

(Re)conceptualising education to bridge the digital divide for innovation and employability

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President Ramaphosa's merger of the Department of Science & Technology with the Department of Higher Education and Training is perhaps propitious, especially given that the new educational imperatives of the Digital Era. The unification would assist in connecting science to the overall developmental challenges of the country through innovative policies and strategies. This reasoning has merit in that education has to be a catalyst to address the multi-faceted problems confronting the nation.

Notwithstanding this rationale, the combined educational resource base of the merger is not only obliged to shape future technologies for innovation and bridging the Digital Divide, but preparing our youth for the new skills requirements of the Fourth Industrial Revolution and employability.

We are living in a time of accelerated change and disruption in which society faces increasing pressure to evolve its systems and processes to meeting the demand of the 21st century and beyond. Within this perspective education is the most sophisticated social technology of societal transformation and yet it is still a widely underutilised pathway for co-creating and contributing to sustainable regenerative and thriving futures. Education has to become an avenue through which society will overcome the gaps and barriers it has created, especially the growing economic and social inequality and the extreme ecological pressures we are placing on our planet.

Paradoxically our educational ecosystems are still designed for the world of yesterday. They need to be changed to meet the demands of the future including increasing social and economic complexity in all domains of human life. The time is opportune to re-conceptualise the purpose and design of education. We need nothing less than a renaissance in education that demands a transformation in learning – a lifelong learning.

The recent Hay Global Skills Index notes that the growing skills mismatch remains one of the key problems of the global job markets. Consequently the main tasks of educational institutions will be the development of new curricula that better match the demands of digital era job market.

Thus the future growth and stability of South Africa's economy depends on the ability of our education ecosystem to prepare our students for career opportunities and help them attain higher levels of achievement.

The lack of appropriate education has produced graduates who cannot find commensurate jobs primarily because our education system has failed them. They simply lack the necessary skills and competencies of the digital era job market. As a result a large percentage of our graduates have become an integrated statistic (63 percent) of the largest youth unemployment drama in the world.

The complexity of the challenge calls for a bold and timely response. We need a solution that will assist us to leapfrog the costly stages in the development and expansion of a new education system – one that will enable existing educational institutions to integrate 21st century skills into demanding curricula.

To prepare learners for success, the notion of education has to change at scale. Students will need to adapt and be innovative in response to new demands and changing circumstances, in being able to command and expand the power of technology to create new knowledge.

To meet the challenges of the skills needs for the digital era, higher education institutions will have to be transformed in ways that will enable students to acquire the creative thinking, flexible problem solving, collaboration and innovative skills.

The 21st Century has introduced an increasingly complex, competitive and fast-paced labour market which has evolved with new types of jobs, professions and occupations that require a new set of skills for agile and collaborative work teams.

These new skills and competencies will effectively contribute to bridge the gap between learning and work and to improve graduate job readiness, thus reducing the current shortage of skills in the workplace and the ever too frequent education-job mismatch.

A new Pan-African platform of higher education institutions, Honoris United Universities, is acutely aware of these new demands on higher education and has thus adopted a philosophy of 'education for impact' at the core of its curriculum development and student experience strategies. Regent Business School a member of this platform has established two Innovation hubs at its campuses: the iLead Lab and the Honoris Collective Lab.

These creative spaces offer the latest exponential technologies and learning experiences which students and community members can use to help carry out their ideas and create innovative enterprises. With courses such as robotics, coding, 3D design and printing students can produce anything from drones to robots using open-source technologies and rapid prototyping tools like 3-D printers and other manufacturing techniques.

The iLead Lab was established to provide for our students, alumni communities and business partners and its main purpose is to bridge the gap between learning and work through Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics (STEM) immersion, Work-integrated learning and internship programmes, thus reducing the education-job mismatch and increasing employability.

The Honoris Collective Lab on the other hand intends to expand its outreach to local disadvantaged communities. It intends to involve networks of people with diverse backgrounds and mind-sets that converge around common values such as 'sharing' and 'openness' and generate a new paradigm of production called social manufacturing or entrepreneurship. Towards this end the lab has initiated a programme to empower women entrepreneurs not only to develop their start-ups but also to take their innovative products to scale.

Through these new innovations, we are challenging the idea of a traditional classroom by exploring how physical and virtual environments can affect and improve not only learning but empower the youth and unemployed individuals to become innovative entrepreneurs or at the least become productive members of an inclusive economy.

Finally, we need to be reminded that transforming higher education is more necessary now than ever before. However the challenges ahead have to be considered in order to ensure effective and immediate transformation. Furthermore, higher education leadership needs to be less risk averse especially in this world of disruptive change. It is no longer an option to keep doing things the old way. A re-conceptualised education ecosystem to bridge the digital gap for innovation, employability and entrepreneurship demands it.

The authors are members of a task team dealing with 'educational ecosystems reformation using 21st century learning spaces' at Regent Business School and write in their personal capacity.

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