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## The Precariatization of Zimbabwean Engineers in South Africa

**Abstract:** This paper discusses how occupational closure of the engineering profession in South Africa left Zimbabwean migrant engineers amongst the precariat ranks. It aims to answer the following research question: what is the nature of precariousness experienced by immigrant engineers in South Africa. An exploratory study of the experiences of Zimbabwean engineers is used to test out Standing's (2011) notion of the precariat as an emerging social class. Semi-structured and group interviews were used as data collection tools. The findings reveal that bureaucratic challenges in obtaining relevant work permits from the Department of Home Affairs, South African universities' reluctance to acknowledge Zimbabwean qualifications at par with local qualifications as well as a host of insecurities in the workplace left migrant engineers in precariat ranks.

**Keywords:** Migrant professionals, occupational closure, precariat, precarious employment, labour market

Skilled migrants generally struggle to maintain their professional status in countries they migrate to (Allsop, Bourgeault, Evetts, Le Bianic, Jones, & Wrede 2009; Girard & Bauder 2007). This paper speaks to and contributes to current debates in the sociology of professions literature by detailing the experiences of Zimbabwean migrant engineers, who were employed in a provincial government department in South Africa. It builds on and develops further the arguments discussed in this journal by Chikarara (2016). While Chikarara (2016) focused on the ways in which the Engineering Council of South Africa (ECSA) undervalued the academic qualifications of these migrant engineers thereby ensuring occupational closure, this paper widens the scope beyond the professional body's politics. It considers Zimbabwean engineers interactions with the South African government's Department of Home Affairs, and institutions of higher learning (universities) impacted their labour market integration. It further explores their workplace experiences within a provincial government department in Gauteng, South Africa. The analysis presented in this paper is framed within the broader discourse of occupational closure and Standing's (2011) concept of the precariat as social class is used as an entry point.

Data were collected through semi-structured individual and group interviews over a nine-month period in 2011. This was further augmented by Department document analysis of official documents. The findings reveal that these migrant engineers faced bureaucratic challenges and semi-structured requirements from the Department of Home Affairs with regard to obtaining relevant work permits. They

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**Received:**  
16 Sep 2019

**Accepted:**  
10 Oct 2019

also perceive local universities' requirements for post-graduate studies for foreign nationals with an engineering undergraduate qualification from Zimbabwe as unnecessarily stringent and a subtle form of gatekeeping which slows down their career progression. In the workplace they had no job security since they were employed on fixed-term contracts with no guarantees of renewal or opportunities for promotion.

The paper is structured as follows: first, a review of the literature on the labour market integration of migrant professionals in migrant-receiving countries is presented. I then introduce the theoretical framework that shapes the analysis presented. Thereafter, I present and discuss the key findings of this study demonstrating the precariatization of Zimbabwean migrant engineers and the paper ends with a reflection on the theoretical significance of this case study

## **Labour market assimilation and exclusion of international professional migrants**

Prior to the 2008 global economic crisis, many countries were loosening their migration policies to allow for the smooth inflow of people with needed expertise. For instance, Khoo, Hugo, and McDonald (2008, p. 196) observed that in Australia "there has long been recognition that in order to be globally competitive the national economy must have an on-going access to a highly skilled labour force". To that end immigration was a major source of such expertise as temporary migration visas were developed to attract skilled workers in particular occupations. Until the 2008 global economic crisis, this was the trend across the globe especially in the developed countries (Kofman & Raghuram, 2005). The revival of far-right politics in Europe, the USA and to some extent Australia amid the "war on terror" and slow global economic growth post-2008 gave impetus to anti-immigration policies.

In an era that is characterized by fragmented and flexible labour markets, the biggest challenge for migrant professionals is attempting to maintain their professional or middle-class status in the host country. Literature (Allsop et al., 2009; Girard & Bauder 2007; Standing 2011) is awash with empirical examples of the struggles of migrant professionals in the Anglo-American and Western European contexts. Furthermore, the focus on temporary migration by developed countries has resulted in migrants becoming the predominant group among the precariat ranks regardless of whether there are skilled professionals or not.

