

William Ngobeni's inspirational 15-year journey to qualified CA(SA) success

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William Ngobeni has followed an exceptionally long and windy path before finally qualifying as a chartered accountant [CA(SA)] in February this year, having passed the qualifying exams after over a decade of stops and starts.



William Ngobeni

Ngobeni grew up in the small village of Lefiswane in Mpumalanga, where just like many of his peers, his heroes and role models were teachers, nurses, policemen and doctors. So, by default, his dream was to become a doctor. He was only introduced to the field of accounting in high school level in 2000.

Even then, Ngobeni showed a natural aptitude for all things accounting-related, obtaining 84% for his first-ever accounting test in grade eight, with his accounting teacher Mrs Mashele convincing him to change his career path ideas and rather follow the accounting route. Yet, the path was by no means an easy one to follow. The process to qualify as a CA(SA) takes a minimum of seven years.

For Ngobeni, the journey took twice as long. His story is an amazing tale of perseverance, as he first started his tertiary studies in 2005, and his overall study highlight was passing his honours degree (the CTA) for the second time after he had exhausted his chances of writing the first qualifying exam known as the Initial Test of Competence (ITC). He says that technically this was his fourth attempt, as he had previously written it twice at UJ – in 2008 and 2009 – before his Unisa attempts in 2016 and 2017. He had many doubts about even attempting the CTA again in 2017 as he had failed it ‘dismally’ in 2016.

And so, on having completed his second attempt at the final qualifying exam (the Assessment of Professional Competence or APC) competency-based case study assessment, which reviews the candidates’ ability to demonstrate ethical, personal and professional attributes in their application to real-world scenarios using their technical know-how in November 2019, Ngobeni didn’t feel that he’d finally accomplished his dream as he was worried he hadn’t written his response to the final question adequately. He’s one to listen to, having learned from painful experience that there’s a thin line between passing and failing those all-important qualifying exams.

Rolling with the punches

But it’s not just academic pressure that Ngobeni faced. The hardships kept coming, as financial resources had always been an issue – so much so that he had to take up loan after loan to pay for his study fees and study materials.

Good friend Patrick Leshomo CA(SA) gave him the R11,000 he needed to register for extra lessons for the CTA with Edge Business School in 2017. If not for Leshomo’s financial assistance and belief in him, and the additional academic support from Edge, Ngobeni does not think he would be where he is today.

In addition to the formal academic qualification path, workplace experience plays a role in qualifying, in the form of the three-year 'articles' learnership programme. Ngobeni completed his training contract at Nkonki Incorporated and had an amazing experience there, despite the challenge of studying while working full time. Yet in 2018, Nkonki Incorporated filed for liquidation.

This affected Ngobeni emotionally, as he now had to find new ways to settle the fees for his Professional Training programme and APC studies as he had no financial backing.

It was the best of times; it was the worst of times...

Ngobeni shares that 2019, the year he successfully wrote the APC, was also one of the painful years of his life. He lost his paternal and maternal grandfathers in the space of four months.

Yet he managed to keep studying, stay motivated and stay the course. Ngobeni took time off to watch soccer on the TV and at the stadium when studies got too strenuous, but the family was a critical factor to his success, as he didn't want his daughter to face the same financial challenges and background he did.

Ngobeni's grandmother was also there for him emotionally throughout the journey, since day one, and always encouraged him to stay focused and keep trying until the end.

Ngobeni's luck finally changed when he found out that he had successfully completed the APC – that all-important second board exam, in February this year. His immediate plan is to take time out from studying for now and spend quality time with his support group of family and friends, as he feels he missed out on too much time with them during his studies.

A call for more inclusive support

While his loved ones are proud of his accomplishments, Ngobeni shares that his success was also celebrated in the social media space, as many have gone through similar struggles on the path to reaching their dream career regardless of the profession.

"The love I got from Facebook, Twitter and LinkedIn was amazing, as I'm not too active on those platforms. It all started with a post on Unisa's 'CTA level one and level two' Facebook group. The page serves as a community of students mainly studying for their CTA at Unisa but is also open to other universities. It's a support group and at times serves as a motivational page where former students pop in every now and then to share their different journeys." So Ngobeni's post was in this light – intended as a simple motivation for his fellow comrades.

Because motivation is certainly needed, from all corners. The total number of candidates who sat the notoriously difficult assessment in 2019 increased by 17.2%, yet the overall pass rate decreased by 12%. Ngobeni believes that professional programme providers like the APT and UCT are doing their utmost to prepare students for the APC exam, but feels more needs to be done to establish where the true challenges lie.

But it's not all bad news, as the number of black chartered accountants under the age of 35 has significantly increased from 3% in 2002 to 25% in 2020. Ngobeni attributes this rise to the projects such as Saica's Thuthuka project which aimed at transforming the profession, in ensuring that African candidates are not excluded from the profession due to lack of financial resources, also offering extra assistance tutors. He himself benefited from the project during his undergraduate period at UJ.

A story of hope: Delay does not mean denial

Ngobeni's story is testament to the fact that becoming a CA(SA), though not easy, is achievable. He's keen to encourage those who would like to follow in his footsteps but keep hitting that proverbial brick wall: "Delay does not mean denial. Keep giving it your all until the end."



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There's inspiration everywhere. Ngobeni encourages candidates to read up the story of Basia Phomane, who had to return to his CTA studies after exhausting his chances of passing the ITC assessment – he also finally passed after 10 years. Unfortunately, Phomane passed away just a few months after passing his second qualifying exam. There's also the real-life story of Vusi Nkabini, who finally qualified at the age of 52 – so if you don't make it the first time, don't despair: all is not lost. But Ngobeni says we're definitely in need of more mentors, and more programmes such as the Thuthuka initiatives, as these can all play a huge role for struggling students – as they did for him.

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