

# Beyond the Matric marks: A path into higher education

When Neil Bonhomme received his matric results a few years ago, he was crushed to see that he had failed mathematics. He thought this meant the end of his educational journey. It would be many years before he heard about an online bridging course at Milpark Education aimed at helping students improve their marks to help them get into degree programmes.

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“I messed up when I was in school. But the bridging course gave me hope that it was not too late for me,” he says. And it wasn’t. After passing the course, he was able to enrol on the BCom programme, which had always been his dream. He talked excitedly of the career opportunities he now has and how he has grown in his field in short-term insurance at Santam.

Another student who knows about feeling hopeless and wanting to give up on academic dreams, is Phemelo Lekale. She started a Postgraduate Diploma in Accounting (PGDA) but failed her first year. She acknowledges that she was overwhelmed and didn’t know how to ask for help. “I would sit with a problem and think I could figure it out alone. But I couldn’t,” she says. On her second attempt, she passed her PGDA at Milpark’s School of Professional Accounting.

## High drop-out rate

It is estimated that up to 60% of SA students drop out of university during their first year. There are many reasons why, although it often is a combination of adjusting to the new learning environment, coupled with financial constraints dovetailing with personal crises and other stresses.

“To be a successful student is not only about studying. Many students have enormous potential, but struggle to study and pass their exams,” says educational and counselling psychologist Michael McInerney. He has worked with many students over the years and has come to see that providing students with socio-psychological support is as important as offering academic support and extra help. “The one cannot function without the other,” says McInerney. “We see this time and time again, how motivation and positive thinking and a few sessions with a facilitator or counsellor can help students in times of stress, getting them through their exams and help them succeed.”

He believes that educators in South Africa must acknowledge that learners do not come from the same backgrounds. Many come to higher education from disadvantaged areas with under-resourced schools. Here, socio-economic problems like poverty, drug abuse, gangsterism and violence result in individuals who want to succeed but have huge insecurities, doubts and fears about their abilities.

## Find motivation wherever you can

These students need enablers to unlock that psychological framework. Enablers are often educators, like in the case of

Portia Letlape who found her motivation to study in a conversation with a lecturer. “He planted a seed of hope and ignited a flame in me that I too can achieve so much more,” she recalls.

But there is evidence that when the right psycho-social support is offered, students thrive. The Milpark School of Professional Accounting (incorporating [CA Connect](#)) has become the leading institution training chartered accountants (CA)SAs in South Africa. Despite being completely online, their approach is personal and interactive and focused on creating an engaged student community that would traditionally be expected at a contact university. The model is clearly working as can be seen from the January 2023 results from the ITC examination, which show that a remarkable 79% of Milpark’s students passed their exams - compared to 39% from another major institution. More impressively, 88% of Milpark’s first-time students passed. Milpark also had more first-time writers than any other institution with many more passes.

We need more agents of hope in the SA education system; at school and colleges, in classrooms as well as youth centres. For the many students who received disappointing results and who are unsure of how to proceed, Ndivhuwo Nethononda, has some good advice. “After I failed my exams, I wanted to give up on everything.” Now, finally on the way to qualifying as a chartered accountant, she has this to say to young people: “There is beauty in failing. It is hard to see sometimes, but you can achieve something beautiful if you dig deep in yourself.”

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