In the United States, migration policies in the 1990s were designed to meet the demands and needs of employers and the advancement of economic growth and innovation. For example the H1-B visa scheme, which required no assessment of qualifications although applicants were required to hold a university degree, was considerably successful (Iredale, 2005). However, the Trump administration has aggressively introduced restrictive changes to this visa programme. For instance premium application processing was temporarily suspended from April to October 2017 (U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services, 2017) and was suspended again from March to September 2018 (U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services, 2018). Canada's approach allowed for the selection of permanent migrants for their generic skills but since there was little pre-migration assessment of qualifications migrant professionals were unable to practice their professions upon arrival and were more likely to be unemployed or take long to find work because of the uncertainty over the worth of their degrees without accreditation (Boyd & Thomas 2001; Iredale, 2005).

The under-utilization of migrant professionals in Canada is further compounded by the fact that although the migration policy is aimed at importing professionals (Bascaramurthy, 2017), it does not address issues around the integration or utilization of such migrants. Furthermore, in Canada trades and professions are regulated at provincial level, each of the 12 provinces has the authority to impose specific

requirements for accreditation. This creates a structural gap between the federally regulated immigration policy and the provincial-level professional regulation system which results in the underutilization of skilled immigrants (Boyd & Thomas, 2001; Girard & Bauder, 2007). In Europe applicable policies and procedures differ according to the origin of the migrant. In principle for European Union (EU) migrants, there is a system of mutual recognition of qualifications. Professional immigrants from outside the EU face challenges since each country assesses them in their own way (Iredale, 2005). However, new developments such as the impending withdrawal of the UK from the EU may potentially destabilize mutual recognition of qualifications.

The integration of professional immigrants in the host country's labour market is also impacted by how they are treated by professional associations, local universities, and employers. Boyd and Thomas (2001) observed that immigrants who studied engineering outside Canada in institutions that are not in the USA, UK or France are required to take up a program of study that is accredited by a Canadian association in order to work as a professional engineer. Medical doctors and teachers among other professional groups are also affected (Boyd & Schellenberg 2008; Beynon et al 2006). In Sweden, for example, immigrants who invest in Swedish education still have a higher risk of unemployment than locals (Duvander, 2001). Employers' attitudes and "cultural arrogance or superiority complex" were reported as factors leading to the exclusion of migrant professionals in the Canadian labour market (Girard & Bauder, 2007).

### ***Skills shortages and migrant professionals in the South African labour market***

While the "South-North" skilled migration has been thoroughly studied over the years (Boyd & Thomas, 2001; Iredale, 2005) there has also been an increase in the "South-South" migration of skilled workers although this has been shadowed by rapid and rampant increases of undocumented migrants, frontier workers, and refugees (Adepoju, 2000; Standing, 2011). In recent times South-South skilled migration is gradually receiving scholarly attention (see Rugunanan, 2017).

South Africa is one of the most favourable destinations for skilled immigrants from within the African continent. Due to its long history of skilled shortages, South Africa needs the contributions made by skilled international migrants. One of the factors that contributed to skills shortages in South Africa is that the apartheid state legislated the occupational closure of professions, including engineering, along gender and racial lines (Bonnin & Ruggunan, 2016). Occupational closure for black South Africans and women significantly reduced the pool of skilled workers, which led to qualitative and quantitative skills constraints during and beyond apartheid rule. Women, in particular, were under-represented in occupations requiring high levels of skill and the few who got in such occupations had limited access to training opportunities (Moleke, 2004).

South African capital's quest for labour market flexibility since the mid-1990s, as well as the change from an inward-looking macroeconomic framework to open up local markets to world necessitated the shift from the emphasis on a semi-skilled labour force to a highly-skilled labour force (Standing et al., 1996). This happened against the backdrop of an education and vocational training system that was purposely designed, during the era, to equip black South Africans with skills primarily applicable to rural agricultural contexts or the routine work at the mines and the factory floor (Paterson, 2004). After the democratic transition in 1994, cyclical economic growth, the increasing emigration of skilled workers, low throughput of engineering students at universities, and negative reactions to transformation policies by white workers were responsible for the skills shortages (Du Toit & Roodt, 2009; Lawless, 2005).

