess the effects of COVID-19 on young people's migration aspirations longitudinally in uncertain job markets and pandemics.



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