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African Immigrants' Employment Experiences and Outcomes in Australia: Race, Immigration and Labour Market

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ABSTRACT

In this article, I examine the labour market experiences and employment outcomes of African immigrants to Australia. Drawing on findings from a qualitative study conducted among thirty participants in Queensland, I identify barriers to and other factors shaping meaningful employment. The findings highlight the impact of race and ethnicity, including structural and institutional practices on the labour force participation of African immigrants to Australia. Given the global significance of issues around race, ethnicity, identity, difference and living across cultural diversity, the article shows how skin colour, alongside race, combines to reveal how the participants' experiences provide novel framework and insight into our understanding of race, immigration, and labour market. The findings indicate the need to develop targeted policies to facilitate African immigrants' incorporation and socioeconomic mobility, highlighting the need for integration policies to be informed by immigrants' labour market experiences and employment outcomes. The article hopes to renew public interest and broadens discussion on the role of meaningful employment and labour force participation for good settlement, inclusion, and successful integration outcomes of African immigrants and other ethnically and racially marked minority people in White settler and dominated societies.

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Introduction

Migration is more than the movement of people across borders. It is also a way of socio-economic enhancement (Joseph 2019). Over the past two decades, there has been a consistent increase in the number of African migrants and refugees¹ seeking opportunities in Australia (Udah et al. 2019). In this article, I examine the labour market experiences and employment outcomes of Africans, who are racialised as 'black' in the Australian context (excluding those Africans racialised as White, Asian, or Arabic). Australia, like the United States and Canada, is a settler-colonial nation² and a prominent immigrant-receiving country, admitting approximately 195,000 permanent migrants annually (Department of Home Affairs 2023). These nations share histories of colonisation,

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Indigenous dispossession, genocide, forced assimilation and policies (Liddell, Kington & Wright 2024) that initially favoured European settlers, such as the White Australia Policy and Canada's white-only immigration policies. Despite these similarities, Australia's distinct geographical isolation and specific immigration history provide a unique backdrop for understanding the experiences of non-European immigrants, including Africans.

Historically, settler-colonial countries have used immigration policies to shape their demographic and cultural landscapes. The United States and Canada, for instance, implemented exclusionary immigration laws targeting non-white populations, much like Australia's White Australia Policy, which explicitly sought to limit immigration from Africa and Asia. Canada's historical preference for European immigrants and the United States' Chinese Exclusion Act reveal parallel attempts to construct predominantly white societies. While a lot is known about African immigrants in Canada and the United States, little is known about African immigrants to Australia. In Canada, African immigrants have been studied for their resilience and contributions despite systemic barriers (Creese 2010). In the United States, research highlights how race continues to affect African immigrants' labour market outcomes (Showers 2015). While these studies provide valuable comparative insights into the unique challenges faced by African immigrants in settler-colonial contexts, it is important to understand the specificities of their employment experiences and outcomes in the Australian context – how they navigate the labour market, and the role played by ethnicity and race in their lived experiences and economic outcomes.

Unlike the U.S. and Canada, Australia presents a distinctive case. Due to the White Australia policy, it was not a primary destination for African immigrants during the colonial or early post-colonial periods. Today, however, Africans are becoming a visible presence in Australia (Olliff et al. 2022). Many have arrived through various waves of migration, seeking better opportunities, a fresh start, and renewed hope for their aspirations. Yet, for many black African immigrants, racism represents a significant barrier, contributing to unemployment and vulnerability. Racism, in broad terms, refers to unfavourable treatment, prejudice, discrimination, or preference based on race, colour, or national or ethnic origin (Forrest et al. 2016). It is often rooted in perceptions of difference between groups and manifests through negative and inaccurate stereotypes (Udah 2018), everyday acts and behaviours (Essed 1991), subtle and institutional practices that systematically exclude people based on racial, ethnic, cultural, national, or religious differences (Bonilla-Silva 2021, Paradies et al. 2015).

A key characteristic of racism is the message that certain groups are inferior, deserving only second-class status and treatment (Udah 2017). It contradicts multicultural principles of inclusion and perpetuates significant inequalities in opportunities between racial groups (Jakubowicz et al. 2017). Racialisation – the ascription of social, political, and cultural meanings to individuals based on perceived traits like skin colour, language, or ancestry – is central to the construction and perpetuation of these racial hierarchies (Udah 2021). Whether overt or covert, racism significantly affects the lives of black Africans in Australia. African immigrants who face racism often encounter poorer employment and socioeconomic outcomes (Udah et al. 2019). They experience difficulties in securing jobs, compounded by low employer expectations and prejudice (Majavu 2020; Mapedzahama and Kwansah-Aidoo 2013). These challenges adversely impact their physical and mental wellbeing (Paradies et al. 2015; Udah 2018).

Furthermore, the legacy of the White Australia policy continues to shape negative employment experiences and outcomes for African immigrants. This legacy is evident in the racialisation of African immigrants as incompetent, requiring constant supervision or leadership training (Udah et al. 2019). In this article, therefore, I focus on the economic integration of African immigrants in Australia, examining how systemic racism and the lingering effects of the White Australia policy continue to hinder their full participation in the labour market and broader society (Colic-Peisker and Tilbury 2008).

