How to uplift SA through the business of education

By Stefan Botha

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Finding solutions to unemployment, poverty and inequality has become the biggest challenge facing our country in a generation.

Image source: Getty Images

This challenge is so pertinent that President Cyril Ramaphosa went as far as to propose a “new consensus” in this year’s State of the Nation Address (SONA).

As part of this new consensus, the president highlighted how “the state must create an environment in which the private sector can invest and unleash the dynamism of the economy.” Ramaphosa further highlighted how a “vibrant civil society is crucial for a capable state and for development”.

Encouragingly, the president is advocating all stakeholders in our society to come together and play their part in making our country a better place.

As part of this new consensus, the private education sector has the opportunity to become even greater social change-makers, who can help address the unemployment problem head-on and build a better economy.

Education, a key solution to unemployment

Stats SA recently indicated that South Africa’s unemployment rate hit a record high of 34.4%. It was further reported that 64% of youth aged 15 - 24 were unemployed, and 42.9% of individuals aged 25 - 34 are unemployed.

However, these statistics also include a very important but often overlooked fact: the unemployment rate is significantly lower for people with better levels of education. As an example, the most recent unemployment rate for people without matric in South Africa is above 40%, while the graduate unemployment rate is below 10%.

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Education, and especially post-school education, is a key measure in helping South Africans find work and improving their prospects of employment in the longer term.

Employers in South Africa are ready and willing to hire more workers. But they have highlighted a dire shortage of skilled workers, which not only affects their ability to deliver goods and services, but also inhibits the economic growth of our country.

How to move education forward

A key question then is: how do we accelerate South Africa's bid to improve the education of its 58-million citizens?

In the 21st century, it's reasonable to say that technology and connectivity should be at the forefront of our education policies and system. While this has been a trend in education over the past few decades, the Covid-19 pandemic has accelerated the adoption of technology in the education space.

At Optimi, we've experienced this trend with the Tuta-Me programme, in partnership with Investec and Promaths, to bring online tutoring to thousands of learners from impoverished schools. During the first year of the pandemic, the online programme supported close to 2,000 Grade 12 learners.

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The project was a resounding success: the learners who wrote mathematics achieved a 99% pass rate (compared to a 53% national pass rate), with approximately 90% of these learners achieving 50% or more for the subject, and the programme yielded approximately 5% of the Department of Basic Education (DBE) schools' mathematics and sciences distinctions. Around 90% of the learners received bachelor passes for their matric results. The only way these kinds of results could be made possible during the pandemic was via online learning channels.

This is why it is important to invest in our country's technology and connectivity. Government and the private sector are progressively driving down the cost of data. With the government creating this enabling environment, public and private sector players will be able to do more when it comes to ensuring that technology becomes the great leveler in our education system.

More than ever, we all need to be solutions-based and we all have a role to play in the new consensus.

Top education companies are driven to make quality education more accessible to learners, and we believe that by doing this we can make a significant contribution to our country's future and its economy.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Stefan Botha is the CEO of the Optimi Group. Optimi provides accessible learning solutions to over 200 000 learners every year through our four divisions: Home, Classroom, College, and Workplace.