

# PLUMBING THE BRAIN DRAIN OF SOUTH AFRICAN SOCIAL WORKERS MIGRATING TO THE UK: CHALLENGES FOR SOCIAL SERVICE PROVIDERS

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## INTRODUCTION

This article reports research that was undertaken to uncover generalisations pertaining to the migration of South African social workers to the United Kingdom (UK). The intention was to identify challenges for the future contribution of social service providers in South African if local social workers are to be retained in the country. In the South African social work milieu it is recognised formally and informally that a significant number of social workers migrated to the UK during the first decade after democracy. This can be classified as a distinct brain drain of social workers, which has a vital impact on social service delivery and social development (*Business Day*, 2005; *Cape Times*, 2004; Louw, 2003:xv-xvi; *Herald*, 2005). However, verifiable data on the brain drain phenomenon in social work are not available (*Business Day*, 2005). With reference to Saravia and Miranda's (2004) use of the metaphor, a plumbing of the South African social workers' brain drain to the UK is thus needed. This plumbing is effected by describing the research design and methodology, sketching the background for the survey, reporting the survey results, and identifying challenges for social service providers.

## RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY

A cross-sectional research design (McMurty, 2005:274) that falls within the exploratory and descriptive continuum (Grinnell, Unrau & Williams, 2005:16-18) was implemented to uncover the research problem pertaining to generalisations on the migration of South African workers to the UK. Exploratory research questions (Grinnell *et al.*, 2005:18) on the topic were asked to generate questions for a survey to describe the profile of South African social workers migrating to the UK in order to identify challenges for social service providers. The exploratory questions were answered using secondary data analysis, content analysis and a literature review, because it was imperative to be explicit about the assumptions and theory underlying the data to analyse the content of documents and to provide a scholarly overview of the topic through an analysis of trends and debates (Mouton, 2001:164-165, 179-180). For these purposes primary and secondary literature sources, and particularly electronic sources were consulted, because press releases, newspaper reports and documents are accessible via the Internet. These exploratory research questions are reflected in the presentation of the background to the survey. The survey (Mouton, 2001:152) was undertaken to provide an accurate profile of a representative sample (Grinnell, *et al.*, 2005:18) of South African social workers who migrated to the UK. The descriptive research questions (Mouton, 2001:54) arrived at are reflected in the presentation of the survey results.

A pilot study (Strydom, 1998:178-199) was undertaken in the first semester of 2003 and formed an important part of this research to ensure that the main investigation would be worthwhile. This served as a preliminary exploratory study and, for example, drew attention to the changes in the registration process of social workers working in the UK. Data on the numbers of South African social workers issued with letters of verification by the General Social Care Council (GSCC) in the UK would only be available until 18 May 2004. Thereafter, a new process of registration would begin. To be able to draw on available statistics and to exclude variables that might arise because of the new registration process of social workers with the GSCC in the UK, the empirical research study had to be completed before this date.

This research has distinguished between “universe” and “population”, according to Arkava and Lane (1983:27). For the purposes of this research, the universe refers to all potential subjects who possess the attributes in which the research was interested in terms of letters of verification issued by the GSCC. Hence, these registrations do not confirm that the subjects work as social workers and live in the UK. Consequently, the term population was used to limit the research subjects to social workers who live and work in the UK, and who qualified in social work at a South African tertiary institution. This particular boundary defines the population as 164 subjects, generated through snowball sampling (Schutt, 2005:166-167), which is 10% of the universe consisting of 1638 (GSCC, 2004) potential subjects.

Semi-structured questionnaires were e-mailed to the 164 subjects during the second semester of 2003; the response rate was 39,63%. This particular sample size of 65 respondents gave reasonable control over sampling error, because it is more than one-tenth of the population and therefore adequate for the purpose of this study (Bailey, 1994:82-104; Strydom & De Vos, 1998:192). Semi-structured e-mailed questionnaires were chosen as a data-collection method (Fouché, 1998:153), since all the subjects had access to e-mail and because a large number of respondents could be involved in a relatively short period. Open-ended and closed questions were included in the questionnaire, because a combined qualitative and quantitative approach of mixed methodology design was used (Williams, Unrau & Grinnell, 2005:85-86).

After processing the empirical results, recruitment consultants from an established recruitment agency tested and compared the statistical deductions. Their experience of the current field and other available statistics using a simplified form of meta-analysis (Bailey, 1994:410) assisted the research process, since trends could possibly have changed from starting the research until writing up the research report. The opinions of the relative recruitment consultants (Recruitment Consultants ABC, 2005) are reflected in this report.

A limitation of this research could be that non-probability snowball sampling was utilised, which does not allow the computation of estimates of sampling error and the use of statistical tests of significance (Bailey, 1994:96). However, subjects supplied addresses of South Africans with whom they worked, but who were not necessarily friends or part of their peer group or age group. This eliminated the inclusion bias of relevant sub-groups. Therefore, the empirical results were not compared in relation to the sub-groups and could thus be extrapolated to the general population.

## **BACKGROUND TO THE SURVEY**

To provide a context for the survey, background is presented by means of the following research questions: What does the concepts “migration” and “brain drain” imply? What is the international trend in the migration of social workers and what are the general reasons for social workers’ migration? Who are the agents for migrating social workers to the UK? How many South African social workers migrate to the UK? What strategies should be put in place to retain social workers? The outcomes of these questions will then be discussed.