African Immigration to Australia

The 2021 census results published by the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) reveal that 48.2% of Australia's population are first or second-generation migrants. Aside from the First Nations people – the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples – immigration has contributed to Australia's major cities becoming more cosmopolitan in character – having a great degree of cultural, religious, linguistic, and ethnic diversity. Before the British arrived in 1788, the First Nations people had lived in Australia for over sixty-five thousand years (Pascoe 2018). From 1788 to 1868, about 162,000 convicts came to Australia (Shaw 1966). During the gold rush era (1851-1860), about 50,000 people arrived each year, with the Chinese being the largest non-British group arrivals, numbering about 34,000 people in 1858 (Markus 2001). In response to fears of being swamped by massive Asian immigration, including the antagonism felt towards economic and cultural threats posed by cheap coloured labour, the infamous Immigration Restriction Act, the 'White Australia' policy, was introduced on 1 January 1901 during the federation of the Australian colonies (Tavan 2005).

The White Australia policy – a racist and legal policy – was specifically designed to preserve Australia as a predominantly white, British society. It employed measures such as literacy tests and other exclusionary practices to prohibit and restrict the immigration of non-whites, particularly from Asia and Africa. The policy explicitly favoured white immigration while imposing a strict colour bar that severely limited African immigration to Australia. Under its provisions, non-whites were generally permitted entry only on a temporary basis and under strict conditions (Udah and Singh 2018). Initially supported across political lines, the policy faced mounting criticism as global attitudes toward race and human rights evolved following World War II. The dismantling of the White Australia Policy began in the late 1940s and culminated in its official abolition in 1973, with the introduction of multicultural immigration policies (Tavan 2005). This landmark change transformed Australia from an insular, homogenous British and white dominated society into a more multiethnic, multiracial, and multicultural nation. The policy's abolition facilitated significant demographic shifts, enabling large-scale migration of non-European and non-white people, including Africans, from diverse countries and backgrounds.

While African immigration was restricted during the White Australia policy era, some people of African descent came to Australia via the First Fleet (see Pybus 2006). Prior to World War II, white South Africans and Egyptians of Greek, Italian and Maltese origin dominated the African migration to Australia (Hugo 2009). In the mid-1960s and early 1970s, under the Special Commonwealth African Assistance Plan, small numbers of African students from British Commonwealth nations were permitted entry (Markus

2001; Uдах 2018). African immigration to Australia reached a significant peak between 1996 and 2005, driven largely by the admission of African refugees and displaced persons under humanitarian programs (Hugo 2009; Uдах and Singh 2018). According to the ABS 2021 census, approximately 1.7% of the total Australian population – over 430, 000 people identify as African-born or having at least one African-born parent. However, this figure includes white South Africans and Zimbabweans, underscoring the need for a nuanced understanding of the black African population within these statistics.³

The Africans in Australia are part of a new African diaspora. Although their overall numbers remain relatively small compared to other immigrant groups, they are establishing a visible and integral presence in Australian society. Many African migrants arrive seeking better opportunities and a fresh start, leaving behind familial and cultural environments, in search of a better life, stability and prosperity. While some have achieved social and economic integration, a considerable portion continues to face systemic barriers to meaningful employment. These challenges often limit access to stable and well-paying jobs, placing them and their families at greater risk of marginalisation and social exclusion. Addressing these persistent obstacles is essential for fostering equitable opportunities and fully realising the potential contributions of African immigrants to Australian society.

In this article, I situate the labour market experiences of African immigrants within Australia's settler-colonial history and its treatment of non-white immigrants (Uдах and Singh 2018). Drawing on findings from a qualitative study conducted among thirty participants in Queensland, I identify barriers to, and other factors shaping, meaningful employment. I highlight the impact of race, ethnicity, structural and institutional practices on labour force participation. This article contributes to a growing body of scholarship on diasporic African settlement and integration experiences, offering valuable insights into the intersections of race, migration, and employment.

Immigrants, Meaningful Employment, and Labour Market Experiences

Success in the labour market is a key indicator of, and fundamental to, immigrants' incorporation and integration into the wider society (Creese and Wiebe 2012; Uдах et al. 2019). Immigrant labour market disadvantage has the potential not only to marginalise and exclude them, but also increases the risks of, or leads to, a sense of disillusionment, stress, depression, anger, frustration, low life satisfaction, a loss of self-esteem, including a decline in self-confidence, morale, and wellbeing outcomes amongst immigrants (Inanc 2018). On the other hand, immigrant labour market success, through access to meaningful employment, can provide a source of economic stability and financial independence (Creese 2010; Uдах et al. 2019). It can also influence settlement outcomes, and contribute to self-fulfilment, self-empowerment, self-esteem, and social standing, improving overall health and wellbeing for immigrants (Inanc 2018).

In this article, I conceptualise meaningful employment as the attainment of paid work that aligns with an individual's qualifications, skills, and experience, and provides opportunities for growth and stability. Meaningful employment encompasses jobs that utilise one's expertise and are competitively obtained in a fair and equitable labour market. Additionally, such employment offers wages that ensure financial security and exceed basic minimum standards, regardless of whether the minimum wage corresponds to

an individual's qualifications. Importantly, meaningful employment is not time limited. It fosters pathways for professional advancement and economic inclusion. This framing recognises that immigrant labour market participation involves both facilitators and barriers to accessing such jobs. For African immigrants, successful labour market participation is reflected not only in securing jobs appropriate to their skills but also in achieving equitable outcomes that transcend barriers tied to race, ethnicity, culture, language, or religion. It is about ensuring equal life chances in economic, political, and social domains, enabling individuals to participate fully in their receiving societies (George et al. 2012). By this definition, meaningful employment is not solely defined by wage levels but by the degree to which work aligns with an individual's qualifications and promotes their integration and wellbeing.

