

Has the door opened for South Africa's youth?



By [Nicholas Owsley](#)

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The first Freedom Day, in 1994, marked a departure from 300 years of colonialism and official segregation in South Africa, and promised a future where the gulf between rich and poor would be no more. Today, this promise still exists but its star has faded somewhat. 19 years of democracy has yielded little change in the living conditions of millions of South Africans, and for many this star has all but disappeared.

Born in 1990, a few months after Nelson Mandela's release from prison, I grew up in a world sans apartheid. The scars of this past, however, were still present in South Africa's social fabric. Despite the end of official segregation, my experience of post-apartheid South Africa still had an electric racial charge. Communities remained segregated, political dialogue was severely polarised, and the adage of the railway tracks was still a case of black and white.

As a young person in South Africa, my experience and prospects have taken their own special shape. Unemployment has been a burden for most South Africans, but has been particularly acute for the youth. Since 1994, South Africa's youth unemployment has ranged between 45% and 58% and, according to the 2012 Labour Force Survey, is currently at the unacceptably high rate of 51%. In reality, more than half of the people who are expected to guide South Africa's future do not have a stake in its present.

Confidence takes a knock

Last year I was destined to join the labour force as one of these ill-favoured youths, and with full knowledge of the mass of disillusioned young people that I was competing with, this appeared a daunting prospect. Nonetheless, I was armed with an Honours Degree in Politics, Philosophy and Economics, and was confident that my academic qualifications would see me surge to the top of the pool of prospective employees. Several lukewarm responses from employers later, and my hopes were brought back down-to-earth.

The explanation for this poor reception rested in one line that marred my chances with most employers: 'no work experience'. The Catch-22 of 'you can't get work experience without work experience' became a dismal reality for me. I eventually emerged from the job-searching doldrums when I received some positive feedback from a small but growing Enterprise Development firm based in Westlake, called Fetola. In January of this year I was employed there as a business intern.

Face it, we lack workplace skills

After a few weeks of working at Fetola it became apparent that there was just cause for most firms' reluctance to hire graduates; namely that we lack workplace skills. As a business graduate, I was fortunate enough to be proficient in various computer programmes and could add value in this area; however, this is not the case with many other graduates, who do not learn these skills during their studying period. These skills deficiencies, as well as poor communication and presentation skills, make it difficult for many graduates to provide real and productive value to their employers. Consequently, this fuels the growing stigma towards graduates as being under-prepared for the realities of working life.

For a graduate, the first weeks of work are a baptism of fire. One is confronted with responsibilities that can make a tangible change in the real world; failure to manage these responsibilities can have ripple effects that extend far beyond the confines of a report card. This is far removed from the world of malleable essay deadlines that graduates are used to. In short, work experience is where real-world learning takes place. Working at Fetola has taught me the value of effective communication and administrative skills, as well as a work-ethic that formal education could seldom instil. This kind of experience is essential for graduates to succeed in the business world.

Another lesson

My experience in the workplace has also provided another lesson. Fetola (www.fetola.co.za) runs a number of programmes that provide SMEs with business support and help them achieve business success. Its mandate and vision are therefore very closely aligned with the economic success of South African citizens.

The programmes generally give preference to firms that are black-owned or that have a high proportion of employees that are black, however the barriers to entry are high and there are no free rides. In this way, Fetola seeks to contribute to redressing the inequities of the past, but in a manner that is positive; it is about working towards a future in which all South Africans are successful rather than dwelling on past injustices. This is exemplified in the office environment and the spirit of the company.

The workplace itself is extremely integrated, and amongst the employees the concept of colour feels washed away. Fetola thus resembles a microcosm of my vision of a future South Africa, one that is conscious of a turbulent past and acknowledges the need for redress, but for which positive action is not hamstrung by legacy and a sense of entitlement; a future that is about growth and not about politics.

A brighter future on the horizon for SA's youth?

The political discourse of 2013 suggests that South Africa may be adjusting its trajectory towards achieving such a future. In his 2013 State of the Nation address, President Jacob Zuma alluded to a youth wage incentive scheme and a shift in focus towards getting the youth working. Furthermore, The National Development plan, produced by the National Planning Commission, proposes to eliminate the 'skills gap' between what young people have learnt and what is demanded by the economy. At Fetola, we are busy with the development of the Graduate Asset Programme (GAP), an initiative to place 24000 graduates into internships over the next three years, thereby boosting the small business sector with skills and also giving capable grads much-needed access to real work experience. The overwhelming response to GAP thus far has proven without doubt that private and public interests alike are enthusiastic about putting our youth to work.

This political dialogue suggests that the star of South Africa's promise may once again brighten for the youth. With Youth Day just past, the youth have cause to look back to 1994 and revive the promise of the future. This hope must be tempered by an awareness that we need to deliver on these promises, but by up-skilling our youth and by pointing ourselves towards growth and away from a racially embittered past, we can unlock South Africa's potential.

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