### **Migration**

In an influential study on the mobility of research and development (R&D) workers from South Africa entitled *The flight of the flamingos*, the contributors use the flamingo metaphor because flamingos migrate only to return when the brackish waters have been replenished (Kahn, Blankley, Maharajh, Pogue, Reddy, Cele & Du Toit, 2004). This metaphor explains the use of the notion of migration for the purpose of this research.

Kahn *et al.* (2004) approach issues of migration not as disasters, but as realities of mobility. The main conclusion of Kahn’s study is that mobility needs to be recognised and managed proactively.

The study confirms that migration is a popular focus in discussions of mobility, that migration is underreported, and that its significance is difficult to identify at a realistic level. However, one of the key findings in the study is that reliable and consistent data are crucial to identify needs in order to inform the public about what aspects of mobility are real concerns and what aspects are specious. In this regard Meyer, Brown and Kaplan (2000), in their assessment of the migration of South Africans, indicate the consequences for policy design by stating that the migration issue should not be over-dramatised nor narrowly politicised, and that it should be addressed. Crush (2004), the director of the Southern African Migration Project (SAMP) warns, however, that migration impacts are likely to be sector-specific and that some care is required in interpreting data. Therefore, it is necessary to obtain specific information about the migration of social workers to ascertain whether it may justifiably be called a brain drain. The notion of a "brain drain" is thus further conceptualised.

### **Brain drain**

A brain drain is a migration or emigration of professionally trained individuals or knowledge workers. These knowledge workers' loyalty is to professions, networks and peers rather than to organisations and institutional systems (Kinnear & Sutherland, 2001). These individuals leave for other nations, because of unfavourable conditions where they are living. It is a human capital flight, a term which refers to financial capital, that is no longer invested in the country where its owner lives. Investment in higher education is lost when the trained individual leaves and sometimes does not return. In addition, whatever social capital the individual has been a part of is reduced by his or her departure. Usually a diaspora of knowledge workers from developing countries to developed countries benefits only the host countries (Khadria, 1999). Migrants from developing countries are generally more likely to stay on in the host country than migrants from developed countries (Cervantes & Guelled, 2002). With this conceptualisation of migration and brain drain as a background, it is further necessary to contextualise the trend in terms of social work.

### **International trend in the migration of social workers**

The loss of expertise presented by the migration of South African social workers is not a unique phenomenon. Migration of social workers between different countries of the world is a general trend (Firth, 2004). Social work is an international profession, which is supported and promoted by the internationally agreed definition of social work, together with the international ethical and global standards of social work (IASSW, 2005; IFSW, 2005). The global nature of the social work community is demonstrated by accessible websites, such as *The New Social Worker Online*, which presents an avenue to disseminate information to social workers. Interactive features make the website a fully-fledged social work community. The most popular sections of the site include the job board (*New Social Worker Online*, 2005). This is confirmed by an Internet search for social work jobs with Google (<http://www.google.co.za/>) as search engine, which delivers about 13 500 000 links to social work job opportunities worldwide in approximately 0,23 seconds. In this respect McDonald, Harris and Wintersteen (2003:191) postulate that social work "...is presented as a transnational activity with practitioners pursuing the objectives of the profession in the contexts of many nations".

The UK is the preferred destination for South Africans who emigrate (Theobald, 2003). This is also a popular destination for social workers from South Africa, mainly because of pull factors (NIDI/Eurostat, 2001), such as the good value of the pound sterling, the shortage of social workers in the UK, and because England serves as a suitable starting point to tour Europe (Firth, 2004). This trend seems to be on the increase. Statistics of the GSCC in the UK show that the letters they

write to verify social work qualifications gained outside the UK have risen elevenfold - from 227 in 1990/1991 to 2534 in 2003/2004 to applicants from 69 countries. Social workers working in the UK are from developed and developing countries, particularly from Australia, Canada, Europe, India, New Zealand, USA, Zimbabwe and South Africa (GSCC, 2004).

### **General reasons for social workers' migration**

Research by Firth (2004) at the University of Northumbria in the UK indicates that economic pressure to improve one's own financial position, or that of one's family or community, is the main reason, or push factor (NIDI/Eurostat, 2001), causing social workers to migrate from developing or poor countries to the UK. When the empirical study for Firth's (2004) research was done, the average salary of a social worker in the UK was £24 000 per annum, while the corresponding average salary of a social worker in South Africa was £2 850. However, poor remuneration of social workers seems to be a global problem. According to Linsey (2003), the reason for this is that social workers are generally more concerned about what they do than the salary they receive. This correlates with the findings of Schenck (2004:196), who investigated the working conditions of social workers in the rural areas of South Africa.

The general reasons or push factors for the migration of social workers can therefore be interpreted from a global point of view. The US Department of Health and Human Services (National Clearinghouse on Child Abuse and Neglect Information, 2004) offers a comprehensive account of the general reasons for staff turnover among social workers. Although these reasons are localised to social workers in the US, they are also applicable to social workers in South Africa and their reasons for migrating. Some of the reasons quoted include low pay; risk of violence; staff shortages; high caseloads; administrative burdens; inadequate supervision; an imbalance between the salary offered and the job demands; a negative public image; a lack of funds; secondary trauma; compassion fatigue; burnout; and lack of job satisfaction. These examples correspond to the factors reported by Naidoo and Kasiram (2003) in their research on why social workers leave South Africa.