The post-1994 South African government introduced various legislative interventions to promote skills development within the country as well as attracting international skilled migrants. For example, in 2000 twenty-five Sector Education and Training Authorities (SETAs) in different economic sectors were established to cater for skills development (Martins, 2005). Despite a seemingly good start, there were many problems with the SETAs including corruption and financial mismanagement (Lee, 2002; Martins, 2005). This meant that the skills shortages continued unabated.

In 2006 the Joint Initiative for Priority Skills Acquisition (JIPSA) was established. This was a joint partnership between the government and the private sector aimed at developing local skills (Lowitt, 2007; Parker, 2009). In 2009 JIPSA was expanded into a nation-wide Human Resource Development Strategy of South Africa (HRDS-SA). The HRDS-SA aimed at creating a broad-based focus on developing skills and training initiatives while seeking to align the supply of skilled labour with labour market demands (Parker, 2009). These efforts were met with uneven success.

On the immigration front, the Immigration Act No. 13 (2002) was designed to attract skilled workers from other countries to fill the skills gaps in the country. As a result, hundreds of thousands of quota work permits (critical skills visas) have been issued to date. Civil engineers form a significant cohort of the recipients of these permits (Lowitt, 2007). The relaxation of immigration laws in the early 2000s coincided with the onset of a dramatic decline in the Zimbabwean economy. Hundreds of Zimbabwean engineers moved to South Africa in search of better-paying jobs. There have been continuous changes in immigration laws since 2002 which largely introduced stringent requirements with regard to obtaining work permits and for families of skilled immigrants to obtain necessary visas to live in the country. Nevertheless, there is still significant documented immigration although the number of work permits issued yearly has been declining. For example, in 2014 the DHA issued 69 216 temporary residence permits of which 18 184 were work permits (Statistics South Africa, 2015). In 2015 the DHA issued a total of 75 076 temporary residence permits of which only 12 354 were work permits (Statistics South Africa, 2017).

### ***Casualization of work in South Africa***

Phenomena such as labour broking, externalisation, subcontracting and various forms of informalisation in search of “flexibility” in post-apartheid South Africa make employment relations precarious. By the mid-2000s the “casualisation cancer” in South Africa had reached the point where most casual or temporary workers remained perpetually in this status and are in effect “permanent casuals” (Bezuidenhout, Theron & Godfrey, 2005). In 2006 “at least 70% (of the South African construction workforce) worked on a contract basis” (Mokoena & Mathimba, 2006, p. 40-41). Attempts to arrest the situation included amending the South African Labour Relations Act (LRA) No. 66 of 1996 on a number of occasions to protect vulnerable workers. Nonetheless, with each legal adaptation South African employers found ways to “make regulations that are premised on standard employment contracts obsolete” (Bezuidenhout, 2008, p. 183). By 2015, very little had changed in this regard and another LRA Amendment Act (section 198B) came into effect which was aimed at protecting temporary workers employed for longer than three months. It became compulsory for employers to treat fixed-term contractors the same as they do permanent employees.

In view of this context, the precariatization of Zimbabwean migrant engineers is not a result of them being targeted due to their nationality but as a consequence of the continuous restructuring of the South African labour market and the global class structure. Notwithstanding this, the general public and many politicians see immigrants, skilled or unskilled, as a threat to local people’s employment opportunities. International skilled immigrants take up relatively better-paying jobs that are beyond the reach of many unskilled locals. At the same time, as non-citizens,

they are faced with constraints for upward mobility and they end up occupying a floating, truncated status with many of the precariat characteristics (Standing, 2011). For example, Chikarara (2016) found that Zimbabwean engineers were frustrated by the long and complicated process for professional recognition and perceived ECSA as a “gatekeeper” reserving the engineering profession for white male engineers.

