



Leading educational reform

Why businesses should be encouraged to make education a strategic issue—and back that strategy with strong leadership



The truth is that change in education has to start at grass-roots level in schools. While learnerships and adult education initiatives are a crucial part of correcting a dark historical legacy, access to basic education is no longer the biggest obstacle that learners face. The most crucial focus of educational reform has been aptly outlined by the National Education Collaboration Trust (NECT): improve resourcing, focus on learner welfare, call for courage in leadership, drum up citizen participation in education, and professionalise teaching. We need to build quality into our basic education system now that we have achieved almost universal access.

What is clear, is that government alone cannot reform education. Individual big businesses have historically supported education reform, but while there are pockets of change, it is not being felt at any measurable scale, partly because it hasn't been co-ordinated, and partly because in spite of the good intentions it hasn't had the critical mass to lead to systemic change.

Chantyl Mulder, Executive Director for Transformation and Nation Building at SAICA, points out that the problem in many instances is that individual companies have already committed to their own individual education projects. Whether or not these are effective on such a small scale, they nevertheless become "pet projects", and the company's emotional attachment to them means that funding to them cannot be diverted to more successful large-scale collaborations like the NECT or SAICA's Thuthuka Bursary Fund (TBF).

Developing a collaborative approach

"I think we all agree that South Africans, generally, want to 'do good'," she says. "But our approach has been too fragmented. There has been an enormous amount of money spent at school level, but we haven't seen the changes that would indicate that it has been

money well spent. We need to consolidate our resources: united we stand, divided we fall."

Terence Nombembe, SAICA CEO, observes that: "We cannot have big business saying 'this basic education quality issue is a government problem'. Moreover, we can't afford to point fingers. It is crucial that we work together and say, 'Here is a collaboration in the form of the NECT—now how can we work together to support this? How can we turn our collective fortunes around by creating an educated workforce?'"

According to Mulder: "We might all have the same aims, but getting everyone on the same page, to play in the same playground, can be challenging. Businesses are spending the money, but they are not seeing the changes, because they are not collaborating to support a single-minded strategy." She explains that it's only once businesses "consolidate their resources, that the movement will gain critical mass and make those huge tsunami waves we need to reform education in South Africa."

Edward Kieswetter, former CEO at Alexander Forbes agrees: "Businesses should realise that there is greater responsibility towards upliftment which goes beyond donating money, and ignoring what happens after that. We should pool all our resources towards a more collaborative and coordinated approach."

Mulder uses the example of the TBF as an indication of what is possible when key individuals come together and collaborate on one, clear objective—even if it doesn't happen overnight. "TBF started with three universities, 123 students and very little money. To date, TBF has provided a full bursary to 7 213 students." The sustained growth from tiny origins has only been possible because the TBF is a broad-based collaboration between SAICA members/donors and Government.

Beyond corporate social investment

"Education is an extension of nation building. It's at the heart of the NDP. Beyond being a social investment effort, education is the key that will unlock the skills required for the future workplace. It's a strategic imperative to develop the very skills that many businesses

complain do not exist. But if business leaders are not willing to pick up the baton and pour themselves into the holes in our education system, we'll never develop the skills necessary for a thriving economy."

According to Mark Lamberti, CEO of the Imperial Group: "Educational initiatives shouldn't even come out of CSI budgets. Instead, it should be a strategic objective and a strategic spend". Corporate spend in education is an investment in the skilled workforce that any company will need in the future, if that operation is to grow and offer increasing opportunities for employment. In this regard, private-sector funding of education initiatives aligns perfectly with both the government's NDP aims, and sensible long-term business planning. Private sector funding in education is not CSI; it needs to be recognised as an investment in skills development, and as a matter of strategic planning.

These strategies then, to make a real difference, should be systemic, holistic and long-term. To do that we need strong business leaders on board who realise the benefit of collaboration. Mulder remarks that "organisations like the NECT exist so that big business can get on the same page and cement their fragmented strategies. They also work with the co-operation of Government, so one knows that the funds will be systemically supported".

In order to achieve this, Nombembe suggests that "we have to show business leaders why we need to undertake these initiatives and



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remind them that these skills are necessary to one day sustain their own businesses. SAICA understands this. After all, it is through collaboration that we have been able to produce the professionals who sustain our ranking as a top professional body."

Measuring outcomes accurately

In order to be sure that any specific education intervention is bearing fruit, it is essential that we can identify and evaluate

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about lack of skills in the workplace, and then not contributing to skills development—and that starts at school level. It really depends on finding decision-makers who take this seriously.”

She maintains that educational nation-building starts with building your pipeline, at schools. “And when everybody does eventually get together, we need to ask: “what has taken us so long?” 

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concrete outcomes. Ultimately the desired metric would be more learners passing matric with high enough marks in maths, science and languages to continue to university and study the professions in which we have a skills shortage.

In the interim, as Godwin Khosa, CEO of the NECT, points out, we need metrics that prove that systemic educational innovation projects are delivering value at scale and that we can reasonably expect that when a generation of learners have had the benefit of these improvements, the country will see much higher pass marks at the matric level. To monitor these outcomes effectively, we need to combine constructive analysis and engagement from the private sector, with measures to evaluate systemic education innovation as early as possible.

But even before we consider monitoring and evaluation, Mulder reminds us, we first need to get more businesses committed to collaborative action.

“To make any progress on this,” concludes Mulder, “we need good leadership in big business. We need leaders who are forward-thinking and independent enough to say, ‘We aren’t getting the most effective return on our investment with this some projects, so we’re going to dedicate that spend, instead, to a large-scale collaborative programme like the NECT or the TBF.’ We can’t have companies complaining



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