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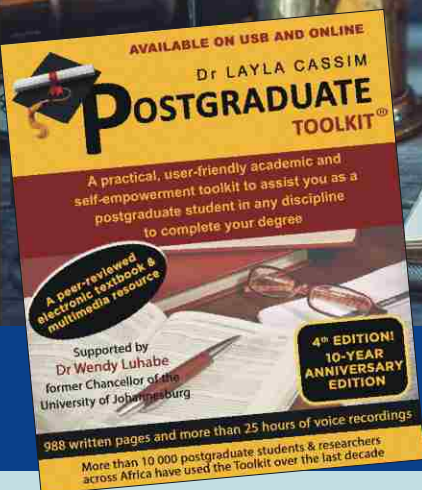
THE UNDERGRADUATE TOOLKIT®



A DEVELOPMENTAL RESOURCE FOR STUDENTS AND STAKEHOLDERS

Empowering you — the matriculant and undergraduate student — in any field of study to achieve your academic, research and professional development goals on your career journey

Supporting stakeholders in all sectors to advance graduate development



Compiled by The Renaissance Network
and Layla Cassim ERS Consultants CC

The Postgraduate Toolkit® (4th edition, 2021) by Dr Layla Cassim is also available



Dedication

The Undergraduate Toolkit is dedicated to all current and prospective matriculants and undergraduate students in recognition of the struggles you have overcome thus far and in the earnest hope that it empowers you to:

Reap phenomenal success with your tertiary studies;

Mentor others who may need your support to achieve their academic and professional development goals; and

Build a career and life in which you can be of service to others.

This Toolkit is also dedicated to those key stakeholders who actively support and drive graduate development in South Africa and on the African continent. We share a collective intent to uplift the academic, research and professional skills base of students in the higher education landscape and their transition into the world of work.

Foreword

Whilst articulation gaps persist, new instruments are critical in facilitating success in higher education. The Undergraduate Toolkit is one such instrument.



The fate of modern South Africa is a project that is continuously being shaped in front of our eyes. The unique history of a country that has emerged from centuries of subjugation and offered the world of template of how humanity can be found from the embers of conflict; and how the pursuit of shared prosperity can galvanise us all towards a common cause. As with all evolving societies, the journey has not been without its challenges. The acute and intersectional nature of the challenges of our time are perhaps best crystallised from the prism of a few figures that narrate the current state of our society. In 2021, the youth unemployment rate stood at a staggering 74%. General unemployment across all segments of society was recorded at 34,9% which translated to 14,3 million citizens. Recipients of social grants — both permanent and temporary — numbered over 18 million.

Naturally, given the high demand for grants and limited resources, the grants are barely adequate across many measures. As a result, what little exists in the way of social assistance doesn't go far enough to alleviate poverty that manifests in many forms. As the pandemic has decimated economic output, the already fragile tax base has found itself under increasing pressure. As a result, South Africa is facing an acute social deficit challenge — where the growth in economically productive and taxpaying citizens is too slow to support the various social programmes requires to address the needs of society at large.

The nature of these challenges — both exogenous and self-inflicted — has gradually drawn us to the crossroads where critical and not altogether popular decisions need to be made. At the heart of it all is the need to map a future whose prospects offer something better than the present; a nation where opportunities expand rather than diminish. The question of how to chart the country's roadmap is the great challenge of our times. Through the minefield of data and statistics, two variables are perhaps more sobering than most. The number of young people aged between 15 and 24 that languish in social and economic limbo is over 3,4 million.

These individuals who are neither in employment, education or training, represent the most acute reflection of how initiatives aimed at addressing the national unemployment crisis have yet to bear fruit. The unemployment rate of this age group stands at 66,5%.





As they grow older, the prospects do not improve much. 44% of citizens between the ages of 25 and 35 are unemployed. These numbers suggest that left to its own devices, the evolution of South African society will simply not materialise in our lifetime.