For many scholars, meaningfulness in employment is considered a fundamental human need and a critical factor in psychological wellbeing (Bailey and Madden 2017; Inanc 2018). Being unemployed, underemployed, or occupationally downgraded can have profound physical, psychological, health, social, and economic consequences for immigrants (Creese 2010; Inanc 2018). Without access to meaningful employment, immigrants risk falling into cycles of social and economic marginalisation, with intergenerational impacts on their children and descendants (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) 2024). As noted in the UNHCR's Integration Handbook:

As well as providing the means for economic stability, employment has a powerful influence on the capacity to participate equally in the receiving society and develop friendships and social support networks ... Being able to realise personal potential in the labour market is a significant factor in successful integration. (para 1 & 2)

Hence, access to meaningful employment not only shapes an immigrant's life but also determines the extent to which they become fully integrated members of their new countries (Bailey and Madden 2017; Creese and Wiebe 2012; George et al. 2012; Showers 2015; Olliff et al. 2022; Udah et al. 2019). In this line of thought, I consider employment as an important aspect of immigrant integration, facilitating access to new social networks, enhancing language acquisition, and restoring economic independence and confidence (Cheung and Phillimore 2014). Thus, if African immigrants secure meaningful employment that utilises their qualifications and skills, they are more likely to integrate successfully and make significant contributions to Australian society (Olliff et al. 2022). However, existing scholarship across the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) and other settler-colonial countries indicates that African immigrants experience less favourable labour market outcomes than their white counterparts. These outcomes are characterised by higher rates of unemployment, underemployment, and occupational downgrading (Creese 2010; Creese and Wiebe 2012; Elo et al. 2015; Hällgren 2005; Heikkilä 2005; Johnson 2016; Joseph 2019; Lefranc 2010; Schans 2012; Showers 2015).

A USA study found that they are discriminated in the labour force based on racial and ethnic identities (Showers 2015), leading to downward economic, social, and occupational mobility (Elo et al. 2015; Halter and Johnson 2014). Even when they possess higher education level and human capital, their earnings fall below their educational qualifications, work experience and skills (Showers 2015). Similarly, studies in Canada (Creese 2010, Creese and Wiebe 2012) show that African immigrants experience

racism and downward economic and social mobility despite the acquisition of Canadian citizenship, education, and English language proficiency. Compared to white immigrants and the native-born populations, Banerjee, Verma and Zhang (2019) and Branker (2017) argue that African immigrants in Canada experience higher unemployment rates.

Similarly, a Swedish study, for example, reports that being African is a sufficient factor in not attaining a much-needed job (Hällgren 2005). In Finland, Africans face the greatest difficulties in finding job because of labour market segmentation, discrimination, and structural barriers to equal opportunities (Heikkilä 2005). Also, scholarship situated in France (Lefranc 2010) and Japan (Schans 2012) show that African immigrants are more likely to experience significant disadvantages in access to employment, and earnings acquisition than their white counterparts. In the Irish labour market, Joseph (2019) demonstrates that racial discrimination and Whiteness work in tandem to disadvantage Africans.

In Australia, African immigrants have significantly worse labour market outcomes and trajectories. They are found to be disadvantaged in the labour market (Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) 2018). They are three times more likely to be unemployed in the first five years of settlement (ABS 2018). While some are trapped, and suffer from precarious working conditions, in the secondary labour market, others are easy targets of employment discrimination and experience more difficulty (Hebbani and Colic-Peisker 2012; Olliff et al. 2022). As indicated by ABS (2018) data, the unemployment rates for people born in North Africa and the Middle East (12.0%) and sub-Saharan Africa (7.5%) are relatively higher than for people born in Europe or Asia.

These findings highlight the difficult experiences of African immigrants in contrast with the experiences of other immigrant groups, such as Asians and Europeans, allowing us to explore the specificities of racism and structural barriers in the Australian labour market. Several factors identified, in the existing studies, that impact on the labour market success of Africans include factors relating to lack of language proficiency and skills (human capital); racism, non-recognition of overseas qualifications (institutional and structural barriers); and lack of social networks. While Asian immigrants in Australia face a mix of opportunities and challenges in the labour market (Junankar, Paul and Yasmeen 2010), ethnic origin, nationality, and race continue to influence the labour market outcomes of African immigrants (Hebbani and Colic-Peisker 2012; Majavu 2020; Mapedzahama and Kwansah-Aidoo 2013; UDAH 2018). While many Africans come with high levels of education and skills, systemic barriers, discrimination, and structural inequalities limit their ability to fully participate in the Australian labour market.

