

# **The experiences of African Immigrant Academics in South African Higher Education**



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## **Abstract**

Since the dawn of democracy over two decades ago when access to South Africa became possible to African immigrants, a significant amount of African academic immigrants have come to the country to work within the higher education sector. This study sought to explore the experiences of fourteen African immigrant academics working at two universities in South Africa. The findings indicate that despite a generally negative national perception of African immigrants (Crush 2002), African academics are generally attracted to work within the South African higher education sector. In addition, while participants lamented the limited access to research related funding, they noted the importance of funding sources such as the Carnegie Corporation of New York as playing an important role in their career development. The study noted that the middle class position of African immigrant academics generally protected them from xenophobia that is often directed at working class African immigrants. They occupy an ambivalent position within their universities as there is the general perception that they are preferred over their black local counterparts while they simultaneously reported experiences of racism within their institutions. Their narratives reflect a consciousness of this position and the inherent danger of disrupting solidarities with black South African academics. The findings reflect moments of alienation in relation to funding, racism and immigration policies and practises which make working within South Africa difficult. There are however moments of belonging which derive from solidarities with black South African academics, a sense of contribution to the project of building the South African academy, and a pan Africanism based on the choice of remaining on the African continent. The study concludes with recommendations relevant to policy changes on South African immigration laws, promotion of research through inclusive funding of African academic immigrants in South African higher education sector, and the need for consideration of immigrant experiences in shaping the institutional cultures of higher education institutions.