### **The precariat: a class in-the-making?**

Theoretically, this paper draws on the work of Guy Standing, particularly his controversial concept of the precariat popularized in his book entitled “The Precariat: A new dangerous class”. According to Standing (2011), the precariat has grown to be global class that is set apart from others by its inherent lack of stability and migrants form a substantial part of this growing class. Furthermore, it can be argued that the precariat is Janus-faced. In one hand they can be seen as “victims, penalized and demonized by mainstream institutions and policies” (Standing, 2011, p. 2). On the other hand the precariat can be hailed as heroes who have rejected and defied those institutions displaying their agency. In Standing’s view, key features of the precariat are “precariousness of residency, of labour and work and of social protection” (Standing, 2011, p. 2).

In addition, the precariat has three distinguishing class characteristics namely: distinctive relations of production, distinctive relations of distribution and distinctive relations to the state (see Standing, 2014). It is important to note that the precariat is still a class in the making, it has not yet developed its own political agenda hence it remains fragmented. It is by no means a homogeneous group; rather there are ranks within the broader class. In other words it should be seen as an ideal type.

Standing (2011, p. 8) sums up the nature of the precariat by stating that as a class: It consists of people who have minimal trust relationships with capital or state making it quite unlike the salariat. It has none of the social contract relationships of the proletariat, whereby labour securities were provided in exchange for subordination and contingent loyalty, the unwritten deal underpinning welfare states. It has a peculiar status position in not mapping neatly onto high-status professional or middle-status craft occupations.

In addition, the precariat lack a work-based identity hence they feel that they don’t belong to an occupational community. This further compounds their sense of alienation, erodes any sense of organizational loyalty or trust making them very opportunistic and instrumental in what they do. Standing (2011) contends that all international migrants are denizens, which means that they do not easily get citizenship or assimilate into local communities so they end up with different groups having some rights but not others. For instance, those who possess professional qualifications are not given professional recognition simply because there is no mutual recognition of qualifications and standards (Standing, 2011).

In his earlier work, Standing (2009) argued that the class inequalities in the world could be addressed by promoting and adopting the values of occupational citizenship and doing away with what he calls “corporate citizenship”. These values include among other things solidarity, identity, and self-determination which would require the establishment of occupational guilds or international trade unions. Time will tell if the precariat will develop these values considering its fragmented nature.

### ***Criticism of the Precariat concept***

The idea of a global precariat class has drawn much attention and criticism from certain academic circles. For instance, Breman (2013) dismisses the concept of a precariat class as a bogus one arguing that there was no material difference between the proletariat and the “precariat”. Others such as Allen (2014), Choonara (2011) also dispute Standing’s characterisation of the precariat as a class arguing that it was

unnecessary to create divisions within the working class. Scully (2016) questions whether or not the precariat is a new phenomenon, arguing that precarious work has been a mainstay for the greater majority in the global South. However, none of the critics can deny empirically the changes in the global labour market as well as the fragmentation of classes taking place globally. It is not easy to overlook Standing's (2012, 2014a&b) claim that the precariat is being subjected to the precariatization process which habituates them to expecting to lead unstable lives in precarious jobs.

### ***The precariat concept and the occupational closure discourse***

Standing's concept of the precariat fits well with the neo-Weberian and neo-institutionalist perspectives on professional groups (Saks, 2012 & 2016) and the general discourse around occupational closure in professions. Occupational closure can be achieved by either restricting access to opportunities to receive academic training in a particular field of specialisation or by restricting the supply of labour that can legally practice the tasks that are under the particular jurisdiction of that occupation. The result is that trained workers remain in short supply (Bol & Weeden, 2015; Weeden, 2002). In same vein Standing (2011) pinpoints occupational licensing as a powerful tool used to deny economic rights to skilled migrants around the world and they end up in the precariat ranks.