The Study: People, Place, and Process

This article draws from a qualitative study, examining the lived experience of African immigrants in Southeast Queensland, Australia. Specifically, the study sought to understand how Africans define their identity, personal and socioeconomic wellbeing in white-majority Australia, focusing on the role of racialised identity constructions and the mediating effects of skin colour and cultural background on their experiences and overall outcomes. Participants consisted of 10 females and 20 males between the ages of 22 and 67 years. Of these participants, 17 arrived as refugees through Australia's humanitarian

program (14 arrived on refugee visa and three on a woman at risk visa), and 13 came as temporary migrants (six arrived on student visa and seven on skilled migration visa). Purposive sampling was employed to ensure the selection of information-rich cases (Patton 2015). Participants were selected based on key characteristics, including their level of education, English proficiency, length of residence in Australia, and visa type. Most participants had tertiary qualifications, were proficient in English, and held Australian citizenship, ensuring they had sufficient skills and experiences to reflect on their integration into Australian society.

The criteria for inclusion were participants needed to have lived in Queensland for three years or more, ensuring sufficient time for integration and acculturation. This duration was considered important because individuals with shorter stays may lack the opportunity or incentive to assimilate or invest in host-country-specific human capital, unlike those with longer-term or permanent settlement intentions (Udah and Singh 2018). Additionally, I included participants with different visa statuses and varying educational backgrounds but prioritised those with tertiary qualifications to examine how such qualifications influenced labour market outcomes. English proficiency was essential to ensure participants could communicate effectively in interviews and had experience navigating the Australian labour market in English. These factors were critical to understanding reflective lived experiences and allowed for an important comparison to be made on the barriers faced by African immigrants in accessing meaningful employment.

Data were collected through individual face-to-face semi-structured interviews. Participants provided informed consent and were assured of privacy and confidentiality, encouraging voluntary participation. The interviews provided an opportunity to gain a rich understanding of participants' experiences, views, perspectives, and perceptions within the Australian labour market. The interviews were conducted in English and lasted approximately 60 minutes. During these interviews, participants' responses were probed, and they were encouraged to provide more detailed clarifications. The semi-structured interview schedule offered both structure and flexibility, allowing participants to narrate their experiences freely and in detail. The questions addressed issues around settlement experiences, personal and socioeconomic conditions, employment, and sense of belonging. With participants' consent, the interviews were audio-recorded.

The transcribed data were analysed using thematic analysis to identify, interpret, and report common themes. NVivo was used to facilitate the coding process, resulting in a concise matrix of key emerging themes. I draw on excerpts from participants to provide focused and instructive insights into the experiences of African immigrants in Australia. To protect participants' identities, pseudonyms have been used throughout the reporting of findings. These interviews provide relevant, practical insights into the lived experiences of African immigrants navigating Australia's labour market.

Findings: African Immigrants and the Australian Labour Market

Though the participants entered Australia with different visa types, I found that their migrant pathways do not seem to make any significant difference on their labour market experiences. Among the participants studied, racialisation has an impact beyond visa status. Effects of racialisation override differences in participants' education, migration pathways, and migrant status in securing employment. Participants' accounts

suggest that there is an issue of racism and structural barriers at play in the Australian labour market that negatively affect their employment outcomes.

Racism in the Labour Market

Despite their qualifications, skills, and language proficiency, many participants reported significant challenges in securing meaningful employment and highlighted the role of racism and structural barriers in shaping their experiences. Participants emphasised that their racialised identity, particularly their skin colour, was a significant barrier to employment. Harry, a South Sudanese refugee with a master's degree, encapsulated the challenges faced by the African community:

We have a high number of Africans that are not getting jobs now. And these people are looking for any job as long as they can get money from it, but they can't find ... That's one challenge that we have.

Harry came to Australia in 2005 as a refugee. While being one of the lucky ones, he recognises employment as core to immigrant integration. However, he believes that finding employment is one of the big challenges facing the African community. Like Harry, other participants describe finding employment as difficult. For example, Barbara, who arrived in Australia in 2001 as a teenager with her family, thinks that getting a job is difficult for Africans. According to Barbara:

I have not met any Africans who have not complained about it. Even those who got jobs, some are quite overqualified for the jobs they are doing but they are settling for those jobs because they couldn't get any.

While the difficulty of securing a job may not only be common among Africans, but the difficulties might also be magnified for Africans partly because of their racial and ethnic identities (Colic-Peisker and Tilbury 2008). One of their defining characteristics is their skin colour, which makes them distinct in the Australian social context and among a predominantly white population. Some participants believe that their skin colour marginalises them even when they possess qualification and are proficient in both written and spoken English language. While this may be difficult to establish, prejudices triggered by racialised skin colour can translate into discrimination in employment settings (Creese 2010, Hällgren 2005). As Barbara explains:

It could be employers are probably not very sure about Africans generally. Because of those labels that have been attached to them ... Your resume may look good but when you come that's not the person they are really expecting to be there. If the people, who are sitting on the panel, are those who are holding very negative views about people from your background, then your chances of really getting that job will be limited.

These experiences align with research highlighting how racialised identities influence employment discrimination (Colic-Peisker and Tilbury 2008). In the above quotation, Barbara suggests that their race and ethnicity can lead to employment discrimination. Employment discrimination arises from everyday acts of employers with negative assumptions and stereotypes about Africans (Essed 1991). These everyday acts of discrimination are deeply tied to whiteness as a norm, positioning black Africans as outsiders in the Australian labour market (Majavu 2020; Mapedzahama and Kwansah-Aidoo

2013). As Barbara explains, employers with low expectations and negative assumptions about Africans will challenge their skills and experiences in performing their jobs. Many participants believe that the common assumption is that Africans are less competent. For example, Damian from Ghana, says, 'I believe the preference will go to a white Australian except I guess when it comes to menial jobs ... We are not seen as qualified enough.' Brian, a participant from Nigeria, echoes similar sentiments. According to Brian:

I have sat on interview panels, and people might not believe me, I know people have preconceived ideas when people come in for interviews and once a black person comes in, the expectations are going to be there.

