

Introducing Africa's first cannabis academy: Q&A with Cheeba Cannabis Academy co-founder Trenton Birch

 By [Ruth Cooper](#)

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One of the latest endeavours to emerge from South Africa's burgeoning cannabis industry is the launch of Cheeba Africa's Cheeba Cannabis Academy, the first learning platform dedicated to cannabis education on the African continent. We chat to CEO and co-founder Trenton Birch for insights into the courses, who they are aimed at and shifting stigmas and combatting misconceptions in the industry.

The first suite of four Cheeba Cannabis Academy short courses are available online and open for enrolment now. The academy will also be offering scholarship programmes and workshops in townships and rural areas.



Cheeba Cannabis Academy qualification is HPCSA-approved

Cheeba Cannabis Academy 8 Oct 2020



A man of many hats, Birch is not only the CEO and co-founder of the academy but he is also the South African director/founding member of the international music education NPO Bridges for Music and member of band Trenton and Free Radical and has worked in the South African creative media education industry for over 10 years.

“Cannabis has the potential to positively impact our economy, facilitating large-scale job creation, uplifting low-income communities, especially in under-served rural areas as well as contributing to the overall improvement of people's health. However, in order for this to happen, we need to provide opportunities for people to develop industry-specific skills. Cheeba Africa is proud to be the first contributor in this space,” says Birch.



Trenton Birch

 Can you give us some insights into the contributing factors that inspired the Cheeba Cannabis Academy and your

role in creating it?

I have had a deep interest in cannabis for many years and have always been interested in getting involved in some way. At one point, six years ago, I took steps to open a cannabis business but with the legal status of the industry at the time, the risk was too high so I put things on hold. When things opened up, I started to research and investigate the best way for me to get involved. I went to LA and Spain to check out their industries and started to assess where I could add the most value to the industry. I then met Medical Marijuana 411 at Cannatech (Cannabis Expo) in Cape Town and had a very good connection with them. They are the global leader in medical cannabis education, and we formed a partnership where we are their exclusive partner for Africa. They have worked very hard to ensure the quality of their content, so we are incredibly proud of our partnership with them.

I was in creative media education for 10 years and have built three campuses in SA so it naturally made sense for me to put this experience into cannabis education and so the universe aligned and Africa's first cannabis education platform, the Cheeba Cannabis Academy, was born.

■ *Who would the academy and the courses be the most beneficial to?*

We have a number of courses that are relevant to different markets.

Our primary market at the moment is the medical industry. Every person working in the medical industry needs to up-skill themselves on cannabis. Whether they support cannabis or not is irrelevant because the general populous want to know about it. The medical industry needs to have the knowledge to answer patient requests otherwise people will just self-medicate, but it is beneficial to consult with a medical practitioner especially for people with underlying health issues.

We are about to launch a grow course, which is for people wanting to grow at home or people wanting to get into industrial farming but needs a place to start building their knowledge.

We are also launching a brand new three-month course with a one-month internship at our new physical campus near Johannesburg, and this is targeted at anyone from school leavers to people wanting to make a career change. Basically, if you want to be in the industry you should study this course. Even if you are in the industry already you need to upskill and formalise your knowledge base.

The general public, with an interest in health and wellness, can also enrol for our courses. This would be for personal benefit and their own health, which is exciting to see.

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What has the response been like since it launched?

We have had an incredible response to what we are doing. There is a lot of curiosity and a lot of people are interested in working in the industry. The industry is still, however, bogged down in slow legislation updates from the government and the pandemic has also slowed things down, so people are really waiting for things to open up, which will benefit the job market.

How have the Medical Marijuana 411 courses been customised to an SA market?

While it is important to acknowledge and embrace international IP, it is imperative that it is localised for relevance. Medical cannabis knowledge is universal to a large degree and the US has been at the forefront of this for a long time so it made sense to get the best content from the best people in the best environment. To localise it, we have added in South African history, legislation and the story of prohibition and how cannabis developed in Africa.

Our grow course that launches shortly, however, is one we developed ourselves. We have some of the best genetics and growing conditions in the world, so it made sense for this to be 100% local.





