

CONNECTION TO OPPORTUNITY

Hands-on

Learning from our implementing partners

Connecting to higher education opportunities

Education level affects future opportunities: The level of education of an individual has a strong influence on whether or not he or she is likely to find sustainable, well-paying work. Someone with matric is far more likely to get a job than someone who has not completed school (Cloete, 2009). Those with some level of tertiary study are two or three times more likely to be employed than those with matric or less (Cloete, 2009). Yet most South African youth do not pursue post-secondary study and many do not even complete matric. Research shows that, in South Africa, 70% of youth are attending educational institutions by age 18 but by age 20, this has decreased to 41% (Statistics South Africa, 2010). The main reasons given by youth for this include financial constraints, lack of time because they are working, poor academic performance and family commitments (Statistics South Africa, 2010).

Matric against the odds: Xolelwa Boyana faced many of the same difficulties as other young people of her generation. The school she attended, Ndyebo Senior Secondary School, is a public school in Port Elizabeth, in the Eastern Cape. The community she comes from is disadvantaged. Many, if not most, young people are unemployed and many have not completed matric.



Xolelwa Boyana

Staying in school: Despite the large scale evidence of the value of completing secondary studies, it might still be rational for a young student

to believe there is little point in finishing school given that the unemployment rate is 50% for 20-24 year olds (and even higher for black youth). This reality only makes it harder for young people who must overcome challenges every day to keep up with their studies.

[The community] has a lack of outreach programs where people can be empowered. Some people do not see the point of even thinking of ways to improve their lives as they have become accustomed to their way of life or they see no way out of it.

Finding the motivation: For Xolelwa, as for many other learners, staying in school was sometimes a challenge. She lived far from the school and had to walk to and from school. Paying school fees was sometimes difficult. As at many public schools, stationary and books did not always arrive on time, making it difficult for learners to study. Other challenges faced by young people in the community included drugs and crime and when some became pregnant; they dropped out of school to support their children. Xolelwa remembers some people who had to repeat a grade and simply did not return to school because they felt that they were not smart enough to be there or that school was not for them. Finding the motivation to keep studying is an on-going struggle for many students.

What made me stay in school was that I knew that I wanted to be successful in life and the only way to be successful was to finish school. To me having an education was the most important thing as I knew that in life you had to work hard to get anywhere.

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Post-secondary education

Access to information: During her final years of school a science teacher sent Xolelwa to do laboratory work at a professional laboratory, where she was able to gain experience. There she was exposed to information about the engineering field.

Our physical science teacher sent us to do lab work at the Trac labs where they also informed us about the different careers that are in engineering. It is there that I developed an interest for chemical engineering. The organisation gave us books that had every type of engineering profession in it and all the information that we would want but I also went online and did some research.

Xolelwa was lucky. Lack of access to information and guidance is one of the areas research suggests limits the success of young people in achieving higher education (Huges, Bosley, Bowes, & Bysshe, 2002). Without knowing anything about career options and higher educational opportunities, it is very difficult for young people to select and work towards appropriate post-secondary studies.

I had always had a love for chemistry for as long as I can remember and plus it's interesting and is forever evolving. Chemical engineering does not restrict a person, you have a lot of jobs to choose from, it's all around us in everything we do and we use, that's why it's my ideal career.

Finding the right course and institution:

Based on the information she had been given, Xolelwa researched the field, in search of educational institutions in South Africa where she could study further. She also researched the admission requirements for the various courses.

She found a course in Chemical Engineering at Cape Peninsula University of Technology. She was particularly interested in attending a university of technology because she had heard that these institutions focused on practical skills. She wanted to be sure that she was exposed to a combination of theory and plenty of practical work. She managed to get assistance with the application process and when accepted, registered to study towards a National Diploma in Chemical Engineering.

Xolelwa advises other young people, "My advice would be to look at what you love, what drives you. Take a close look at your weaknesses and strengths. Also look for the career that fits your personality that you know you will flourish in. Choose an institution based on their academic potential and not because a friend is going there".

Financial support

No money to study: 36% of young people between 15 and 24 reported, according to the StatsSA Social Profile (2010) that they were not studying because they could not afford to. Post-secondary education in South Africa is relatively expensive and remains far beyond the reach of many families, particularly those from disadvantaged backgrounds. Various funding mechanisms are available but these do not necessarily solve the problem. Bursary schemes often fund only part of the requirements of a tertiary student, perhaps covering only tuition and not accommodation, food, books, transport, etc. The National Student Financial Aid Scheme (NSFAS) has less than half the funds it would require to meet the demand of all qualifying applicants and has serious problems with repayment rates (Department of Higher Education and Training, 2010).

NSFAS: The NSFAS provides the option of converting 40% of the loan to bursary based



on academic performance. The remaining 60% must, however, be repaid as soon as the student completes his or her studies and becomes employed. This means that graduates enter the workplace already heavily indebted, which affects the likelihood that they will take risks to start their own businesses or attempt to study further. Changes to the functioning of the NSFAS that will allow for the loans of those who graduate within the minimum required time to be converted to bursaries have been proposed, but questions remain as to how this will be funded.

Considering funding options: Xolelwa considered all the funding options open to her. By the time she began applying for funding in her final year of high school many bursary and scholarship application deadlines had already passed so she applied to NSFAS. Her loan application was approved and she was able to begin her studies.

Applying for further funding: For her second year of studies, she applied to two places. She found the process of applying daunting and felt that some applications required information she was unable to provide.

The process of applying was a bit complicated as I had to wait till I got home to fill out forms and get some of my documents and only for me to find out when I come back to Cape Town that some of the information is not all there. I received help from my aunt who helped me fill out the forms and posted some documents to me.

Bursary funding: This assistance made it possible for her to complete the application process and she was awarded a bursary through Studietrust to fund her further studies. Studietrust is an organisation that works with sponsors to support talented young South Africans to study further through bursaries and mentoring programmes. In this way, bursary beneficiaries

are given not only financial support but also the psychosocial and other support they require to succeed.

Other support

South Africa has a very serious problem with tertiary students not completing their studies successfully. Research shows that, of the students who began their studies in 2000, 78% did not complete their courses within the specified time (Letseka, Cosser, Breier, & Visser, 2010). Apart from financial constraints, some of the factors affecting the likelihood that students will succeed include: help-seeking behaviour, intrinsic motivation, self-esteem, perceived stress and the student's perception of his or her ability relative to the academic demands of the course (Petersen, 2009). Academic performance can also be affected by employment responsibilities, quality of prior education and academic resourcefulness and study habits (Petersen, 2009).

Family support: A supportive family affects these factors and is, in itself, important for success, while the support of teachers, community members and role models can also help prevent drop-out and failure. Xolelwa specifically values the support of family and friends who encourage her to do her best.

I receive a lot of support from my family and friends, they are always telling to do my best. One of my greatest supporters is my great grandmother, even though she has never been to school she has always told me to take my school-work seriously and be successful in life.

Beyond tertiary education

Although an individual's level of education is key to predicting job prospects, there are still young people in South Africa who have obtained higher



education and are unable to find work. Many young people do not know how to go about finding information and opportunities. Others find it difficult to fund their job search, which may involve travelling or even relocating in search of work. Xolelwa plans to work in the petroleum industry. She visited Sasol during high school but has not had contact with anyone in the industry since then.

Xolelwa's story would not be remarkable, were it not for the obstacles she has overcome and the challenges faced by her and her peers. Against the backdrop of research about these challenges, her story provides insight into the kind of interventions needed to ensure talented young people are able to access higher education and contribute significantly to the skills base and the future of the country.

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