

Experts say it is hard to establish how many are leaving SA, but their number is likely rising

Black professionals seek greener pastures

Michael Bleby

Writer at Large

CHARLOTTE Mahome is an HIV specialist nurse. She works as a clinical research co-ordinator at London's Chelsea and Westminster Hospital.

Mahome, who moved to the UK five years ago with her husband and two children, does not know when — or if — they will return to SA.

"Initially it was not a permanent move," she says. "We came to pay off our mortgage, but settling here (in the UK) provides more opportunities for our children as well as ourselves."

"I don't know when we'll be coming back."

How many skilled black professionals leave SA for overseas is unknown. Accurate statistics do not exist. But the number is most likely rising — skilled workers are in short supply the world over. And their loss is something the country cannot afford.

"People from all walks of life are daily deciding to uproot and go elsewhere. Every 30 000 highly skilled individuals who make this step probably reduce SA's GDP (gross domestic product) by 1% or more, starving it of critical support, thereby undermining ongoing employment of double their number," First National Bank chief economist Cees Bruggemans said this week.

The reasons why black professionals leave vary as much as they do for whites. Mahome cites greater job satisfaction.

"It's easier to progress professionally (in the UK) as opposed to SA. If you want to study in SA, people can't afford it most of the time. There are a lot of short courses you can access," she says.

Mahome also says the benefits, such as subsidised rent and mortgages paid to designated "key workers" such as nurses, make it easier to afford decent accommodation than in SA.

Ngontombana Mahlangu is also a nurse and lives in North-wales, Wales. The 45-year-old sup-



These days it is no longer only white South Africans heading to other destinations, with many of their black counterparts also considering emigration.

ports a daughter in Johannesburg and plans to return in a couple of years. "You find it's a common reason of trying to augment the salary," she says.

"Some of us are single parents. You have a bond, you have children in former model C schools. If you are alone, you can't cope with all those things in SA."

Others are not as positive. "I was slowly getting disillusioned with the way things work in SA," says Siba Sokhulu, a quantity surveyor from Johannesburg now living in Nottingham. Sokhulu is not his real name.

"It's all muddled up with all sorts of questions, either people criticising that you're getting work and saying it's because you're black," says the 43-year-old. He left SA thinking he would stay away for five years, but now thinks it will be longer.

When it comes to emigration of skilled whites, estimates exist. No such figures exist for blacks, however.

As the number of whites is smaller, changes in that population group are easier to estimate.

In 2005, the South African Institute of Race Relations reported a "brain drain" of white people aged between 20 and 39 and estimated that 796 000 whites had emigrated since 1991.

The black population, harder hit by deaths from HIV/AIDS in the same age range, makes population data alone insufficient to estimate emigration, the institute says.

"We don't know how many skilled black professionals are leaving the country," says Marco MacFarlane, the head of research at the institute.

"We don't know how many whites are leaving, but we have a fair idea because we can see the population numbers. Black people are a much larger group. We can't really tell what's happening in terms of emigration."

Anecdotal evidence indicates a greater number is leaving. John

Gambarana, a co-founder of Rivonia-based immigration consultancy Trans-Global Migration, says the racial mix of people making enquiries these days about leaving, compared with when he started in the industry in 1997, is very different.

"Where it used to be almost 100% white, we have a huge change in the demographics."

"When I go to Natal, it's 50-50 between whites and others. It's the same for Cape Town. Johannesburg is 60% white and 40% others."

In a profession such as nursing, those leaving now are likely to be senior. In 2006, the UK, the main foreign destination for South African nurses, removed junior-level nurses from an official shortage occupation list, making it much harder for junior foreign nurses to get work permits.

But in other professions, such as accounting, engineering and finance, the movement of black

professionals is the same as in any normalised labour market — a wish to get experience, which they often bring back home.

"There are large numbers of those sorts of youngsters going offshore," says recruitment company Landelahn Business Leaders CE Sandra Burmeister.

"After two to three years they're dead keen to come home," Burmeister says.

The more senior black professionals who have left the country cite crime as a concern, but not as their first one.

"There is crime in this country (the UK), but it's more controlled than at home," Mahome says. "I went home two years ago and the first thing I was told was, 'don't answer your phone in public'. I don't live in a high-security complex here."

Sokhulu has two young daughters and is happy to raise them in the UK. "The kids just walk to school. I don't have to drive them. It's much more back-to-basics community living. You risk bad-mouthing SA, but the fact is, you do realise how much crime there is back home."

Immigration agents such as Gambarana caution that a time of uncertainty, whether caused by political leadership changes or rolling power cuts, increases the number of enquiries about emigration, but does not confirm that more people are leaving.

"One has to be cautious," he says. "You have a mixture of knee-jerk reaction to ills and problems. The other issue is some people thinking (of emigrating) for quite a while and all that's needed was something to spur them to make the decision."

With the world needing their skills, professionals such as Mahome who are overseas can choose to come back or go, just like their white counterparts have done for decades.

Her house in Roodepoort, the initial reason for going to the UK, is now paid off, and yet she and her family remain in London. What has happened to the house? "We rent it out," she says.