Since South African social workers migrate mostly to the UK, it is necessary to ascertain how these social workers get drawn to the UK. If the above-mentioned push factors drive South African social workers to migration, who are the agents that present the pull factors to draw social workers to the UK?

### **Agents responsible for the migration of social workers to the UK**

Agents for the migration of social workers to the UK are the GSCC, recruitment agencies and employers in the UK. The GSCC, as the regulatory body in Social Care in the UK, was introduced on 01/04/1990 and verified the qualifications of social workers until 2004. Since 2004 a new process of registering social workers on a social care register ensures that the qualifications held by all social workers in the UK are equivalent to that country's diploma in social work. Registration with the GSCC will be compulsory for all social workers in the UK from 2005. To be registered, social workers have to submit verification statements for each of the six competencies that the diploma in social work (in the UK) covers. Employers hire recruitment agencies to pre-select and recruit staff. These agencies help social workers with visa applications, follow up references, complete police checks and apply on their behalf to the GSCC for verification of their qualifications, and currently for the forms of equivalence. The visas that social workers apply for are mostly working holiday visas and ancestral visas. The working holiday visas are issued for two years and apply if the social worker is under 31 years of age. Social workers over 31, with no proof of British ancestry, require a working permit to be placed with an employer directly, initially

for two years. Employers usually offer relocation packages, which include offers of accommodation (Firth, 2004).

That social work employers and recruitment agencies in the UK successfully attract foreign social workers to the UK is illustrated by the fact that from 1990/1991 to 18/05/2004, 8796 social workers were issued with letters of verification by the GSCC. South African social workers numbered 1638 (18,6%) of that total (GSCC, 2004). This significant number of South African social workers who received letters of verification requires further analysis to obtain a clear profile of the number of South African social workers who migrate to the UK.

### **Number of South African social workers migrating to the UK**

To determine exactly how many South African social workers are working in the UK at any given time is impossible, since the GSCC does not keep an on-going record of social workers once they have been registered. Thus, there is no central place where information can be obtained about the length of time registered social workers continue working, whether they are still working and where they are at present. Social workers may still be registered with the South African Council for Social Service Professionals (SACSSP) even if they are working in the UK and are in possession of a letter of verification from the GSCC. Nevertheless, a comparison of social work registrations by the SACSSP and letters of verification by the GSCC could indicate how many South African social workers are working in the UK at a given time. Table 1 provides details of the number of social work registrations by the SACSSP (SACSSP, 2005) and the number of letters of verification by the GSCC as at 18/05/2004 (GSCC, 2004).

**TABLE 1  
 COMPARISON OF THE NUMBER OF REGISTRATIONS WITH THE SACSSP AND  
 LETTERS OF VERIFICATION ISSUED BY THE GSCC BY 18/05/2004**

A: SACSSP REGISTRATIONS (18/05/2004)	B: LETTERS OF VERIFICATION BY GSCC* (18/05/2004)	$B \div A \times 100 = \%$
11271	1638	15%

\*For period 1990 - 18/05/2004 (SACSSP, 2005; GSCC, 2004)

As already explained, Table 1 cannot be said to indicate that 15% of South Africa's social workers are working in the UK, because too many variables may be present to determine an exact number. However, it does offer a background for constructing a numbers profile. The number of letters of verification that the GSCC issues to South African social workers annually gives a meaningful indication of the number of South African social workers working in the UK and is presented in Table 2 (GSCC, 2004).

**TABLE 2  
 LETTERS OF VERIFICATION ISSUED TO SOUTH AFRICAN SOCIAL WORKERS BY  
 THE GSCC FROM 2000 - 18/05/2004**

2000-2001	2001-2002	2002-2003	2003-18/05/2004
224	283	262	342

(GSCC, 2004)

Table 2 shows an increase of 118 (34,5%) letters of verification issued to South African social workers by the GSCC between 2000 and 18/05/2004. The extent of this increase in South African

social workers migrating to the UK becomes clearer when the letters of verification between 01/04/03 and 18/05/2004 are compared with the number of social workers registering with the SACSSP between 01/04/03 and 31/03/2004. This is indicated in Table 3. (The final dates of the available statistics differ because of different financial year-ends. The 48 extra days in the case of letters of verification issued by the GSCC should not have any significant effect on the entire relevant comparison. Annual registrations with the SACSSP are payable by 31 March).

**TABLE 3**  
**NEW SOCIAL WORKERS REGISTERING WITH THE SACSSP BETWEEN**  
**01/04/2003 - 31/03/2004 COMPARED TO LETTERS OF VERIFICATION ISSUED BY**  
**THE GSCC BETWEEN 01/04/2003 - 18/05/2004**

Number of new registrations with the SACSSP between 01/04/2003 - 31/03/2004 (A)	Number of letters of verification by GSCC between 01/04/2003 - 18/05/2004 (B)	$B \div A \times 100 = \%$
522	342	66%

(SACSSP, 2005; GSCC, 2004)

When expressed as a percentage, the 342 letters of verification issued by the GSCC between 01/04/2003 and 18/05/2004, compared to the 522 new social work registrations at the SACSSP between 01/04/2003 - 1/03/2004, come to 66%. Although expressed in statistical terms only in order to construct a scenario of numbers, these figures imply that South Africa lost the equivalent of 66% of its social workers to the UK in terms of those who registered at the SACSSP for the first time between 01/04/2003 and 31/03/2004.

