

## Education is key in unlocking the African promise

Despite the International Money Fund predicting sub-Saharan Africa will post a 3% GDP growth rate this year, down from the 5-7% range previously recorded, the continent still possesses attractive opportunities for the global market.



Source: IT News Africa/<http://innocentclassroom.com>

Many multinationals and local South African businesses are planning for and investing in providing goods and services to the 900 million new urban dwellers expected in Africa over the next 35 years.

However, according to Leon Ayo, CEO of executive search firm Odgers Berndtson Sub-Saharan Africa, in order for leaders to create sustainable businesses and support new ventures, development of local talent and skills are critical.

“Businesses, whether locally or internationally based, will not only require a high-quality talent pool but also need to understand the investment required into developing this talent pool,” said Ayo. “Education plays a critical role in delivering on talent development which calls on institutions of higher learning and government to also consider this implication.”

South African education entrepreneur Fred Swaniker commented during the WEF Africa meeting earlier this year, that Africa would need to build 135 universities the size of Harvard every year, for 15 years, to provide the level of tertiary education available in India. “Realistically, this is not going to happen and while there will always be room for bricks and mortar institutions, this cannot be the only solution,” says Ayo.

### Online courses

MOOCs (mass open online courses) are potentially one solution. In June this year, Wits University in Johannesburg South Africa, announced that it will be offering MOOCs, short online courses, and ultimately entirely online degree programmes. Wits has become the first university in Africa to offer MOOCs on edX an online learning platform established by Harvard University and the Massachusetts Institute of Technology in 2012.

“While greater access to education can provide qualifications which we expect to result in employment, whether this is through MOOCs, blended learning models or even traditional bricks and mortar universities this is far from reality,” says Ayo. “There are two main issues to consider. The perception of the quality of education and the expectation of what that qualification will deliver.”

According to Ayo, the perception around MOOC qualifications is that they may not be as highly valued as a tertiary qualification from a 150-year-old higher learning institution. On the other hand, a traditional university degree or qualification may not also guarantee employment. Universities, business leaders and governments need to reassess the education archetype and determine whether its application is still relevant in the continuing development and growth of the continent overall.

It is vital therefore that higher learning institutions produce graduates that are ready for the workplace, and ready to solve some of the continent's (including social and economic) problems. Education needs to go beyond simply churning out qualified people and include:

- Students learning and practicing critical thinking.
- Businesses needing to be honest about their needs, and they need to be in touch with higher learning institutions so that they can share this information.
- Business/Government needs to have a better dialogue with institutions.
- Interventions such as internship programmes and skills courses must be implemented.
- Africa needs to realise that we are competing on a global stage.
- Universities and tertiary institutions need to pay attention to global rankings so that they can aim and become globally competitive.

“Africa needs to improve the quality of education, and the outputs. Other challenges such as infrastructure, lack of internet that is fast and affordable; and energy supply issues, can be resolved with the right collaborations.

“Africa needs an effective higher education system, the right talent and leaders with a clear vision to make this happen. The talent exists on the continent, it just needs to be educated and refined,” concluded Ayo.

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