What are these expectations? For Brian, Africans are more likely to face racism based on their skin colour, which is constructed in opposition to Whiteness. As such, many participants (28 out of 30) attribute the difficulty in securing meaningful employment to their racialised skin colour. For these participants, their racialisation constitutes a major obstacle to employment and impedes access to the Australian labour market.

Given the racialised attributes attached to African skin, many participants consider skin colour as the first barrier to meaningful employment. For these participants, their skin colour puts them at disadvantage. For example, Natalie from Botswana, suggests:

You get that challenge of being an African where people don't know and doubt who you are and what you are about ... If you are going to get a job and immediately you come in, it will come in; they will think you probably doctored your certificate. It means unemployed.

Natalie migrated to Australia in 1999 for further studies. Her comment aligns with Bonilla-Silva's (2021) concept of new racism, where exclusion is maintained through ostensibly neutral practices. Based on her own experience of employment discrimination, Natalie believes that skin colour can impede access to meaningful employment. For many participants, their skin colour will always come into play to restrict their opportunities in the employment environment. As Dianna, one of the young female participants in this study, stated 'they still based decisions on the colour of your skin.'

Dianna was born in Zimbabwe. She moved to Australia when she was 12 years old. She has a Bachelor of Business degree. Based on her observation of the recruitment processes in her workplace, Dianna believes that people still discriminate. In addition to talking about skin colour impacts, some participants believe that their names can also impede access to the labour market. As Sandra explains:

It is not just colour that we have an issue but our names. If I say, Fabio, they will know it is South America but if I say Bajila automatically, they know the person is from Africa.

Sandra came to Australia on a woman at risk visa. At the time of the interview, Sandra had completed a university degree and was applying for jobs. She believes that finding employment is hard. Like Sandra, other participants believe that applying for a job with an African-sounding name can be disadvantageous. For example, Kevin says, 'you are more likely to get a job interview if you have a Caucasian name.'

The influence of racial bias in the labour market has led some to change their names. For example, according to Aaron, some Africans in Australia 'have gone so far to hide their names and change them' to increase call back rates for interviews. Another

participant, Tim, reaffirms it: ‘people have changed names in the African communities to be able to be called for the first round of shortlisting for a job interview.’ For some participants, the racial bias in the labour market explains the high concentration of Africans in the secondary market. As Harry explains:

There is a high concentration of Africans applying for factory jobs. An example is a mother and son with a biomedical degree working in the same factory job because the son couldn’t get a job.

In the above quote, Harry suggests that Africans find it difficult to get a job, leading to many of them applying for factory jobs. Other participants share similar beliefs with Harry. For example, according to Damian:

We seem to get more opportunities when it comes to menial jobs. We seem to do very well as a nursing assistant, aged care, disability support worker, factory worker, and those sorts of things because we are not seen as being able.

Damian thinks that Africans are still stereotyped and seen as not capable. For Damian, employers and people relegate Africans to low-wage insecure forms of jobs. Hence, Kevin says:

For African peoples here, it is quite difficult. The expectation of an African is to be in a factory or in the farms. And this is where we are mostly generally accepted. If you want to go and work in a meat factory you get it. You can have master’s degrees; I know of engineers who are sitting at home. If you leave your degree and look for jobs in the factories, you have a better chance.

Indeed, several participants’ accounts indicate not only the barriers but also the influence of racism on their employment outcomes.

Academic Credentials

Structural racism – systematic exclusion rooted in institutional practices – also emerged as a central theme. Participants cited the non-recognition of overseas qualifications and the pervasive demand for local experience as significant barriers. These barriers reflect broader systems that prioritise whiteness and devalue the qualifications and skills of racialised minorities (Bonilla-Silva 2021). For many participants, the failure of employers and professional associations to recognise their qualifications brought significant challenges, leading to downward social and occupational mobility. As Brian, comments:

It did affect me. It was very difficult to get a job. I had to go back to start doing menial jobs which somebody of my qualification did not expect to do.

Before coming to Australia, Brian was a qualified veterinarian. For him, it was a profound disappointment that his qualifications were not considered equivalent to Australian standards. According to Brian, ‘They probably believe that our qualifications back home are not as good as what they have here in Australia. So, it does affect people.’ For many participants, the non-recognition of their qualifications limited their employment opportunities and undermined their professional identities.

For example, Aaron, a political refugee from the Democratic Republic of Congo and a former university lecturer, shares:

Believe me; you must be very strong not to fall into depression in such situation ... My PhD qualification did not help me at all with job search ... My plight was such that I could fall in depression.

The non-recognition of qualifications deeply impacted Aaron's ability to rebuild his life in Australia. He associates this barrier with structural racism, describing it as:

I was victimised in the name of those sets of disadvantages and vicious circles hard to break such as a lack of local experience, networks, and local referees.