The extent of South African social workers migrating to the UK becomes more evident when the 342 letters of verification issued by the GSCC from 01/04/2003 - 18/05/2004 are compared to the number of social workers actually practising at the Department of Social Development in each province of South Africa in 2004. These figures were announced at the Portfolio Committee on Social Development during September 2004, and reported by Waters (2004) in a press release. From this exposition (Waters, 2004), the conclusion may be drawn that in only three provinces of South Africa did the number of practising social workers in the Department of Social Development in 2004 exceed the total number who applied for letters of verification to the GSCC during 01/04/2003 - 18/05/2004. These provinces are Gauteng (387 social workers), KZN (376 social workers) and Eastern Cape (463 social workers). This comparison should be interpreted in the context of the number of social workers in the Department of Social Development falling short of the minimum requirements for positions to be filled by 6503 (72,55%) individuals in 2004, as provided by Waters (2004).

From the above profile of the number of social workers who migrate to the UK, it is evident that one can actually speak of a brain drain of South African social workers, and that this brain drain essentially contributes to the shortage of social workers in South Africa. The logical consequence is that strategies should be put in place to retain social workers in South Africa. Therefore, further investigation is needed into what retention strategies should entail.

### **Retention strategies**

Retention strategies may be regarded as a second-generation effect of the brain drain phenomenon (Khadria, 1999). In this regard retention refers to the process of ensuring that quality employees stay on the staff (Nonprofit Hub.com, 2005). McConnell (2005) equates retention strategies with

the ability to retain staff, so that workers can provide effective contributions to organisations as an outcome of human resource practices.

According to Buchan (2004), retention of a work force is part of a system's human resource management. The author stresses the need for a fit between the human resource management approach and the organisational characteristics, context and priorities of an organisation. The author also advocates that bundles of linked and coordinated human resource management interventions are more likely to achieve sustained improvements in organisational performance than single or uncoordinated interventions. The author uses the term "magnet institutions" (Buchan, 2004:5) to highlight the staff attraction and retention characteristics of institutions. In this regard he refers to research on magnet institutions that has highlighted positive links between good human resource practice, staffing characteristics and outcomes of care.

Cohen (1996) offers two obvious solutions to retain workers and prevent a brain drain, i.e. make it worthwhile for highly trained professionals to stay, or replace them with competent locals at a rate as fast as or faster than their departure. This strategy seems too simplistic. The dimensions of work environments, which Allen, Lambert, Pasupuleti, Cluse-Tolar and Ventura (2004) distinguish in their research on the impact of job characteristics on social and human service workers, can be accepted as the starting point for retention strategies. The authors distinguish organisational structures and job characteristics as two principal dimensions of a work environment. A further dimension of retention strategies, according to authors such as Mason (2005) and McConnell (2005), is financial compensation. However, financial compensation should not be the only strategy to induce workers to stay on in their jobs. The latter two authors specifically mention that, if the only right thing in a person's job is their salary, there is no assurance that they will stay. Organisational structures, job characteristics and financial compensation are thus dimensions of an interrelated work environment from which a variety of situational-specific and practical retention strategies can be distinguished (Mason, 2005; McConnell, 2005; National Clearinghouse On Child Abuse and Neglect Information, 2004).

With reference to the above contextualisation, the question thus arises as to how this impacts on the migration of South African social workers to the UK. This is indicated in the following survey results.

## **SURVEY RESULTS**

The research questions to the 65 respondents aimed at tracing the profile of South African social workers migrating to the UK are as follows: Who are the South African social workers who migrate to the UK? What are the reasons for their migrating? What are their plans for the future? The responses to these questions are subsequently presented as a synthesis in the survey results.

### **Gender**

The gender distribution shows that 10 (15%) of the respondents are male and 55 (85%) are female. *Proportionally the gender distribution of South African social workers working in the UK does not differ substantially from statistics of the SACSSP on social work registrations in South Africa*, because 11% male and 89% female social workers registered in 2004 (SACSSP, 2004).

### **Age**

The mean age of the respondents at the time of the survey was 31 years, with the youngest respondent 23 years old and the oldest 53. Table 4 shows the age distribution of respondents.

**TABLE 4:  
AGE DISTRIBUTION**

Age	F	%
<29	31	48
30-39	28	43
40<	6	9
Total	65	100

N=65

From Table 4 it seems that just over half the respondents, i.e. 34 (52%), were older than 30 years. These statistics are supported by the research of Naidoo and Kasiram (2003:373), who state that *the idea of working in the UK is attractive not only to the young social workers in South Africa, but also to older and more experienced social workers.*

#### **Passport endorsement with reference to work**

The respondents were asked to indicate how their passports were endorsed with reference to working in the UK, and their responses are reflected in Table 5.

