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## OPINION PIECE

### **WORLD YOUTH SKILLS DAY: Tearing off the mask on youth unemployment in South Africa**

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World Youth Skills Day is commemorated annually on 15 July.*

Youth unemployment remains an ever-present problem around the world, and more so in South Africa. Current unemployment rates have increased to a staggering 29%, of which more than 60% is youth. This number is set to rise as a result of the global COVID-19 pandemic which has brought the already vulnerable South African economy to its knees.

For many, the general belief is that a tertiary qualification is an enabler of employment and poverty reduction, with thousands of students enrolling into higher education institutions annually. While this is true, it has become evident that a qualification alone does not guarantee employment.

The “qualified unemployment” phenomenon has seen an increase in saddening trends such as one where students stand on street corners donned in academic regalia, board in hand, “begging” for employment. All this in an attempt to draw the attention of potential employers. Some have gained employment in this manner, which raises the question: “Must academic acknowledgment rest on begging?” This is what is known as the “experience paradox”, which sees many graduates find that, at the end of their studies, they “qualify for unemployment”.

The COVID-19 pandemic has brought to light several pre-existing gaps regarding the future of work, youth unemployment, sector support and collaboration. President Cyril Ramaphosa’s announcement about the COVID-19 relief grant saw thousands of applications submitted by the youth – which can be seen as further reducing the youth, qualified and unqualified alike, to “begging”.

There is still an expectation by employers that individuals seeking jobs should have several years of experience in the field. Obtaining experience prior to graduation is, in some sciences such as economic and management sciences, virtually impossible to do without having done work-integrated learning or part-time work during the years of study. This is a cause for concern as more students enrol for courses that focus on the “softer, analytical sciences” as opposed to the more practical and hands-on qualifications.

While it would be remiss to say the sole reason for studying is to gain employment, in general the primary reason students invest in a university or tertiary education is indeed to improve their chances of employment. If we look beyond experience required, we find that there is a mismatch or a gap between what employers seek and the skills possessed by students, thus creating and adding to the burden of unemployable graduates.

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It is therefore critical to understand that “employability” should not only focus on youth obtaining jobs, but rather on creating platforms that will enable students and youth to develop the relevant skills and competencies required to function in industry, society and the world at large. These skills and competencies should ultimately allow for the advancement of a generation that has the ability to adapt successfully to new jobs as well as the ability to function in different, dynamic, turbulent and sometimes unpredictable environments as they navigate their way through their present and future careers.

Qualifications are valued, but they do not make for sustainable employment. The world seeks individuals who can create value, transform organisations, and perform in versatile environments under a variety of circumstances. Thus, it is important that in “training” students, higher education institutions take into consideration the students’ abilities, inabilities, awareness, perception regarding their qualifications, their expectations regarding the work environment, potential barriers and industry requirements.

In seeking to find a solution to youth unemployment and closing the skills gap, the South African concept of “ubuntu” becomes dominant, as it is apparent that there is a dire need for collaboration between students, higher education institutions, government, society and industry. There is a need for transparency and communication when addressing the issue of youth unemployment. Furthermore, it is vital that the roles of the relevant stakeholders be clarified and solidified.

The University of Pretoria’s (UP) Department of Business Management in the Faculty of Economic and Management Sciences and the Department of Historical and Heritage Studies in the Faculty of Humanities have partnered with five other local and international universities for a three-year period, in an effort to better understand and solve the youth unemployment problem locally and globally. The project is currently under way, with the University of Pretoria leading the research phase.

The EU-funded project, which is aimed at strengthening the employability of students, specifically in the business and tourism sectors, is titled ‘Strengthening university-enterprise cooperation in South Africa to support regional development by enhancing lifelong learning skills, social innovations and inclusivity’ (SUCSESS). The key focus of this project is on investigating collaboration between universities, government and industry.

The project will look at benchmarking against best practices from around the world in an effort to indicate how students can benefit from project-based, experiential and inquiry-based learning. The project will also highlight any key gaps and hopes to inform curriculum development, training of lecturers and the development of skills, diversified teaching methods, and the use of new technology and communication tools to further enhance student employability in the fields of business management and tourism.

Entrepreneurship has been cited as one of the key ways to alleviate poverty and unemployment in South Africa, with many resources allocated to developing businesses of various sizes and forms. The narrative around entrepreneurship should shift towards “entrepreneurial thinking” where creativity, innovation and out-of-the-box thinking and risk-taking are embraced and applied across the various sectors and faculties. In doing so, cross-functional and interdisciplinary collaboration could take place and potentially do away with the silo mentality often seen among students, disciplines and industry. It is only then that we may be able to begin addressing the problem of youth unemployment constructively.

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## **ABOUT THE UNIVERSITY OF PRETORIA**

The University of Pretoria (UP) is one of the largest contact and residential universities in South Africa, with its administration offices located on the Hatfield Campus, Pretoria. This 112-year-old institution is also the largest producer of research in South Africa.

Spread over seven campuses, it has nine faculties and a business school, the Gordon Institute of Business Science (GIBS). It is the only university in the country that has a Faculty of Veterinary Science which is ranked top in Africa, and overall has 120 academic departments, as well as 92 centres and institutes, accommodating more than 55 000 students and offering about 1 100 study programmes.

UP is one of the top five universities in South Africa, according to the 2019-2020 rankings by the Center for World University Rankings. It is also ranked among the top 100 universities worldwide in three fields of study (veterinary science, theology and law), and among the top 1% in eight fields of study (agricultural sciences, clinical medicine, engineering, environment/ecology, immunology, microbiology, plant and animal sciences and social sciences).

In June 2019, the annual UK Financial Times Executive Education Rankings once again ranked GIBS as the top South African and African business school. The University also has an extensive community engagement programme with approximately 33 000 students involved in community upliftment. Furthermore, UP is building considerable capacities and strengths for the Fourth Industrial Revolution by preparing students for the world beyond university and offering work-readiness and entrepreneurship training to its students.

As one of South Africa's research-intensive universities, UP launched the Future Africa Campus in March 2019 as a hub for inter- and transdisciplinary research networks within UP and the global research community to maximise 4IR innovation and address the challenges and stresses our continent and world is facing. In addition, UP also launched the Javett Art Centre in September 2019 as a driver of transdisciplinary research development between the Humanities and other faculties. In 2020 UP will launch Engineering 4.0. as a hub not only for Smart Cities and Transport, but also to link the vast resources in technology and data sciences to other faculties via Future Africa. These initiatives are stimulating new thinking at the frontier of 'science for transformation'.

For more information, go to [www.up.ac.za](http://www.up.ac.za)