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South African youth hit hard by COVID-19, UCT study finds

Over 60% of young people aged between 18 and 34 in South Africa are “very worried” about COVID-19, with many of them uncertain about the future and if there will be jobs for them.

These are some of the findings of a survey conducted recently by the University of Cape Town (UCT) Graduate School of Business’s Bertha Centre for Social Innovation and Entrepreneurship, in association with youth organisation Lucha Lunako and partners M4 Jam, Skills Empire and Simanye.

A total of 814 young people were polled between 22 May and 9 June 2020 to find out the consequences of the COVID-19 lockdown for them. Respondents came from across the country, with 88% being African, 5% coloured, 5% white and 2% Indian.

“The survey is of significance as it reveals how the virus is impacting on South Africa’s youth, an extremely vulnerable segment of our population,” said Dr Solange Rosa, director of the Bertha Centre, the first academic centre in Africa dedicated to advancing social innovation and entrepreneurship.

Some of the key insights of the survey are that 30% of young people said they had lost money because of the lockdown, with 28% admitting to having borrowed money as a result of the lockdown, putting them deeper in debt. A total of 32% said their finances had been impacted because they could not go out to look for work, revealing that many young people are experiencing more financial challenges.

“The survey shows that there is a need to acknowledge that young people are facing a disproportionately more uncertain future than those people who have had the time to develop skills and start on their careers,” said Alana Bond, co-founder of Lucha Lunako, a social enterprise which explores ways to promote youth employment and skills development through collaboration, partnerships and innovation.

Other interesting findings were that more than half of those polled felt uncertain about their future and were frustrated by the inability to plan ahead. Almost a quarter of those polled said they had not finished learning important skills that they would need for jobs, with 50% saying that having access to free online courses would help them to move forward. A large number lamented the fact that data was expensive and 24% said they had no access to Wi-Fi.

Rosa said the survey's findings were especially important considering South Africa's high youth unemployment figure, which currently stands at just over 58%, according to Statistics South Africa. This is up 3.4% from the previous year and especially troubling considering that 35% of young people polled in the survey said they had received no food assistance in their communities.

Interestingly, 58% of young people said they would really like to read, hear or watch people talk about how to become motivated about the future as well as get practical tips for planning for their future. A large number (49%) said they would like to connect with a mentor or with groups focusing on motivating the youth, specifically about their futures. They also showed a strong interest in being more active in their communities, with the majority interested in sharing information about the virus, as well as helping and becoming change-makers within their communities (47%).

This shows that there needs to be more of a focus on providing practical and meaningful content that provides tried and tested solutions for moving young people towards their future, said Bond. "This is not about only providing technical skills, but is also about providing places to discuss and motivate young people around what the future can look like." She added: "We must take note that many young people have lost income and are saddled with student and other types of debt and now have to borrow even more money to survive. Financial solutions have to be developed and other solutions, like cheaper data and online learning platforms must be explored."

Ends

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