Aaron's experience highlights how structural factors, such as lack of local networks, experience, and references, compound the challenge of qualification recognition, which he views as a form of racism and a barrier to labour market success. While participants like Aaron and Brian attributed the non-recognition of their qualifications to racism, their experiences reflect broader challenges faced by immigrants in Australia. Research shows that immigrants from outside the Global North, particularly non-English-speaking countries or regions with perceived different educational standards, face similar obstacles (Colic-Peisker and Tilbury 2008). However, African immigrants encounter heightened challenges due to intersecting factors like race, cultural perceptions, and systemic biases. Unlike white immigrants, black African immigrants often face additional discrimination that exacerbate their difficulties in securing jobs that match their qualifications. This highlights how the racialisation of qualification recognition amplifies barriers for African immigrants, as seen in Aaron and Brian's experiences.

Local Work Experience

In addition to talking about the devaluation of their academic credentials, some participants believe that the demand for local work experience is another barrier to employment. As Brian explains:

The biggest question is 'do you have experience?' And you say you have got experience back home. They tend to think that that experience is not good enough compared to what they have.

For Brian, the demand for local Australian work experience is discriminatory. He feels there is no difference between what he studied overseas and what is taught in the Australian curriculum. Like Brian, other participants believe that the requirement of local work experience makes it difficult to secure jobs commensurate with their qualification, skills, and experience. Lamenting about the experiences of her community members, Barbara says:

There are people who have their masters, are fluent in English both in written and spoken English and still they cannot find employment. . . . Some people are told they don't have enough work experience even when they are just applying entry level jobs.

The above quotation indicates three things: First, the demand for local work experience makes it difficult to gain employment. Second, it also impedes access to the labour market because one's qualification may not be useful without local work experience. Third, to base employment selection on local work experience results in poor employment outcomes.

Local Language Proficiency

More than half of the participants (19 out of 30) recognise the importance of local language proficiency for positive employment outcomes. For these participants, local language proficiency, here English language, can increase employment opportunities. As Patrick explains:

The competition is very high. Somebody who has English as a second language competing with someone who is born here, went to school here, has English as the first language; it will be hard to compete with them. That is a barrier itself. It has stopped a lot of people from getting employment in what they have studied. They end up becoming labourers ... It pulls down their self-esteem.

Patrick came to Australia as an unaccompanied minor from South Sudan. While he believes that Africans can get any jobs in Australia, he maintains that finding employment that is commensurate to one's skills and qualifications is difficult even for those who studied in Australia. According to Patrick:

In terms of getting jobs, you can get any jobs but getting the job you have studied is very hard for Africans because of lack of language, economic factors and competing against everyone.

Patrick's account suggests that lack of local language, often speaking with accent, leads to difficulty finding job. Not surprisingly, many participants identify accent as a barrier. For these participants, employers screen people out on the phone before the real interview. A participant, Tim from Rwanda, thinks that accent can present communicative uncertainty, resulting in employment discrimination. Narrating his experience in the media industry, Tim says:

As you may realise, I have an accent. No one is going to tell you that you have an accent, but you really need to understand that it won't be easy. There is the issue of we can't trust you interviewing such and such important person ... The media house won't give you chance regardless of all the skills and the experiences that you have.

Tim's account suggests that accent can have a considerable impact on the labour market success, which is evident across African diasporic literature (Creese 2010; Halter and Johnson 2014, Hebbani and Colic-Peisker 2012). This is because accents can influence employers' perceptions of an immigrant's employability. Despite Tim's qualification and work experience in media, he did not get a job because of his accent.

Another participant, Brian, agrees that accent does impact on whatever an individual does in Australia. According to Brian:

To be sincere with you, it does play a big impact on whatever you do. I will use my experience as an example. Looking for jobs, when you come to Australia, it is not as easier as people think it is. When you speak, they would say, you have got an accent. Where are you from? And all those things. And I think sometimes, it does affect how people relate to you.

In addition to talking about their experiences, participants say that some of their friends and family members did not get jobs because of their accents. For example, according to Natalie:

I have heard a person say, 'I did very well in the interview and when they called back, I wanted to get feedback why I didn't get the job. They said you have an accent. People are not going to understand what you are going to say ...' That was the reason they didn't give her the job.

There are few things to identify from the above quotation. First, employers may worry about the effects of miscommunication resulting from a job applicant's accent. Second, some job applicants may not see accent as a problem, needing improvement. Hence, accent constituted a problem for many participants.

Social Networks

Another important finding in this study is the critical role of social networks in shaping employment outcomes. Many participants believe that finding meaningful employment depends heavily on having the right social connections. For these participants, knowing someone who can vouch for them or introduce them to key opportunities is vital. Social networks can help secure a job, bypass employment gatekeepers, or simply get a foot in the door. For many participants, gaining employment is very much about 'who you know' and 'where you know them from' than 'what you know.' As Harry succinctly puts it, 'Jobs are there, but to get a job is about who you know or where you know them from, more than what you know.' Similarly, Patrick says, 'getting jobs is about surrounding yourself with good network of people. In Australia, it is about who you know.'

Patrick is also one of the lucky ones. He has a wider network and takes a proactive approach in job searches through networking and volunteering. Patrick explains:

Getting a job in Queensland is not a problem for me personally. What I often do is to do volunteer work. It is also about being open, approachable and talk to people and tell them look, I have no job. It is about being open about what you want. For me, I don't have problem getting a job. It may not be a good paying job, but it is a job. But other people do have problem getting a job. It could be lack of experience, lack of network or haven't really done some volunteering work to upgrade their skills. I think Queensland is one of the best states when it comes to getting a job, but it is about how do you get in? That is the challenge.

