

Tips to final-year students on how to adapt career plans during and post the COVID-19 pandemic

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This is usually the time of year when our unit would be finalising planning for the upcoming career fairs at Academia and on the Rooiplein. This would include arranging a series of meetings, organising a medical officer and security company, obtaining the relevant certificates for waste removal, sound pollution control and occupational safety, and recruiting student assistants. However, as on all other South African and overseas campuses, there will be no on-campus career fairs this coming August – and none likely for the rest of 2020.

The COVID-19 pandemic has disrupted every aspect of life as we know it – yet we are constantly reminded to be resilient and flexible to adapt to this period of upheaval, uncertainty, anxiety, fear, frustration and despair. This is easier said than done but a crisis can indeed present an opportunity for personal growth and creativity, the kind of creativity that can change our future for the better.

We at the Unit for Graduand Career Services may not be able to host our on-campus career fairs as in previous years but we have partnered with 20 other universities and the South African Graduate Employers Association to host a virtual career fair from late July to early August, so do please be on the lookout for emails and social media posts marketing this event.

We are working hard to present our students with the opportunity to network with graduate employers in a virtual space because we are aware of the anxieties that our graduates may be experiencing. News flashes of unemployment statistics, a decline in our economy, the subsequent lack of new job opportunities – these may well be weighing heavily on our graduates. Although we cannot predict the full long-term impact of the pandemic on our economy or when things will return to a version of business as usual, we can, however, present a few tips to our students – especially our final-year students – on how to manage and adapt their careers during and post the COVID-19 pandemic. That is my goal with this article.

Prioritise your health and the health of those around you

The fact that we are constantly reminded of the importance of sanitising our hands, wearing a face mask and adhering to social distancing and other safety protocols makes these a given. However, attending to both your physical and your mental health is also important during and post the COVID-19 pandemic.

Do your best to stick to a safe exercise routine and to eat healthily – and make time for reflection and/or meditation. Reflecting on your state of mind, your actions and your response to the pandemic helps to create self-awareness and may spark a need in you to

learn new skills on how to deal with the anxiety and frustration that you might be experiencing. Reach out to our Unit for Psychotherapeutic and Support Services via email should you need assistance with psychological and personal challenges – supportus@sun.ac.za.

Stay engaged with . . .

. . . your Career Services Unit

Many scholars agree that engagement is one of the biggest predictors of academic and career success. “Student engagement represents the time and effort students devote to activities that are empirically linked to desired outcomes of college and what institutions do to induce students to participate in these activities” (Kuh, 2009). For us as a career services unit, this means making our core services available to our students on our online platform.

In this regard, we would like to invite all our students, especially our final-year students, to register on our career services management platform – MatiesCareers (Symplicity) – at [MatiesCareers](#). From there, you are able to apply for jobs that are posted on the portal and have access to company information.

It also gives you 24/7 access to our available services. This includes assisting you with writing your CV and cover letters, honing your job-seeking and interview skills, creating your personal brand and optimising your LinkedIn profile. Having an effective online presence and knowing how to navigate the virtual side of recruitment are of the utmost importance.

Visit our website – [CSCD/careerservices/website](#) – for self-help material on the above-mentioned and other topics such as informational interviewing and helpful career websites. You can access additional resources such as our newly created webinar series via the links [Personal Branding Webinar](#) and [CV Writing Webinar](#). And you can email enquiries to our unit’s official email address at careerservices@sun.ac.za.

. . . industry and companies

Some industries such as retail, food, hospitality, tourism and aviation have been severely disrupted by the COVID-19 pandemic. Nobody can predict exactly how the job market in these and other industries will unfold or what additional skills companies may be looking for when they start recruiting again. However, according to various reports, many companies are focusing on the following important skills: critical thinking, collaboration, communication, adaptability, initiative, leadership, social and cultural awareness, persistence, creativity, curiosity, ICT literacy, cultural and civic literacy, problem solving, cognitive flexibility, problem sensitivity, emotional intelligence, and negotiation and persuasion skills, among others.

While this is a mouthful, it is important for you to be aware of the skills that are valued by the companies that you would like to target. Follow the companies that you are targeting on LinkedIn, regularly visit their websites and subscribe to their recruitment websites for job alerts. Where possible, also subscribe to industry associations for students to stay abreast of latest developments.

It is important for companies and industries to keep their brand active in the virtual space and it is important for you to empower yourself with the necessary knowledge, skills and tools for entry into the world of work when the tide changes. The rapid shift to online communication presents an opportunity to the savvy graduate to develop these skills to be ahead of the wave.

. . . your career community of potential mentors

Network, network, network!!! It is important to make time for the job-hunting process – and networking remains the best way to seek out opportunities in the world of work.

The Stellenbosch University alumni LinkedIn site has more than 100 000 alumni waiting to connect with you. Granted, they are also going through tough times but many are more than willing to share their experience, knowledge and lessons learned with you, our current students. Reach out via your LinkedIn profile, search for the Stellenbosch University alumni site and connect with them. Being part of a career community is crucial. LinkedIn provides you with this opportunity.

Alumni can also serve as a vital resource for informational interviews. Learn from those who have been or are currently in positions that you would like to pursue. This is another great way of empowering yourself with knowledge and skills to prepare yourself for the transition to the world of work.

And have a plan B (and C)

In his book *The Graduate Code*, Dr Akanimo Odon speaks of how our hobbies are the things that we love to do without getting paid. How great would it be then to get paid for doing your hobby!

So, are there aspects of your hobby, any extramural activities or other activities that you engage in that you could turn into a potential income? Could you transfer some of the skills that you have developed to other industries that you may not have considered before? Or – better yet – to your own entrepreneurial opportunity?

There is the amazing story of F1 engineers who joined the drive to build more ventilators during this period when no F1 races were taking place. Closer to home, Denel, a well-known arms manufacturer, is switching from making weapons to making locally designed ventilators. Some people have turned their businesses into factories making face masks and face shields and others have become actively involved in social upliftment and food security projects.

The challenge is to set realistic goals and to have an open mind to consider other options. This could mean lowering your salary expectations, joining the gig economy and doing short-term contract work or considering further studies that will make you more marketable or present you with more options, if you can afford it.

The online education industry, health care industry and delivery industry are showing potential for growth during and post the COVID-19 pandemic. Like our centre, which has

had to adjust to online counselling, the challenge for you is to find ways of delivering your skills online.

Finally, it is important to stay positive and to remember that some things will always hold true. That the pandemic will pass. That you have developed skills that will enable you to contribute to South Africa, to Africa, to the world. That, when you graduate, you will exit Stellenbosch University with an internationally recognised qualification. And that it is your attitude that dictates your altitude.

Stay safe – and remember to believe in yourself and in your dreams!