It has been argued that professions are camouflaged powerful, privileged, and self-interested monopolies based on occupational closure (Evetts, 2003). In addition, they lobby other stakeholders, even against economic logic, to protect their financial gains (Leicht, 2016). In addition, Bol and Weeden, (2015) observed that with state backing, professional bodies issue licences that allow licence-holders exclusive rights to practice a set of skills or to use a particular occupational title (see also Saks, 2012 & 2014). Supplementary requirements such as paying annual membership fees, accepting a code of ethics and conduct and demonstrating competence are imposed in addition to a set minimum academic qualification for licensure (Bol & Weeden, 2015). It is important to underscore the fact that, globally, the framework of professional regulation is rapidly changing (Bellini & Maestripieri 2018; Saks, 2016; Tracey, 2017). This is also true in South Africa where there are calls for more inclusivity and accountability in self-regulated professions including engineering (Chikarara, 2016). Despite global changes and challenges to professional self-regulation (Chamberlain, 2015; Saks, 2015) it still persists in some contexts albeit in altered forms and through different methods (Adams, 2017).

### **Design and methodology**

This paper is based on an exploratory study. As stated earlier, it builds on the study by Chikarara (2016) and draws from the same empirical data set. The sample comprised of twelve participants from Zimbabwe: ten men and two women between the ages 31 and 43 who had been working in South Africa for a minimum of three years between 2006 and 2011. Purposive and snowballing sampling techniques were employed. This case was made up of academically qualified Zimbabwean engineers who were employed in one provincial government department in South Africa. Written informed consent was obtained before the interviews were conducted and for ethical reasons the names of participants used in this study are pseudonyms. In addition the name of the government department where they worked and actual locations of their offices are not mentioned to ensure anonymity. See Table 1 below for a brief profile of the participants.

Total Number of Respondents	12
Age Range	31-43
Gender	10 men and 2 women
Engineering Qualifications	9 had Honours Degrees in Engineering, and 3 had Diplomas in Civil Engineering
Waiting Time for a Work permit	From 4-18 months
Working Experience (Zimbabwe)	From 3-16 years
Working Experience (South Africa)	From 3-5 years
Length of employment contract	All were on 5-year fixed-term contracts
ECSA membership status	3 were non-members and 9 were registered as candidate engineers

Table 1: *Summary of the profile of participants*

Data was collected through eight semi-structured individual interviews which lasted between 45 to 90 minutes. In addition, a focus group interview comprised of four participants was conducted to tease out any new information that interviewees may have been reluctant to discuss in individual interviews. The focus group interview lasted for 90 minutes. This turned out to be a more vibrant discussion compared to the individual interviews as participants shared and discussed their experiences. Thematic analysis of the data was done to discover variations, portray shades of meaning, and examine complexities of the phenomenon under study (Rubin & Rubin, 2005).

The following section presents the findings of this study divided into three themes. As stated earlier, the aim of this study is to explore the nature of precariousness experienced by immigrant engineers in South Africa and test out the analytical usefulness of the concept of the precariat.

### **The first hurdle: dealing with the Department of Home Affairs**

In order to access the South African labour market, a migrant professional is required to obtain a valid work permit. Hence, South African companies are not legally allowed to hire an international migrant worker without him or her first obtaining the necessary permit. At one fell swoop, in order to process and issue a work permit the Department of Home Affairs requires that an individual obtain a firm job offer from their prospective employer. This bureaucratic procedure complicates and

delays the process of legally hiring a foreigner whether or not they possess “scarce skills”.

The length of waiting time is perceived to be too long by the informants. This goes against the spirit of the Immigration Act No.13 of 2002 which was designed to ensure that permits “are issued as expeditiously as possible and on the basis of simplified procedures and objective, predictable and reasonable requirements and criteria.” Given delays and the pressure to urgently find skilled staff, some companies allowed migrant professionals to start working while the documents were being processed. In other words, in the strict sense of the South African immigration law such individuals were illegally employed. In most cases, despite being highly skilled, migrant professionals in this situation are open to exploitation and are subjected to poor conditions of employment. This fits with Standing’s (2011) contention that the precariat does not map neatly into either high-status professionals or middle-class status. It also brings into focus the inherent insecurities faced by precariats.