**TABLE 5  
PASSPORT ENDORSEMENT**

Nature of endorsement	F	%
Working holiday visa	8	12
Work permit	54	83
Ancestral visa	3	5
Total	65	100

N=65

From Table 5 it is clear that most respondents, i.e. 54 (83%), have a work permit. Of the eight (12%) respondents working with a holiday visa, six (75%) indicated they are in the process of obtaining a work permit. Two (3%) respondents also indicated that they previously worked with working holiday visas, then returned to South Africa, and are now back in London on a work permit. The conclusion may be reached, and this is supported by Recruitment Consultants ABC (2005), that *most South African social workers attempt to obtain a work permit, which will allow them to acquire residency status after five years.* Various advantages are attached to residency status. Apart from the fact that it facilitates access to countries of the European Union, another advantage is that after acquiring residency status, they can locum again, like all the social workers on a working holiday, since more money is earned this way.

The passport endorsement correlates with the age distribution of respondents, since a person has to apply for a working holiday visa before the age of 31 years (Firth, 2004). Recent social work graduates as a rule start working with a holiday visa and thereafter they try to get a work permit before the relevant visa expires after two years. This explains why most respondents possess a work permit.



### Population affiliation

To determine the relation between previously politically advantaged and disadvantaged South African social workers who have chosen to work in the UK, respondents were asked to indicate their population affiliation. Table 6 reflects the respondents' population affiliation.

**TABLE 6**  
**POPULATION AFFILIATION**

Population	F	%
White	46	71
Coloured	11	17
Black	4	6
Indian	4	6
Total	65	100

N=65

It is clear that just over a quarter of the respondents, i.e. 19 (29%), are from previously disadvantaged population groups. This means that the majority of social workers who left the country are white, which could in turn point to more work opportunities and promotion possibilities for social workers from previously disadvantaged environments in South Africa. This would corroborate Cohen's (1996) arguments on the results of the brain drain phenomenon. Another conclusion that could be drawn is that the majority of respondents are white, because they are more likely to have the financial means to migrate than people from previously disadvantaged groups. According to Recruitment Consultants ABC (2005), however, most recruitment agencies nowadays have creative ways to help social workers limit costs when they apply for holiday visas. Sometimes the new employer pays the removal expenses of those who obtain work permits from the start. Therefore, it is currently more affordable for social workers to migrate to the UK. The direct result, according to Recruitment Consultants ABC, is that more than 60% of the applications that they currently handle are from social workers from a previously disadvantaged population affiliation. This trend seems to be confirmed by information on the brain drain phenomenon of professional workers in general (*Mail & Guardian Online*, 2004). This implies that, *although the majority of social workers who migrate are white, an increasing number of social workers from previously disadvantaged population affiliations are joining the exodus.*

### Domicile in South Africa

The respondents were asked to indicate where in South Africa they had lived. Table 7 reflects respondents' domicile in South Africa according to province.

**TABLE 7**  
**DOMICILE IN SOUTH AFRICA**

Province	F	%
Western Cape	23	35,4
Gauteng	21	32,3
Eastern Cape	9	13,9
KwaZulu-Natal	8	12,3
Free State	2	3,1
Mpumalanga	1	1,5
North West	1	1,5
Total	65	100

N=65

It would be incorrect to use the statistics of Table 7 to draw conclusions on, for example, the frequency and reasons for social workers migrating, and to link these to their province of origin in South Africa. The nature of the sample does not provide for this, since all South African social workers in general are included as a unit in the analysis. However, a valid conclusion from Table 7 is that the *respondents originate from most parts of South Africa*. Only two provinces are not represented, namely the Northern Cape and Limpopo. It is furthermore remarkable that more respondents originate from the Western Cape than from Gauteng, which according to the 2004 registrations by the SACSSP, is the province with the most social workers (SACSSP, 2004). This trend corresponds with the experience of the Recruitment Consultants ABC (2005). Although this agency operates nationally, most applications for holiday visas are from individuals in the Western Cape. To provide reasons would be speculating.

#### **Highest social work qualification**

The majority of respondents, i.e. 56 (86%), have an undergraduate qualification in social work. Taken proportionally, a significant group of respondents, i.e. 9 (14%), have a postgraduate qualification, since eight (12%) have a masters degree and one respondent (2%) obtained a doctoral qualification in South Africa. From these statistics the conclusion may be reached that *a postgraduate qualification in social work does not necessarily prevent a social worker from migrating to the UK*.

#### **Years of social work experience in the UK**

To determine the average period that respondents had been working in the UK, they were requested to indicate this. This period ranges from two months to seven years, with two years as the average period at the time of the survey. This correlates with the high percentage of respondents with work permits, since a working holiday visa is valid for two years only. Hence, it is also clear that *the majority of respondents started migrating from South Africa after 1997*. This is significant, since this is when the transformation of South Africa's welfare system started and the White Paper on Social Welfare (1997) was accepted.

#### **Years of social work experience in South Africa**

The respondents' work experience in South Africa was also determined. This is reflected in Table 8.