While Patrick recognises Queensland as a state with good employment opportunities, he maintains that getting a job is also about how to get a foot in the door. It is about networking, volunteering, and exploring strategies for expanding social connections. While Patrick's proactive approach highlights the importance of networking, other participants, like Morris, underscore the barriers faced by newcomers. Morris explains:

Unless I have my friend, a white friend, who knows me and who works there, who can support my case and who will say, 'give him the job,' I will not get the job. The job I am getting is not because of my qualification. It is because my friend gave me space.

Morris's perspective illustrates how social networks, particularly connections with established locals, can tip the scales in a competitive labour market. For Morris, you need someone to vouch for you or make your job application strong. According to Morris:

So, it is hard. You will be lucky if you get. Some get jobs through friends or through their churches if you are a Christian and not by your skills or qualification. You need someone to make your case stronger.

The lack of access to social networks among African immigrants is compounded by the common practice of internal hiring. Dianna highlights this issue:

It's starting to be who you know within the industry because a lot of places hire internally. I know that where I work, they are always asking us to refer people from inside for the job. So, they start looking internally before they go out which makes it hard for people with better knowledge and skill trying to get into the field.

Dianna's account reveals the problem associated with 'internal job advertisements' that have become common in many industries. Internal hiring practices often prioritise existing relationships, creating barriers for external applicants who lack local networks. As Dianna explains, it seems people are tapped on the shoulder and encouraged to apply and fill a vacant position, making it hard for external job applicants with skills, qualification, and work experiences. For many participants, this insider advantage, where it is more about who you know than what you know, exacerbates the difficulties of navigating the Australian labour market. As Bruno laments:

We get all these disadvantages to adapt to Australian way of life in order to get a job. Most of Africans don't get the job they want. Firstly, it has taken us many years to get a skill, a qualification, because our previous qualifications are not recognised. Secondly, you face competition on the job market. Thirdly, we don't have job networks, anybody who can really support us ... In summary, you really need to work very hard to get what you want, and you need to be aware of these situations.

The accounts of participants suggest that the lack of local networks, while not always directly tied to race, is indirectly influenced by racialisation. Being new to Australia often means starting with limited connections, and racialised stereotypes may further hinder opportunities for networking. The combination of being a newcomer and navigating a predominantly white social landscape makes it harder for African immigrants to build the relationships necessary for career advancement. Indeed, the absence of social networks contributes to marginalisation and downward socio-economic mobility. Many participants express frustration at their inability to use their skills and qualifications due to systemic barriers and the centrality of 'who you know' in the Australian job market. Addressing these challenges requires not only individual effort but structural changes to make opportunities more accessible to those without established local connections.

Discussion

This article has examined the labour market experiences and employment outcomes of African immigrants to Australia, providing valuable insights into the structural and interpersonal factors that hinder or influence the settlement experiences of racialised immigrants. The article contributes to scholarship on the integration of African immigrants in the labour market and extends African diaspora studies within the Australian context. While employment is becoming increasingly uncertain and competitive in most industrialised societies, the participants' experiences illuminate the unique challenges

faced by African immigrants in the labour market. The findings hold significance for understanding the intersections of race, immigration, and employment in settler-colonial societies. Although it is not possible to generalise the findings in a strict sense, they align with and support existing research in similar settler-colonial and immigrant-receiving countries (Banerjee, Verma, and Zhang 2019; Branker 2017; Creese and Wiebe 2012; Halter and Johnson 2014; Joseph 2019; Showers 2015), allowing for theoretical extrapolation and broader applicability.

Examining Australia as an exemplar of white settler colonialism reveals how the legacies of past racist policies, including the White Australia policy, and practices continue to shape participants' contemporary experiences of exclusion, discrimination, and barriers in the labour market. As participants' experiences demonstrate, racialisation remains a significant factor influencing labour market success. Despite possessing the qualifications, skills, and experience necessary to thrive in the workplace, participants' employment outcomes are mediated by perceptions rooted in racialisation. Discursive constructions of their identity, characterised by notions of incapability and incompetence, perpetuate disadvantage and exclusion. These narratives hinder participants from securing meaningful employment that fully utilises their skills, qualifications, and experience. As their accounts highlight, there is an urgent need to dismantle the processes of racialisation that marginalise African immigrants to Australia, stripping them of recognition for their competence and contributions.

The interpersonal and structural barriers reported by participants are significant and real (Majavu 2020; Mapedzahama and Kwansah-Aidoo 2013), negatively impacting their labour market experiences and relegating them to the margins of the Australian workforce. Many participants lack the crucial social networks needed to secure employment and face exclusion due to employer practices and systemic barriers. The non-recognition of their overseas qualifications and work experiences, coupled with discrimination and racially driven biases in the labour market, further disadvantages them (Hebbani and Colic-Peisker 2012). Additionally, requirements such as local work experience and language proficiency often function as systemic structural barriers during job searches. These challenges, compounded by racial bias, contribute to downward occupational mobility for African immigrants. The participants' accounts vividly illustrate their marginalisation within the labour market, underscoring the persistent inequities they face.