Nonetheless, it is important to highlight, at this juncture, that though they submitted themselves to work under adverse working conditions it was only temporary. Their agency is seen clearly in the fact that such individuals quickly looked for a new job as soon as they obtained their work permits and in some instances even before they were issued with such work permits. Local employers often would try to make these migrant professionals feel as if they were actually being done a favour to be offered a job without the necessary permits. This is a line of thinking that is commonly used by employers in the construction industry to silence the voices of unskilled migrant workers (Goldman, 2003). Therefore it can be argued that this part of the precariatization process for these migrant professionals whereby they are habituated to expect to lead unstable lives in precarious jobs (Standing, 2014a&b). It is important to note that the process of precariatization for migrant professionals in South Africa is initiated as they engage the department of Home Affairs in an attempt to obtain the work permits which gives them the right to work in the country. All the participants in this study had finally managed to obtain the required work permits, but as would be shown later they remained in precarious employment.

### ***Dealing with South African institutions of higher education***

Frustrated by the barriers to professional citizenship (see Chikarara, 2016) participants in this study also sought to strengthen their labour market position by enrolling for post-graduate studies with a local university. They also believed that obtaining a qualification from a local university would bolster their chances for registration as professional engineers with ECSA. All the participants were either enrolled for or had recently completed a post-graduate course with a South African institute of higher education. However, their attempts to further or upgrade their academic qualifications were at times stalled due to the reluctance by some South African Universities to acknowledge Zimbabwean qualifications on par with local qualifications. This applies especially to the participants who hold Zimbabwean diplomas obtained from Zimbabwean technical colleges, the equivalent of South African Universities of Technology commonly known as Technikons. These individuals were asked to re-do or take bridging courses to up-grade/supplement their diplomas before they were able to enrol for post-graduate studies. The following examples reveal how they felt about this:

...re-doing my Diploma the way they want it here, which is just boring to study the same thing over and over again and they can’t even see that these persons, in all the Universities where they re-do them, they are actually passing with ease, something is not being evaluated well...they used to take previously but I think this thing of promoting locals so they would want to make it a bit difficult for

foreigners to get ahead (Orbet: 30/06/2011).

I was studying at one of the Technikons ... you find that their diploma has so many subjects but if you look at the coverage it's the same, because I realized that nothing much was new. So I don't know the basis for them rejecting our qualifications because actually we are doing, performing at the same level even far much better than the locals (Silvia: 20/09/2011).

This further frustrates these Zimbabwean engineers, they felt that they were systematically kept at the 'margins' of the labour market and their efforts to escape the precariat ranks were effectively stalled. Drawing from the Neo-Weberian and Neo-Institutionslist's perspectives on the professions (Saks, 2016) it can be argued that institutions of higher education play a key role in the process of ensuring occupational closure in the engineering field in South Africa. One of the participants claimed that South African universities in the past used to accept Zimbabwean qualifications without questioning their worth but recently there has been a tightening of requirements. It can, therefore, be argued that the tightening of requirements, specifically for foreigners who want to apply for postgraduate studies in engineering, limits their professional growth and the potential competition on the labour market from such migrant professionals. The effect is increased labour market insecurity for the migrant professionals who are affected which furthered their precariatization. This invokes Standing's (2011) views on occupational licensing as a tool used to limit the economic rights of skilled immigrants.

### ***Dealing with tensions, fear, and insecurities in the South African workplace***

The South African workplace plays a key role in deepening the sense of precariousness for these migrant engineers. To begin with, in some instances, prospective employers lured, using false promises, prospective migrant professionals to come and take up a job instantaneously. In such cases, employers presented the prospective employee with an offer of employment before he or she actually comes to South Africa. Conditions of employment and remuneration were negotiated whilst the individual is still in Zimbabwe as the following example shows:

...I left the first company within a month...when they invited me here they made certain promises under the offer which they didn't live up to and when I got here I realized that actually I could get better from the other companies. So when the other company offered me a much better offer and better working conditions I simply moved to the next company (Keita: 01/10/2011).