A key variable that continuously emerges is the role of access to and success in higher education in transforming individual and social outcomes. Within the staggering youth unemployment rate, the rate for young people with a form of post-secondary qualification is much lower. The prospects of socioeconomic mobility — once one accesses and conquers higher education — are manifestly much better. Regrettably, the pathways to access and succeed in higher education still have multiple pitfalls. For those who emerge from basic education with less than optimal results, the chances of accessing higher education are much lower. The funding gap leaves many young people unable to make the transition into higher education successfully. In recent years, the expansion of the higher education system through the introduction of new public institutions and the growth of private higher education institutions has widened access into higher education.

In spite of the progress made in widening access, the most persistent challenge remains the wide articulation gap that exists between the world of basic education and higher education. Such a gap, best described by the erstwhile Vice-Chancellor of UCT, Professor Njabulo Ndebele's report on undergraduate curriculum reform in South Africa, as 'the discontinuity between secondary and higher education in South Africa' which is a 'structural obstacle that arises from incorrect assumptions about the prior learning of a large proportion of the student body'. The nature of this gap — and its associated complexities — has been debated and researched extensively within the higher education landscape. At the heart of the gap is the reality that as student cohorts diversify and students from varied backgrounds and socioeconomic circumstances seek to make their way into and through higher education, the ability of the university environment to provide adequate support to a varied audience remains elusive.

What is also well understood is that for as long as the articulation gap remains unchallenged, various other interventions aimed at addressing funding, resource and technical gaps, will collectively achieve a diminished impact on the country's higher education outcomes. Regrettably, in spite of these known realities, little in the way of comprehensive and coordinated interventions have been implemented on a universal basis across the higher education landscape. As a result, far too many candidates face the transition journey and its multiple gaps without the toolkits necessary to ensure a strong change of success. The absence of such toolkits leaves far too many languishing in the transition limbo that leads directly to high attrition rates across the system.



The development of an Undergraduate Toolkit, which has been developed by The Renaissance Network (TRN) and Layla Cassim ERS Consultants, represents an important step in the quest to address the holistic shortcomings of the higher education sector.

As a guide that acknowledges the persistence and prevalence of the gaps within the education system, the Toolkit provides an instrument of enabling many more students to improve their chances of succeeding in their higher education journey. Its focus on 'bridging the gap' is not just limited to bridging the educational gaps across the different years of undergraduate studies. Rather, it quite uniquely also bridges the gaps that exist between different stakeholders who form part of the higher education journey. For funders who may need to have a more intimate understanding of the challenges faced by the students they support, the Undergraduate Toolkit provides key insights into the various critical and intersectional issues that need to be understood and appreciated. For higher education practitioners needing to understand the evolving nature of student cohorts, alongside the practices and considerations funders apply in seeking to support students, the Undergraduate Toolkit provides the granular insights necessary to assist in the formulation of appropriately tailored interventions. The benefit of this is that it informs and enables funders to allocate resources where the greatest impact is likely to materialise.

But perhaps the greatest contribution of the Undergraduate Toolkit is its ability to enable the most important roleplayers in the student support system — parents and families — to obtain a comprehensive view and insights into the challenges associated with transitioning into a world of uncertainty at a time where the need to enter into and succeed in higher education is fundamental to unlocking the education and demographic dividend inherent in the young people of South Africa.

As someone who has been intimately engaged in running student support initiatives across different universities, the Undergraduate Toolkit presents a consolidated template for the key considerations that all higher education stakeholders — from parents, students, funders and academics — need to appreciate in order to enable the youth of the nation to capitalise on the widened access and expanded opportunities into higher education. The irresistible proposition is that for a country that has already seen the linearities between success in higher education and improved socioeconomic prospects, such a Toolkit represents a fundamental contribution into the solutions mix that is desperately needed to elevate the prospects of young people, their communities, and the nation at large.

Khaya S Sithole (CA (SA))

Chartered Accountant, Academic, Consultant, Activist, Writer and Radio Host

