What does the future of edtech in Africa look like?

By Shan Radcliffe   21 Oct 2022

The Covid pandemic undeniably changed the face of education - fast-tracking the need for online learning development and solutions. What the pandemic also exposed was the digital divide and the extent of the gap between the "haves" and "have-nots".

Image source: Getty Images

This was the consensus between the panelists of last week's CNBC Africa forum on *The Future of EdTech in Africa* - hosted by broadcast and financial journalist, Alishia Seckam. Speakers included Rogers Sithole, managing director of OneConnect Education; Melvin Govender, country manager for South Africa at Anthology; and Dolf Jordaan, deputy director of e-learning at the University of Pretoria.

Sithole believes that while many were left behind during the pandemic's era of digital learning, it's not all doom and gloom: "There have been many institutions that have been able to keep up in the areas where governments and private sectors were willing to invest to ensure that there's continuity in this space."

He said now that the challenges and issues for those who have been left behind have been exposed, there lies an opportunity for improvement and growth across the continent.

Govender agreed with Sithole, saying that the past two years have provided us with "an opportunity to reflect on where education in Africa was, and what this pandemic has done to expose where it was". He said it's allowed us to identify tech and skills gaps, and now we need to take necessary steps, both as edtech institutions and the private sector at large, to bridge those gaps.

Despite the underlying issues that were revealed in this period, Jordaan reminded us not to underestimate our students' creativity in finding solutions to their own challenges. He reflected on the #FeesMustFall protests of 2016, where groups of students would continue to study - by establishing collaborative groups and sharing data as well as learning space - despite the disruption.

Future of learning

Govender said the way forward lies in what the learner data says - what it tells us about where our students are based and how they are responding to this year. "We can't take a broad brush and stroke all our students in the same light." There is no one-size-fits-all response to their educational needs - we need to employ personalised learning solutions.

Sithole said that while it is important to invest in such services, we do not have to invest in software development from scratch. "It does not necessarily have to be African-developed platforms; it needs to be African-centric solutions. And from a tech point of view, many have already made the investments and we do not have to recreate some of those platforms. However, we need to make sure that they are fit for our context."

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Implementation, customisation and consumption

As we look to employ a new online education system and its personalisation for students, we will need to move away from the synchronisation of consumption.

"The typical ways of teaching and learning were done synchronously," said Sithole, describing the typical setting of an educator standing and instructing students in the classroom. "If we're going to move into the digital world, and we think we just want to take that and 'automate it', that's not necessarily going to work."

Sithole pointed out a benefit of moving to an asynchronous teaching model is that students who do not have access to the classroom at a specific time will be able to view the lesson material and catch up as if they were in class.

Jordaan noted that student profiles are changing - there are more adult learners who are studying while working regular jobs. They have also seen that students and lecturers alike are accessing the online platform at all hours of the day and night.

"They want to study how they live," said Jordaan. "And they want to be able to customise that experience for themselves, which may even impact on the time it takes to complete their degree. That is something we need to start looking into."

"Technology allows us to leverage itself in order to give students a personalised experience and give them options," Govender added. As content is produced and provided online in a certain way, "what we want technology to do is allow that student to access that content in a way and a form that they find most accessible".

"We've seen textbooks - don't laugh, it's a reality - photocopied, generated into PDFs, put online and be called 'digital teaching and learning'. That's where the challenge is - we're not leveraging the capacity and capability of the devices that we have," continued Sithole, emphasising the importance of content and instructional designers at institutions that offer online learning options.

Opportunity to scale

"The move to this online digital environment is a huge opportunity for expansion of institutions," Govender commented. "We are not confined now by the brick-and-mortar lecture venue. What we have is knowledge systems within the universities, we have distinguished professors in the institutions, and now what we can do is expand that offering to a wider environment and at a low cost."

He advised universities to seriously consider this third-stream income: "We have largely contextual curricula that we can offer to the global market. When we look at the cost of that [expansion], we have to ask ourselves: cost and value.

"What we're going to see is that the expansion, the income generation - that third-stream income - is largely going to come from that virtual learning environment, which previously was not available in the way that we see now, but it was confined by what our brick-and-mortar structures at our institutions were."

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Democratisation of education

Seckham asked Sithole whether it really is possible for children in rural and remote areas to access the same quality of education experience using technology solutions as those in the best private schools.

"I don't care where the location of a child or student is," Sithole answered, "if an institution has got the best quality educator in a specific course, and this student is found in a location across the continent where they may not necessarily have a quality teacher like that, technology should be able to bridge that gap in connecting that student with that teacher.

"This is true in higher education, but this is equally true in basic education."

Sithole said his vision, in line with Unesco's own agenda, is to leverage technology to democratise education to ensure that every child has access to good, quality education by 2030. This will be the first step out of poverty for so many in the country, as well as the continent, and so access to the necessary technology must be prioritised by government.

Upskilling teachers

Govender explained that the focus of edtech needs to not only consider the students, but the teachers as well: "They are the ones wielding the technology.

"We have to ensure they are skillful enough to leverage that technology to get the personalised experience we want the student to have."

Sithole said we can't expect brilliant educators to switch from classroom to digital teaching overnight and still be brilliant: "We need to have solutions that can look at teachers themselves, and be able to provide ways of training them - almost retraining them - to become digital teachers.

"We've got programmes that exist to convert and to help them learn how to do lesson plans and generate the content online.

"We can't leave them behind, we need them to continue to deliver good teaching and learning in this digital era."

ABOUT SHAN RADCLIFFE

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