When this participant eventually arrived in South Africa he realized that he was "tricked" into accepting a salary that is way below the prevailing rates. In some extreme cases the employer would actually refuse to pay what they had promised to pay. Consequently, these migrant professionals quit their first job instantly when they were presented with a better offer and increasingly became opportunistic with no organizational loyalty. This is one of the attributes of the precariat (Standing, 2011).

All the participants in this study had worked for other South African companies before they joined this government department on five-year fixed-term contracts since in 2009/2010. Hence, by the time of the interviews, in 2011, they were at least halfway through these contracts. Being employed on fixed-term contracts without the option of a renewal meant that these professional immigrants lived in fear, not knowing what will happen at the end of their contracts. The anxiety brought about by this situation is illustrated in the following interview excerpts:

...job security is not very good, its contract, they wouldn't employ foreigners on a permanent basis...so until I become a permanent resident and I get a South African ID that's when they can make me permanent depending on that time, because when we started our Zimbabwean colleagues who had acquired permanent residency got permanent jobs (Orbet: 30/06/2011).

It's not clear whether it's going to be renewed or not...our contracts are quite vague actually, because they say they will post us as and where there is need, so I am here at the moment and I don't know where or whether I am going to be posted somewhere tomorrow, so for five years we don't know where we stand (Silvia: 20/09/2011).

It depends on whether they still need us or not. Of which I feel the problem is they want engineers they don't have professionals. So I think their aim was to get foreign engineers to train the locals and get rid of them (Chinotimba: 27/09/2011).

This further demonstrates how migrant professionals do not map easily into either core or periphery of the labour market. They have access to some of the opportunities and benefits offered to the "core" group of employees and at the same time they share the same problems with the employees in the 'periphery' segment in terms of the precariousness of their jobs (see Standing et al., 1996). Although they are employed on a full time basis like the core group, these migrant professionals find themselves in the periphery of the labour market because they are only hired on fixed-term contracts with no guarantee that they will be retained after the fixed contracts run out.

Citizenship or permanent residency is key for job security. South African citizens with scarce skills are offered permanent jobs. Some participants claim that Zimbabwean engineers who managed to get permanent residency were also offered permanent jobs. Although these migrant engineers were hired at the same time to occupy posts at the same level by the same organization; those with permanent residency were given permanent jobs while those on work permits were offered fixed-term contract employment. In addition participants were asked if they had ever been promoted whilst working in South Africa and whether or not they felt they had a chance for promotion in the future. These are some of the responses:

I don't foresee us being promoted, now that's where the issue of being a foreigner comes in. I don't think they really like us getting into administrative positions...that means we have a ceiling...and the ceiling is where we are...so we cannot move up... it's very difficult to get promoted to positions that are perceived to be political, you have to have political backing somewhere (Nicky: 28/09/2011).

I haven't been promoted, where you start is just where you remain...promotion is something else...the level that I am now, here that's normally where foreigners end. Above this it becomes political appointees...For the locals it's all fine. They can move up until the highest level (Orbet: 30/06/2011).

According to Standing (2011) precariousness of residency is one of the identifying characteristics of the precariat. In their case precariousness of residency also limits their career progression through promotion. Evidently, opportunities for promotion are very limited if not non-existent; none of the participants in this study had been promoted while working in South Africa. Unless they leave the public sector these migrant professionals would not progress in their careers and will remain trapped in the precariat ranks. In addition to lack of opportunities for promotion, migrant professionals also face insecurities with regard to skills reproduction. Respondents

spoke about how their employer is keen to send them or sponsor them to attend work-related training but not post-graduate academic studies:

...the department has made it compulsory, all [the] employees must go for training in order to improve on their service delivery...I appreciate it if there is anything I need to learn...The idea is that whenever you are doing something the result must be perfect (Jones: 20/02/2011).

When it comes to short courses it depends on the budget and who you know, it's a political organization, some people can go to as much as five training courses a year but if I apply I am told there are no funds (Maromo: 04/10/2011).

