

It's time to change the way we see education

By [Stefan Botha](#), issued by [Optimi](#)

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There's no doubt that there have been big advances in South Africa. At the dawn of democracy in 1994, 58% of public-school learners in Grade 12 passed matric, while in 2021 that figure was 76.4%.

However, our youth also face serious challenges, as outlined by two recent reports.

The first is underscored by a comment from Higher Education, Science And Innovation minister, Dr Blade Nzimande, who recently said that only [4% of learners on average who start Grade 1](#) in South Africa go on to attain a university degree.

Compounding this problem further is the fact that the pandemic has severely impacted learning. A recent study by [Stellenbosch University](#) — which compared test results from the years 2019 and 2021 on a range of mathematical and reading and writing competencies — found that learners had fallen 40% to 70% of a school year behind earlier cohorts in language learning and up to 95% to 106% of a school year in mathematics.

All of these challenges with education ultimately have a direct impact on employment prospects in South Africa. Already, 64% of youth aged 15–24 are officially unemployed in South Africa.

But 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%.

Therefore, we need to do more as a country to ensure that we help our learners get to the next steps in their educational journeys.

Meaningful digital learning

In the 21st century, it's fair to say that technology and connectivity should be at the forefront of our education system and any efforts to catch up on lost learning.

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 these benefits first-hand through strong growth in our homeschooling and online schooling offerings. In addition, our Tuta-Me programme, in partnership with Investec and Promaths, brought tutoring to thousands of learners from impoverished schools with the help of technology. During the first year of the pandemic, the online programme supported close to 2,000 Grade 12 learners.

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.

There's no doubt that there is the potential to roll out this type of approach to a wider net of schoolchildren in South Africa and digitisation gives us the ability to achieve this.

University is not the only option

After prioritising catch-up efforts in our schooling system, we further need to pay more attention to the post-matric learning options for our learners.

While having a degree certainly is proven to boost one's job prospects, the fact is that the world has also changed dramatically when it comes to tertiary education.

For example, there has been a severe shortage of artisans in SA for many years now, and therefore many job opportunities in this space. To study towards becoming an artisan, one wouldn't typically follow the university route but rather opt for national trade courses.

These qualifications are known as N1, N2 and N3 qualifications, and enable learners to ultimately follow career paths such as boilermaking, welding, fitting and turning, electrical and motor trade and more.

When it comes to technology, there are, for example, certified software development courses that cover fundamentals such as HTML5, C#, Microsoft Azure, and much more. In addition to these, there are many viable alternatives to university courses in the fields of accounting and finance, HR management and more.

What's clear is that as a country we need to collectively start thinking outside the box when it comes to how we educate our youth and the options they have once they move through the education system. There are many more options on the table today with advances in technology.

In this way, we can then start to tackle the big challenges we have as a country.

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.

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