

# Youth must prepare, start strategising for the new normal

 By [Cindy Peters](#)

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Bokang Mokoena is the executive director of youth-led NPO Phakamani Young Minds Academy, which provides academic assistance, support and mentorship to learners during their schooling career. He believes that young people are our biggest hope in helping South Africa thrive and progress.



Bokang Mokoena, executive director of Phakamani Young Minds Academy

We chatted to Mokoena to find out more about the origins of the organisation, some of its most significant achievements, and how it is meeting the challenges brought on by the Covid-19 crisis.

## ***Tell us a bit about yourself and your background.***

**Bokang Mokoena:** I grew up in Freedom Park, Soweto and was raised by a single, phenomenal mother, who is now late. I matriculated in 2013 at Eldomain High School and am currently an undergraduate with the University of South Africa, pursuing my BA in Development Studies. I am an experienced professional in community development, leading a non-profit organisation focused on education and youth empowerment.

I have extensive experience in leadership and working with children and youth. I served as a facilitator at Junior Achievement South Africa and was a Youth Club Team leader at Camp Sizanani Life Skills. I also worked in labour law services as a sales department team leader where I was responsible for customary sales targets and motivating the sales team. I am currently a mentor with the Student Scholarship programme, and have worked with Frost Valley YMCA in the United States of America in 2018 and 2019 as the activities coordinator.

In 2019, I was voted in the Top 100 Young Independents (TYI), a prestigious campaign aimed at recognising inspiring and aspiring young leaders across sub-Saharan Africa.



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### ▣ What prompted you to start Phakamani Young Minds Academy?

**Mokoena:** I was raised and attended school in Freedom Park, surrounded with high rates of crime, violence, poverty, unemployment, drug and alcohol abuse. Irrespective of all of this, I still managed to thrive and never allowed circumstances to determine my destination.

In 2013, after completing my grade 12, I realised that there's an overabundance of young people in our community who are motivated and capable of achieving greatness - if they were provided with the right support and channelled towards relevant opportunities.

*“ This prompted me to start Phakamani Young Minds Academy (PYMA), a youth-driven organisation dedicated to helping those within the community lift themselves and each other out of the cycle of poverty through access to tertiary and post-school opportunities. ”*

I believe that the socio-economic challenges faced by South Africa arising from poverty, inequality and unemployment, require young people to respond responsibly and be fully engaged. Passion and hope continues to drive me to create even greater social impact, and motivates me to explore more opportunities for engagement with young people in the community.



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### ▣ What, for you, are some of the organisation's most significant achievements?

**Mokoena:** Phakamani Young Minds Academy is steadfastly committed to offering quality services and support that improve the employability of learners in disadvantaged and marginalised communities. Since 2014, we have developed from an informal to a more formal and professional working environment. We exist because we want young people to use education as a tool to be prominent in society.

For the past years, we have witnessed our learners being awarded as top achievers in their respective schools, some taking on leadership positions. Over 60 learners receive brand new school shoes each year in January. Thus far, we have 388 beneficiaries enrolled in our programme from 28 feeder schools with over 30 volunteers (through our partnership with the University of Johannesburg). We have 42 learners who successfully reached grade 12 with the support of PYMA, 86% of whom successfully passed grade 12 with a Bachelor Pass.

In grade 12, we ensure our learners apply to at least three post-school opportunities so that they have somewhere to go when they finish school. 50% of them have accessed tertiary education, while 70% have been placed in employment and internships. We have retained 36% of our alumni who have returned as volunteers to help others succeed too. We strive to

brand the organisation as a formidable player in the sector, and it is through such outcomes that we continue to serve.



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### ■ ***From where does your passion for youth empowerment stem?***

**Mokoena:** My passion for youth empowerment began at a very young age. When I was a prefect at Freedom Primary School in grade 7, I started a small reading club, and we would give motivational talks to all learners every Monday during assembly time. In high school, I served on the student representative council and as the public relations officer. This enhanced my leadership capabilities, and I also became involved in different engagements that stimulated young people in schools.

It was quite rare at that time to find young people who wanted to better their community, and actively make change happen. These activities inspired me, and immediately after grade 12, I established an organisation that focused on empowering young people. Developing and running an organisation wasn't easy, but I had to make it work. It's true that when you have passion, you have everything.