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■ ***Can you tell us more about the upcoming scholarship programmes and workshops planned in townships and rural areas?***

We are about to launch a Dagga Couple Scholarship, in memory of the late Julian Stobbs for our three-month campus course. We will also be rolling out free workshops in the townships in partnership with the Cannabis Expo next year. In each town when the expo takes place, we will run workshops just before and attendees will get tickets to the expo events. I have been running music workshops in the townships for over 10 years and it is important that everyone has access to cannabis information.

■ ***How do you hope to see the cannabis industry and initiatives such as the Cheeba Cannabis Academy benefiting job creation and boosting the economy in South Africa?***

Cannabis is not the silver bullet that is going to save our economy, however, it has the potential to have a sizable positive impact on our economy and the job market. It is also not just about the local cannabis economy but our potential to export globally and this has huge potential for bringing international currency back to SA. But for the industry to realise its full potential, we need trained staff and we currently do not have a workforce to deliver what is needed. We hope to play our part in this through the academy, where we have partnered with cannabis recruiter 9th Wave, to ensure our students can be placed.



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11 Nov 2020



■ ***What are some of the biggest misconceptions about working and educating in the cannabis market?***

A lot of people see the recreational side of the industry first. It's fun, playful and attractive to work in but that is only the tip of the iceberg. There is the health and wellness side, product manufacturing through industrial hemp, farming, etc. so it is not just about getting high. It is also a profoundly serious industry. A lot of people are taking cannabis to aid with health issues, so there is also a tremendous responsibility for working in this industry. It is fun, but it is still business. Just because you 'love weed' does not mean it's the right industry for you to work in.

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❏ ***What would you say still needs to be done when it comes to decriminalising cannabis in the minds of Africans?***

Education and open dialogue are key.

❏ ***What are some of the stigmas you see working in the cannabis industry and how do you hope to see these shifting over the coming years?***

People still see cannabis as a gateway drug and something that is harmful. This comes from decades of lies and manipulation, so it isn't easy to change. It is, however, shifting very quickly especially in the older 'grey market' where a lot of people are experiencing incredible results using cannabis. So seeing is believing and as our populous starts to experiment more the perception changes and dialogue opens up. Nobody has ever died from a cannabis overdose and cannabis prohibition is one of the greatest lies of our time.



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❏ ***What are some of the pros and cons of working in such an emerging market?***

The pro is that it is exciting to be part of an emerging industry with so many different facets. Despite the legal frustrations and the pace being too slow we are blessed to be experiencing a plant medicine revolution and while it can be confusing it is very interesting. It is also a new industry so there is a lot of freedom to create and build.

❏ ***How do you balance your diverse work commitments of being a band member, NPO Bridges for Music founding member/director and now co-founder of Cheeba Africa?***

I love what I do, so work is not really work for me. I'm happy to work 12/14 hour days for something I believe in. It is not always easy, however, and each project has its ebb and flow, so right now the focus is on Cheeba as it is in the startup phase and as it settles other projects will get more attention. I keep fit and eat well so that also helps me focus.

■ **What would you say are some of the major cannabis and CBD trends for 2021?**

Cannabis private members clubs are opening across the country and this will be a big trend for 2021. People understanding cannabis strains and how they affect us differently will also be a big thing as opposed to just consuming what we buy. People are going to demand higher quality and transparency.

On the CBD side, I am hopeful that many brands out there start to do proper testing and quality control. That is missing a lot at the moment.

Dosing I think will become a hot topic next year. A lot of CBD brands are selling under-specced CBD so are losing trust with the consumer. I'm hopeful that as the public become more educated that they make more demands for accountability and that should flush some of the time-wasters out of the market and clean things up.

Lastly, I think the self-regulation of the industry will become a big thing. There are already steps being taken in this direction, but I think it's going to grow rapidly as we realise how important it is to protect the consumer and ourselves by setting standards.



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■ **What advice would you give to fellow entrepreneurs wanting to succeed in the canna market?**

If you are in cannabis for money find something else. The green rush is a myth. This is a tough industry where you need to be resilient and patient. If you do not use cannabis personally, then you should consider other industries, as this is something that you need to experience. A good place to start is to study and educate yourself through Cheeba Africa's courses.

For more information visit: cheebaafrica.com/pages/cheeba-academy

ABOUT RUTH COOPER

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