**TABLE 8**  
**YEARS OF SOCIAL WORK EXPERIENCE IN SOUTH AFRICA**

Years experience	F	%
None	17	26,15
0-5 years	27	41,54
6-10 years	10	15,38
11 -23 years	11	16,93
Total	65	100

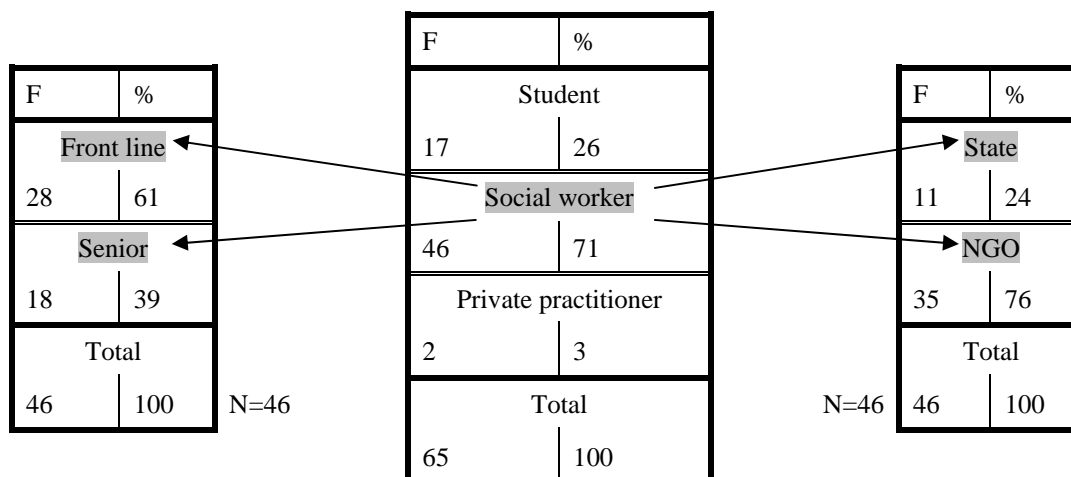
N=65

According to Table 8, respondents' years of work experience in South Africa ranges from nought to 23 years, with an average of five years. The fact that 21 (32,31%) of the respondents have more than 6 years of work experience indicates that *a significant number of respondents could, because of their experience, have held senior social work positions in South Africa.* This is explained in the following section.

**Position and nature of work in South Africa**

The respondents' position and nature of work in South Africa are presented graphically in Table 9.

**TABLE 9**  
**POSITION AND NATURE OF WORK IN SOUTH AFRICA**



N=65

From Table 9 it is clear that two (3%) respondents practised as private practitioners and 17 (26%) were students without work experience in South Africa. Most respondents, i.e. 46 (71%), were social workers, of whom 28 (61%) were front-line workers, and 18 (39%) senior social workers in South Africa. Of these 46 (71%) social workers, 35 (76%) worked in NGOs and 11 (24%) worked in the government sector.

The conclusion that could be drawn from these statistics is that *almost the same number of social workers in senior posts (18) and recently qualified students (17) migrated to the UK.* This is probably related to the high percentage of respondents who previously worked in the NGO sector.

This trend is attributable to the difference in salaries and working conditions between social workers in the NGO sector and the government sector. This situation has been repeatedly pointed out in the South African press (*Beeld*, 2004; *Beeld*, 2005; *Business Day*, 2005; *Cape Times*, 2004; *Herald*, 2005). Reasons for migrating to the UK are discussed below.

### Primary and secondary reasons for migrating to the UK

The fundamental question concerning social workers working in the UK is why they left South Africa: what are the push and pull factors behind the migration of South African social workers to the UK? This question was put to respondents as an open-ended question and their responses are summarised in Table 10. The reasons they mentioned for migrating to the UK have been grouped into primary and secondary reasons, and are reflected in order of frequency. The secondary reasons complement the primary reasons.

**TABLE 10**  
**REASONS FOR MIGRATING TO THE UK**

	F	%
<b>PRIMARY REASONS</b>		
Financial reasons	65	100
Working conditions	53	82
Personal reasons	2	3
<b>SECONDARY REASONS</b>		
Further career development	32	49
Travel the world	24	37

N=65

From Table 10 it is evident that the *migration of South African social workers is largely driven by financial reasons* (65 or 100%), to some extent by working conditions (53 or 82%), and insignificantly by personal reasons (2 or 3%). Respondents mention further career development (32 or 49%) and, to a somewhat lesser extent, to travel the world (24 or 37%) as supplementary reasons. Their primary reasons correspond with previous local research (Naidoo & Kasiram, 2003:374), as well as international research (National Clearinghouse On Child Abuse and Neglect Information, 2004). Since authors such as McConnell (2005) are of the opinion that financial compensation is not necessarily the only reason why people leave their work, a continuum of push factors is presented, which is a synthesis of the respondents' reasons for migrating to the UK.

### Continuum of push factors

If respondents' reasons for migrating to the UK are cross-tabulated with their years of work experience and positions in South Africa, *a continuum of push factors can be distinguished, i.e. prevention, disenchantment and survival*. This continuum of push factors is financial by nature and related to the working conditions of social workers in South Africa. These are illustrated in Figure 1.

**FIGURE 1**  
**CONTINUUM OF PUSH FACTORS FOR SOUTH AFRICAN SOCIAL WORKERS’**  
**MIGRATION TO THE UK**

WORKING EXPERIENCE	WORKING POSITION	CONTINUUM OF PUSH FACTORS	PRIMARY REASONS
0 years experience	student	prevention ↓ disenchantment ↓ survival	financial & working conditions
< 5 years experience	front-line worker		
6 < years experience	senior worker		

Figure 1 illustrates that those respondents who were recently qualified social work students migrated to the UK to prevent being exposed to financial discomfort and poor working conditions in South Africa. Front-line workers who had experienced the full state of affairs in South Africa’s social work environment for about five years lost their ideals and were disenchanting with the social work profession. Senior workers with more years of experience were driven to migration by personal motives and for professional survival. The following direct quotations from responses illustrate the continuum of push factors underlying the reasons for migration.

