

Chapter 34

Moving against the Current: Student Migration to Zimbabwe

Admire Thonje

Independent Researcher, Zimbabwe

ABSTRACT

International student migration in the southern African context is a scantily researched area. While research abounds on aspects of migration such as human rights, remittances, development efficacy of migration and transnationalism, the concerns, experiences and encounters of student migrants remains neglected. While in South Africa some migrants are exposed to xenophobic sentiments, little is known about experiences in places such as Zimbabwe. Employing Zimbabwe as a case, the author discusses context, experiences and the policy framework around international students from within the southern African region. It reveals the causes for migration, socio-economic experiences as well as exposure to life in Zimbabwe predominantly during the difficult decade at the turn of the millennium in 2000. In bringing up experiences and challenges, it highlights transformation in the enrollment patterns as well as areas for policy improvement.

INTRODUCTION

The author in this chapter addresses a thus far largely obscure phenomenon in academic and policy circles—international student migration in Southern Africa—using Zimbabwe as a preliminary case study. The chapter makes two key contributions:

1. It highlights the migration policy framework relating to international students in Zimbabwe, and
2. It discusses student migration from other countries within the Southern African region to Zimbabwe.

In doing so, the chapter reveals the dynamic nature of student migration in Southern Africa. In addition, it attempts to take a different perspective from the broad human rights based or developmentalist perspectives assumed by researchers on migration. This means that the chapter discusses experiences as well as presents a picture of the nature of student migration in the region. While brief discussions

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may not proffer much in analytical terms, the author suggests that in providing them, the chapter lays a crucial platform for further research and inquiry into the various aspects of the student mobility terrain. Groundwork is important because studies into international student migration are increasingly gaining traction both in academic and policy circles around the globe. The chapter is *not* concerned with higher education *per se*, but with mobility of students in higher education. Consequently, higher education policy, legislation and practice are—at best—only touched on in passing. The aim of the chapter is, therefore, to place international student migration involving Zimbabwe and Zimbabweans amidst the increasing body of literature on student migration in particular and human mobility in general. The author will focus and emphasize the motivations, experiences, and plight of international students based in Zimbabwe. Such a void is hardly surprising given the dearth of inquiry into Zimbabwean student migrants even at the height of the unprecedented emigration of Zimbabweans between 2000 and 2008. Furthermore, the scant attention being directed to student migration in policy circles complements the academic void. It is this void and scant attention this chapter seeks to redress in some way.

Before delving into a detailed discussion of student migration in Zimbabwe, it is important to note that not all student migrants are referred to herein. Indeed, while student migrants encompass those in primary, secondary, and tertiary education, this chapter is primarily concerned with students in tertiary academic institutions. Moreover, the study predominantly narrows down on students in universities. Thus, students enrolled in private colleges are not widely included herein. The main reason for such delimitations stems from the operational definition of student migrants employed in this chapter, as well as ease of access to data and potential respondents in universities and technikons. When dealing with foreign students, private colleges in Zimbabwe and South Africa at times flaunt immigration regulations by registering undocumented students. This makes verification of international student figures difficult. Lastly, the politics of the day play a crucial factor in the chapter's design and content or lack thereof. As Zimbabwe's image in international relations continued to char, the government responded by enforcing controls and restrictions on economic affairs, in political processes as well as on society at large. The result was a highly politicized society mired in mistrust between opposing parties and in society. While the tensions, mutual disdain and mistrust have slightly dissipated in recent times, a state of paranoia among state bureaucrats still prevails. This chapter is written under such an environment. Important data and statistics proved very difficult to acquire from responsible ministries. In addition, authorization to engage all universities in the study proved to be a long drawn-out affair with no end in sight. Consequently, issues discussed herein were drawn from literature available and from informal discussions with current and former students, former student leaders, and academic staff who chose to maintain anonymity.

BACKGROUND: A CONTEMPORARY HISTORY OF MIGRATION AND POLITICS IN ZIMBABWE

A history of Zimbabwe is in many respects, a history of migration. Human mobility on the Zimbabwean escarpment predates colonial times and has persisted in the post-colonial period (Mlambo, 2010). Similar to migration trends and patterns on the African continent (Jonsson, 2009) the composition of migrants has changed with transitions in the political structures and systems first in Zimbabwe, and then in South Africa (Pasura, 2010). Starting with a largely male-dominated migrant population, migrants have over time become younger and more gender balanced in distribution. While there has been a substantial

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