Consistent with existing research in Europe, Canada, and the USA (Creese 2010; Johnson 2016; Joseph 2019; Showers 2015), African immigrants face significant challenges in securing employment. Ethnicity – a marker of difference – continues to be a source of disadvantage for many African immigrants in Australia. Participants frequently reported that their ethnic and racial differences made it difficult to find meaningful employment, entailing ongoing struggles with racism and systemic barriers. While immigrants in general experience disadvantages across all aspects of the labour market, from job searches to promotions (Joseph 2019), negative racial bias exacerbates these challenges for African immigrants. Although not all African immigrants may experience overt discrimination, their ethnic and racial characteristics undeniably influence their labour market experiences and restrict upward mobility (Showers 2015). These findings underscore the need to acknowledge the insidious effects of persistent racist practices in the labour market and to shape policies informed by immigrants' lived experiences.

Empirical studies have shown that *résumés* with English-sounding names receive significantly higher call-back rates for interviews compared to *résumés* with similar qualifications submitted by applicants with distinctly identifiable non-English names (Booth et al. 2012). While some African immigrant job applicants resort to changing their names to improve their chances, they cannot alter their skin colour to mitigate its impact on employment outcomes. Furthermore, the strategy of changing names to avoid discrimination, downplay stigmatisation, and increase call-back rates risks reinforcing and perpetuating discriminatory practices in the labour market. Rather than shifting the burden onto individuals to conceal their identities, it is essential to tackle employers' biases and discriminatory practices directly through targeted education and engagement initiatives with potential employers.

The experience of accent discrimination reported by participants aligns with existing scholarship, which highlights the widespread nature of such bias against African immigrants (Creese 2010; Showers 2015). Creese (2010) contends that the issue with African accents is less about miscommunication and more about power relations and linguistic domination rooted in the enduring histories and legacies of colonialism. In the Australian context, accent discrimination by employers may similarly be linked to the nation's colonial history and nation-building processes. These practices function as everyday forms of linguistic domination, discrimination, and exclusion (Essed 1991, Bonilla-Silva 2021; Creese 2010), marginalising many racialised immigrants in the labour market without explicitly invoking race or immigrant status. Importantly, speaking with a foreign accent does not inherently impair communication; rather, it is the negative perceptions of such accents by employers and the public that carry social and professional consequences for job applicants (Creese 2010). Therefore, instead of using accents as a basis for discrimination in hiring decisions or denying access to employment, employers should strive to embrace and understand diverse accents, fostering inclusivity in the workplace.

While dominant discourses often attribute the economic marginalisation of immigrants to personal deficiencies, such as accents or lack of local experience, it is crucial to acknowledge the capabilities, skills, and qualifications immigrants bring from their home countries (Branker 2017). Immigrants have much to contribute, and employers must recognise and value their overseas qualifications and experiences. Failing to do so risks creating a double dilemma: immigrants become a brain drain for their countries of origin and a brain waste in Australia. Labour market theories that neglect race and exclude the voices of marginalised immigrant groups perpetuate inequality by presenting one-sided narratives (Joseph 2019). Therefore, the experiences of participants are essential for informing policies that reflect immigrant realities and contribute to more inclusive labour market and migration theories.

Implications and Conclusion

Without addressing the significant race-based disparities in employment outcomes, the rhetoric surrounding social justice and a more inclusive, vibrant multicultural Australia remains hollow. Echoing the calls of other scholars, I emphasise the urgent need to develop well-targeted policies aimed at improving immigrants' economic integration and enhancing their socioeconomic wellbeing. Recognising and addressing

structural barriers, everyday racism, and discrimination within the labour market are critical steps toward facilitating the socioeconomic mobility of African immigrants in Australia.

Unemployment and underemployment have significant social and economic consequences, particularly for those relegated to part-time, casual, or seasonal work, or for whom exclusion from the labour market becomes a permanent condition. For African immigrants settling permanently and becoming Australian citizens, meaningful employment is essential for successful settlement and sense of belonging. Their participation in the Australian labour market serves as a key indicator of inclusion, belonging, and active societal engagement. Failure to achieve economic integration for African immigrants may lead to poorer health and socioeconomic outcomes across all domains. Employment access significantly influences life satisfaction, sense of belonging, and overall wellbeing. Participants' experiences underscore the urgent need for focused attention and assistance. Without intervention, high unemployment rates among African immigrants could have severe consequences, including increased rates of depression, anxiety, and diminished life satisfaction, ultimately impacting their overall wellbeing. As Australia continues to evolve as a multicultural society, addressing the social and economic challenges of integrating African immigrants must remain a priority. Policymakers in both government and private sectors must adopt policies and practices that promote racial equity and ensure equal opportunities for all. This commitment is essential to building a truly inclusive and cohesive society.

Notes

1. While a migrant is someone who relocates to another country for economic reasons, refugees are people who have migrated from their country of origin due to fears of persecution, conflict, violence, or other situations that have significantly disrupted life, necessitating international protection.
2. Settler colonialism is distinct from other forms of colonialism. It involves elimination of Indigenous people from colonised lands through forced relocation, genocide, and forced assimilation.
3. The ABS classifies individuals by country of origin, not race, so African Australians include European-descended immigrants, such as White South Africans, and their descendants.

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