**Prevention response:** “Social work is a scarce skill...after I pay back my study debts and gain (UK) residency status I can organise my life as I want it.”

**Disenchantment response:** “I was very committed to social work in SA when I worked there, but after several years I had nothing to show for it, except frustrations ... I started to question whether social work was right for me, although there was nothing else I wanted to do. When the opportunity arose to work in the UK I did not think twice.”

**Survival response:** “I am not regretting my decision. My debts are paid and my family back in SA have food in their cupboards... I will never return as a social worker to SA... I understand that by leaving SA I was part of a massive brain drain, but I did not have a choice to survive or to enable my family to survive.”

The sections below focus on aspects relevant to the professional future of respondents.

**Job satisfaction in the UK**

To explore how social workers adapted to different working conditions in the UK and investigate factors that impact on their professional future, respondents were asked to indicate if the work in the UK meets with their expectations. Their general response was that job satisfaction in the UK relates to the personality of the social worker concerned. However, most respondents, 47 (72%), indicated that the work in the UK meets their expectations. Only ten (9%) respondents indicated that the work did not meet their expectations. They mentioned reasons such as too much administrative work and that the work is too specialised. Some respondents, i.e. 12 (19%), were ambivalent about their job satisfaction. The conclusion is drawn that *the majority of respondents are more satisfied with their jobs in the UK than they were in South Africa*. This conclusion is supported by the responses of 63 (97%) respondents that they would recommend working in the UK for some time to other social workers and students.

The potential for job satisfaction is indicated by the fact that 12 (18,5%) respondents hold senior social work positions in the UK. It is further demonstrated by the significant number of respondents who aim to realise their ambition for self-development in the UK. Of the respondents,

28 (43%) indicated that they would like to improve their qualifications in the UK over the next five years, as well as apply for senior positions in social work in the UK.

### Future plans regarding a possible return to South Africa

Considering their job satisfaction, respondents were asked to indicate whether or not they would like to return to South Africa and to give reasons for their answers. None indicated any regrets about migrating to the UK. Table 11 illustrates the respondents' plans with regard to their possible return to South Africa.

**TABLE 11**  
**FUTURE PLANS REGARDING A POSSIBLE RETURN TO SOUTH AFRICA**

<b>FUTURE PLANS</b>	<b>F</b>	<b>%</b>
Prefer to return to South Africa	47	72
Stay in the UK	14	22
Unsure	4	6
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>65</b>	<b>100</b>

**N=65**

It is clear that most respondents (47 or 72%) would prefer to return to South Africa. Among the reasons they give for their plans to return to South Africa are to be closer to their families and because of their loyalty to the country. The 14 (22%) respondents who prefer not to return to South Africa seem to be domiciled in the UK and have accepted their host country as their new home.

With reference to a follow-up question it is significant, however, that 28 (60%) of the 47 (72%) respondents who indicated that they would prefer to return to South Africa said they did not know when they would return. This indicates that they have no definite plan to return to South Africa and this conclusion is supported by their responses about specific plans for the next five years. A significant number of respondents (51 or 79%) plan to remain in the UK for the next five years. Only four (6%) respondents indicated that they would prefer to return to South Africa somewhere in the future. Hence, the conclusion to be drawn is that *returning to South Africa is not part of most respondents' immediate planning*. This conclusion should be viewed in the context of most respondents aiming for residence status after having worked for five years and the fact that they have on average been working in the UK for two years already.

The respondents' ambivalence about returning to South Africa is summarised by the following response: *"I definitely want to return to South Africa one day, but I am very anxious to first obtain residency and thus complete working my five years before thinking of going home. The longer I stay here, the less I feel up to South Africa and its welfare situation, and to adapt again – what work will I do when I return?"*

### Willingness to do social work in South Africa

To explore the respondents' willingness to return to South Africa for the benefit of social work, respondents were asked if they would again do social work in South Africa should the opportunity arise. Table 12 reflects their responses.

**TABLE 12**  
**WILLINGNESS TO DO SOCIAL WORK IN SOUTH AFRICA**

<b>Willingness</b>	<b>F</b>	<b>%</b>	<b>Motivation</b>
Willing to return to social work in South Africa	42	65	<i>Will return home if I can live on my social worker salary in South Africa; if I can find a job; if I could do specialised work; if the discrimination against my skin colour/age stops; if I can set up a private practice; if I can enter on management level; if I can do only training; if I can work in a hospital or residential care.</i>
Not willing to return to social work in South Africa	23	35	<i>I believe the social work situation in South Africa will never change; don't trust the politicians with the social development portfolios; will always be exploited by NGOs; government doesn't care about NGOs; government will never care about social workers; the gap between grassroots social work and government is too big to bridge; social work setting for front-line social workers will still be chaotic for many years without officials able to do something; had enough; never ever again; pay will never be enough to live on; affirmative action will still be in South Africa for a long time; can't imagine myself anymore as an underpaid social worker in South Africa.</i>
<b>Total</b>	<b>65</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>N=65</b>