I had to let go of most of my social life. My work has shown me how selfless, determined, passionate and big-hearted young people can be, regardless of age. I carried a lot on my shoulders and I did it all with a smile. I learned to be great - hence today, I inspire other young people. Most people my age are generally more interested in building themselves, but I am in it for a higher purpose. I believe myself to be a young South African leader.



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### ■ ***What are some of the most significant challenges for South Africa's youth? How does Phakamani Young Minds Academy help them overcome these obstacles?***

**Mokoena:** Young people in South Africa are confronted with a lot of challenges such as unemployment, which leads to poverty and exacerbates inequality. Although some young people may have academic, as well as technical skills, they often lack basic soft skills that could prepare them for the world of work. Phakamani Young Minds Academy focuses on empowering the South African youth through capacitating them with the relevant skills and knowledge, prior to them seeking employment.

“ We also exposing young people to relevant networks that could help them access job opportunities. We are steadfast in our commitment to engage in support efforts that improve the employability of young people in disadvantaged and marginalised communities. ”

We seek to explore opportunities to innovate and enhance our project, resulting in job creation through entrepreneurship. We build a platform to match young people who need guidance with mentors who are able to coach them. We aim to start by leveraging our network, and later scale to include other organisations who can contribute time and human capital to this project.

### ■ ***The Covid-19 crisis is likely to have a significant impact on the opportunities available for young South Africans. Do you have any words of encouragement to share?***

**Mokoena:** Indeed, Covid-19 is the latest crisis that is going to affect the future of South African youth. This pandemic has

already rapidly impacted negatively on the availability of opportunities for young people. We will have to adapt to increasingly limited access to education and work opportunities, including the economic shock. It is important to continue to contribute towards resilience within our communities. We need to prepare and start strategising for the new normal, through embracing technology, initiating innovation hubs and developing effective solutions to address Covid-19.

■ **Briefly, how has Phakamani Young Minds Academy adapted to meet the challenges brought on by the Covid-19 crisis in terms of the assistance and support you provide?**

**Mokoena:** Following President Cyril Ramaphosa's national address, which led to the lockdown, we had to make unbelievably difficult, and relatively immediate decisions, in order to respond responsibly in curbing the spread of Covid-19.

These changes compelled us to engage through WhatsApp learning with our beneficiaries, by providing continuous online learning support - more so for grade 12 learners who will be desk-bound for their final October/November examinations.

We also know that many of our students come from under-resourced communities, however, as an organisation, we believe that all learners need to be assisted through these online platforms so that they continue to keep up with their schoolwork. During Covid-19, we introduced an online mentoring programme and all 27 of our grade 12 learners were successfully paired with mentors from Deloitte, Vodacom, Discovery, The LAG and other companies. This has helped to ensure that each learner could apply for university during lockdown and Covid-19.

Covid-19 has had deleterious impacts on all aspects of society, including the mental and psychological wellbeing of South African families. It has been very difficult for our beneficiaries to seek mental health and psychosocial support due to restrictions on movement. We have continued to provide telephonic psychological support to all our beneficiaries. We have also engaged in a research project with the objective of assessing the impact of Covid-19 on the education sector, with particular focus on South African families. We have responded to calls for immediate relief by distributing 80 food parcels to families in Freedom Park.

Above all, it is our responsibility to devise sustainable and innovative methodologies during this pandemic that will serve our beneficiaries. We need to stand together to contribute to this contemporary complex situation. We seek to explore opportunities to endow and enhance PYMA's contributions, whilst leading by example in all of our work and embracing the principles of a learning organisation.

■ **What, to you, is the significance of Youth Month in 2020?**

**Mokoena:** Youth are the backbone of any society and Youth Month commemorates the youth of 1976 during the Soweto uprising. It is very important during Youth Month to pay tribute to the lives of the fallen heroes and heroines who lost their lives during this time. Given these uncertain times of Covid-19, we also need youth to recognise their role in the liberation of South Africa.

*“ We cannot lose sight of the fact that young people are our biggest hope in helping our country to thrive and progress. Much like those brave students in 1976, it is time for parents, society and government to be bold in coming together to make necessary sacrifices for the youth of South Africa. ”*

As young people, we need to stand as one voice and paint a telling picture of a better nation. During 2020 Youth Month, let us remember how far our country has come and how far it still has to go. We are young people - the future generation - and united we stand, divided we fall.

■ **Words you live by?**

**Mokoena:** “When a man has done what he considers to be his duty to his people and his country, he can rest in peace.” – Nelson Mandela

## ABOUT SINDY PETERS

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