

OPINION | Second class: Africa's education system still has a long way to go

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The skyline of Johannesburg, the largest city in South Africa, with the largest economy of any metropolitan region in Sub-Saharan Africa. The city is one of the 40 largest metropolitan areas in the world, and is also the worlds largest city not situated on a river, lake, or coastline. (Photo by Brooks Kraft LLC/Sygma via Getty Images)

*When it comes to future-ready education and skills development, Africa is scoring dismally, say **Solly Moeng and Rinku Vij**.*

While it remains a given that education systems must be context-specific, consensus is emerging - as the world gradually moves towards a post-Covid-19 era - on key areas where actions must be taken to have a relevant and responsive education ecosystem that can meet the needs of a fast-evolving labour market, in Africa or elsewhere in the world.

These include focus on early childhood education, future-ready curricula, digital fluency, robust and respected technical and vocational education, early exposure to the workplace, continuous career guidance, a professionalised teaching workforce, as well as openness to education innovation and lifelong learning (WEF, *Realising Human Potential in the Fourth Industrial revolution, An Agenda for Leaders to shape the Future of Education, Gender and Work*, 2017).

Broadly speaking, Africa's education system has some way to go before it can be deemed to embody the above characteristics.

Invest in formative years

The importance of early childhood education and quality preschool in the development of beneficial cognitive, and socio-behavioural skills, which are important for future learning abilities in the 4IR, have been well documented (World Bank, 2019). Globally, only half of all three- to 6-year-olds have access to preschool education. In low-income countries this share is one-fifth (World Bank, 2019).

In Malawi, less than 40% of three- to six-year-olds attend an early childhood education programme, while the share drops to 6% in Mali. In 2012, North America and Western Europe spent 8.8% of their education budgets on preschool education; in sub-Saharan Africa the share allocated was only 0.3% (World Bank, 2019).

In primary and secondary education, issues of access and quality loom large in Africa: about 50 million children are not going to school. Africa is also the only region in the world where the number of out-of-school adolescents has risen in recent years, partly because of rapid population growth among the poorest, who also have the lowest access to education.

Learning levels across sub-Saharan Africa are very low: less than 15% of primary school students pass a minimum proficiency threshold in mathematics, while the proportion in reading is lower than 10% (World Bank, *The Human capital Project in Africa*, 2018).

An international comparison of Education Quality made by Altinok et al. (2018) shows that Asian countries seem to outperform countries from other regions at primary and secondary level, followed by North America and Europe. Latin America, the Caribbean, and north Africa are the next best performers, followed by sub-Saharan Africa.

A future-ready education system must ensure that everyone has the basic digital skills to function in society, as well as opportunities to gain intermediate skills that improve employment and enable more meaningful uses of technology.

It encompasses providing children and young people at primary and secondary education level with early exposure to digital skills, computational thinking, skills needed to develop successful careers in the digital economy, creating multiple pathways for adults to build skills at different stages of life.

The situation regarding those factors is not the same across Africa. In fact, while some countries provide children and young people with good access to computers and the internet at school (Egypt, Mauritius, Morocco, and Rwanda are good examples), others do not perform as well (for example, Angola, Ghana, Liberia, Niger, Sierra Leone, and the Sudan).

A future-orientated Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET) education ecosystem requires access to well-developed and modern TVET qualifications; certification and credentialing systems based on agreed industry standards and the identified needs of both learners and employers, updated on a rolling basis to ensure continued relevance; and employer input into its design (WEF, 2017b).

Although there are significant positive efforts to strengthen them, the TVET systems in many African countries are characterised by under-resourced, obsolete or damaged infrastructure; inadequate inter-sectoral linkages; lack of labour management information systems; limited curricula; and inadequate human resources.

As a result, on average, executives think that the quality of vocational training in Africa is low (WEF, 2018b). In tertiary education, access and quality issues are also relevant. Currently, in sub-Saharan Africa, the gross tertiary enrolment ratio is 9% while the world average is 37% - even though African governments spend 20% of their budget on tertiary education, while the world average is 22%.

More than half of the countries considered in the 4IR readiness assessment do not have a university ranked in QS World University Ranking 2018 out of 972 universities. Only Egypt and South Africa stand out with, respectively, five and nine national universities appearing in this ranking (WEF, 2018b).

Moreover, there is an acute lack of Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics (STEM) graduates in Africa. Currently, African college graduates with a STEM degree represent a mere 2% of the continent's total university age population, but are increasingly needed across a wide variety of industries (WEF, *The Future of jobs and skills in Africa*, 2017c).

On average, executives think that scientists and engineers are hardly available in Africa.

They also think that it is difficult to attract and retain talented people from abroad to Africa (WEF, *Readiness for the Future of Production Report 2018*, 2018b).

Finally, the indicators on lifelong learning ecosystems are weaker in Africa compared to others. For example, on average, the unemployed do not benefit from a support system to reskill, and it is more difficult to find high-quality professional training services and companies that invest adequately in training and employee development in Africa (WEF, 2018b).

The skills and competencies needed to succeed in the 4IR are described by the WEF as "21st-century skills" (Soffel, 2016). They are a combination of foundational literacies (literacy, numeracy, scientific literacy, ICT literacy, financial literacy, cultural and civic literacy), soft competencies (critical thinking/problem solving, creativity, communication, collaboration) and character quality (curiosity, initiative, persistence/grit, adaptability, leadership, social and cultural awareness).

Low literacy rates

As a result of the overall low quality of the education system, African countries' performance in foundational literacy is lower, compared to others. For example, according to Unesco, on average, 61% of adults in sub-Saharan Africa can read and write with understanding, which results in one of the lowest adult literacy rates in the world.

Adult literacy rates range from 19% in Mali to 90% in the Seychelles. Fourteen of the 22 countries in the world with literacy rates below 60% are in sub-Saharan Africa. On average, the quality of maths and science education is the lowest in Africa (WEF, 2018b). In general, ICT illiteracy is still at a very high rate in Africa. An analysis of the WEF Future for Production data reveals that the active population in Africa possesses on average lower digital skills (WEF, 2018b) than elsewhere in the world. For example, in Sudan, less than 5% of the youth and adults can perform basic tasks with a computer, while in Morocco, the proportion is generally less than 45%. On soft skills, the scores of African countries are lower on critical thinking in teaching (WEF, 2018b).

As South Africa enters its second era of coalition governance at a municipal level, leaders from all formations must master the art of balancing the act of remaining politically relevant, delivering needed everyday services, and being positive conduits to public and private investments into future productive capacity for the country.

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