The responses in Table 12 indicate that the majority, i.e. 42 (65%), will return to the social work profession in South Africa, if the opportunity arises. However, these respondents all envisage personal or work-specific conditions comparable to their current working conditions before they would think of returning to social work in South Africa. The conclusion can be drawn that, currently in South Africa, it would be difficult to offer the conditions that these particular respondents desire. The attitudes of the 23 (35%) respondents who are not willing to return to the social work profession in South Africa possibly stem from their previous experience of social work in South Africa. None of the respondents gave a neutral response and this reveals how strong their motivations are. *The key finding of this research is thus that the social workers who have migrated to the UK represent a lost generation who may not easily be regained for local social service delivery.*

### **CHALLENGES FOR SOCIAL SERVICE PROVIDERS**

Based on a synthesis of all the responses to the exploratory and descriptive research questions, challenges have been identified and formulated to describe the contribution that social service providers (provincial departments of social services, the NGO sector, professional associations and universities under the leadership of the National Department of Social Development, and the SACSSP) will need to make in future to retain social workers in South Africa. *These challenges are presented as an effect of the brain drain phenomenon on a second generation of social workers and are aimed at retaining the remaining and prospective social workers in South Africa.*

Social service providers are challenged to put management information systems in place that will **enable the ongoing collection of reliable and consistent data on the migration of social workers**, and that will serve the interests of social service delivery proactively without politicising the phenomenon. These management information systems should, for example, make it possible to identify micro-level and macro-level trends resulting from social workers who terminate their services, with a centrally coordinated structure that can make available the statistics on the migration of registered social workers. This will make it possible to develop organisational, provincial and national strategies to retain social workers, based on verifiable statistics.

The brain drain phenomenon, verified by statistics, needs to be managed proactively. Therefore, all social service providers are challenged to **establish a stronger culture of healthy human resource management**. This would imply, amongst other things, maintaining an ongoing and conscious balance between the priorities of service delivery and human resource management (e.g. in terms of time and money). There should also be a balance between the investment made in the recruitment of social workers and their retention. This implies, in practice, that the retention of social workers from the designated groups should, for example, enjoy the same priority as their recruitment. In developing and maintaining human resources, a balance should also be found between beginner front-line workers and seasoned senior social workers. Service providers should be encouraged at national level to specifically indicate in their business plans what interrelated strategies they will provide for in their management of human resources to retain social workers at all managerial levels to the benefit of their programmes.

To accomplish a healthy culture of human resource management, all social service providers are challenged to **invest in collective retention strategies that are sustainable and proactive**. Part of managing their organisation should include having an official retention strategy; a strategy that can be operationalised and is supported by a sustainable national strategy for the retention of social workers in South Africa. A prerequisite for the retention of social workers is a sufficient market-related minimum remuneration. Sustainable retention strategies may also involve creative non-monetary benefits. These may include an approach aimed at a work-life balance to offer more flexibility to the vast female social work force. For the sake of solidarity and collaboration and with a view to the initiation, follow-up and monitoring strategies for the retention of social workers, a special networking forum should be established between private and public welfare sectors and training institutions. These forums should be environment-specific and aimed at unique retention strategies for the specific circumstances of social workers in a particular environment.

Establishing an all-encompassing culture of healthy human resource management in the social work profession in South Africa, characterised by collective retention strategies that are sustainable and proactive, will require efficient organisational communication between social service providers and professionals. This will ensure a reciprocal flow of meaningful information about retention strategies in and among organisations. A collectively accessible and nationwide source of communication will therefore be needed to ensure the retention of social workers in South Africa. Service providers are thus challenged to be innovative and show their leadership abilities in this regard by using national structures and agitate at national level for **a regular official national publication for social service professionals**. The *Community Care* magazine and website (*Community Care*, 2005), published in the UK as a specialist magazine and website, and dedicated to all areas of the social care profession, could serve as an example. All service providers in South Africa should be involved in this effort and all social service professionals should accept ownership of, have access to, and participate in, deliberations in this regard. The journal should be available in paper format, but also electronically, to ensure wide access to all



registered social service professionals – thus also to those social workers who might be located outside of South Africa. New policies, developments, job opportunities and all aspects of social work in South Africa that need to be communicated to the readership could form part of the journal's contents. This publication could serve as a powerful tool to repackage social work in terms of pull factors for social workers and social work students of South Africa.

## CONCLUSION

The research referred to above indicates that the migration of social workers can be ascribed mainly to less-than-favourable remuneration and less-than-favourable working conditions. These are international tendencies that seem generally underrated. In the local scenario these determinants lie on the extremes of the continuum, which has led to a generation of social workers being lost to social service delivery in South Africa. This scenario needs to be managed urgently and constructively in order to retain capacity for the successful throughput and output of the transformation of social service delivery in South Africa. Although attractive salaries and also working conditions are important, they are but part of the bigger picture of management aimed at retaining social workers for local social service delivery. The challenge to social service providers is also, amongst other things, to establish a culture of healthy human resource management practices aimed at collective and sustainable proactive retention strategies, directed at the remaining and prospective social workers of South Africa. Metaphorically, this will be a constructive tool to help plug the brain drain of South African social workers migrating to the UK.

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