Zimbabwean engineers see this kind of training as a means of keeping themselves updated with new developments in engineering standards and technologies in their profession. Knowing that engineering is a dynamic profession that keeps on evolving, they believe that without continuous skills development they may become "dinosaurs". They also view professional short courses as opportunities for continued professional growth which can enhance their position in the labour market in the construction industry in South Africa. It equips them with some critical country and organization-specific skills. Their employer promotes work-related training rather than further academic training. Achieving 'functional flexibility' seems to be the driving factor for employers. Participants reported that they are required to attend several short courses and workshops on many different aspects of their profession in order to diversify their knowledge.

## Discussion

This paper has demonstrated how Zimbabwean migrant engineers faced occupational closure in South Africa and in the process were relegated into precariat ranks. It has also shed some light on the precarious nature of the conditions of existence for Zimbabwean migrant engineers. While the immigration policy in general encourages skilled immigration, in practice the way the Department of Home Affairs has been managing immigration created unnecessary bottlenecks. There are, reportedly, long delays in processing critical skills permits. In addition there are confusing and contradictory requirements. These factors left these Zimbabwean engineers exposed to exploitation and put into motion their precariatization process.

Participants in this study decided to register for post-graduate studies at local universities in order to strengthen their labour market position as well as bolster their chances of gaining professional status. However, there were still some challenges emanating from the fact that local universities were reluctant to readily accept Zimbabwean undergraduate qualifications. Participants were forced to either re-do their undergraduate studies or register for bridging courses to supplement their qualifications. This entrenched them deeper into the ranks of the precariat. Similar complaints are made by migrant professionals in countries such as Australia, the USA, and Canada (see Beynon et al., 2006).

The experiences of these migrant professionals in the South African labour market "tick all the boxes" as it were for the insecurities that define the precariat as stated by Standing (2011). In some cases, employers presented the prospective employee with an offer of employment before he or she immigrates to South Africa. This opened the opportunity for the company to offer less remuneration. Most of them did not stay long in their first jobs. Furthermore, although they were employed on a full-time basis, these migrant professionals were only hired on fixed-term contracts with no guarantee that they will be retained after the fixed contracts ran out. This meant that these migrant professionals and their families had to deal with the anxiety and fear of not knowing what was going to happen at the end of their

contracts. In addition, opportunities for promotion were very limited if not non-existent and they faced insecurities with regards to skills reproduction. In this case the employer only promotes work-related training rather than further academic training because they are only interested in achieving “functional flexibility” and not career development of these Zimbabwean engineers. From the time of data collection in 2011 to date the Immigration Act No. 13 of 2002 was amended in 2014. The amendments made it even more difficult for skilled immigrants to access the South African labour market and for their families move and live with them in the country (see BusinessTech, 2018; Eisenberg, 2019). Thus, the experiences of the participants in this study would most likely still hold true to date.

## Conclusion

Theoretically, this paper has provided an empirical example that illustrates the existence of the precariat as it is described by Standing (2011). It is not possible to simply classify the Zimbabwean migrant engineers, whose experiences were discussed in this article, into either working class or middle class. Hence Standing’s conceptualization of the precariat class best describes their condition of existence. It demonstrated, there are many different factors that intersect in the lives of Zimbabwean migrant engineers that give impetus to their precariatization. Precariousness of residency, employment insecurity as well as limited opportunities for promotion and career progression relegates them into the precariat ranks. Bureaucratic processes in terms obtaining work permits and pursuing post-graduate qualifications from South African universities ultimately lead to occupational closure. This also increases the levels of precariousness among this group.

From a policy perspective, there is a need to realign the aims of the institutions discussed in this paper. To date, there is a disconnection between an immigration policy that is designed to attract skilled immigrants and the exclusive-protectionist approach by ECSA and local universities. As a region, Southern Africa would benefit from a harmonized training system that would produce mutually recognized qualifications through the region similar to that in the EU (see Iredale, 2005). This would improve quality of life for migrant professions as well as help reduce skills wastages.

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