

Collaboration is key to youth employment and startup success

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South Africa has an amazing resource of biotechnology industry - the scientists. Scientists are trained at internationally regarded universities such as University of Cape Town, Stellenbosch University, University of the Witwatersrand, University of Pretoria and many others. However, that's just a miniscule part of the biotechnology industry. To have an industry, you need other stakeholders such as private partners and government institutions.



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As Science Bridge founder, I came across many representatives of the private sector who say they want to discover those brilliant minds of South Africa who are cultivated at the universities, but they can't. So question is: What's the problem?

Firstly, it might be funding, because hiring someone for an internship requires immense financial input from the company, therefore startups are unable to afford having interns without additional support. So where does that support come from?

One of the examples is governmental institutions, which could provide funding for interns to become part of the company for short period of time, whilst the company provides its time and resources to train the intern and possibly achieve some internal milestone. Sounds ideal, however in practice things don't work as smoothly, as some startups feel pressure from the government to make space for already pre-selected candidates. As a result, onboarding an intern who does not fit the criteria for the position is perceived as waste of time and money by the company, who already struggles to onboard candidates. This can potentially create resentment towards government-funded internship programmes.

Another way of funding internships in private companies is collaboration between big and small businesses. Hypothetically, a big company can afford to sponsor 30 interns but has space for only 10, therefore the other 20 could be trained in small startups, while being sponsored by the big company. In such way, students can gain valuable industry exposure, small startups do not have to spend a small fortune to train an intern, and big companies can use this opportunity to efficiently spend their transformation budget, making significant impact. You would think this is a win-win-win situation. However, there

are various non-disclosure, non-solicitation agreements in place, which prevent such collaboration or make it very difficult to establish.

Tied up in red tape

Universities have invaluable resources such as research groups, various faculties, access to their facilities and students. Holistically speaking, universities have all a startup needs. So why aren't there many collaborations between biotechnological startups and universities? Firstly, universities love paperwork and committees. To get a project off the ground, it can take roughly five months to complete the paperwork needed merely to send a proposal to the relevant committees. Further, those committees, which meet once per month or every few months will assess the proposal, give feedback and request necessary corrections or approve the project. In this period, the project cannot be started.

The academic institution can afford such timeframe, but in business time is money. The financial loss of two- to three-quarters of a year simply waiting for paperwork to be approved is often a life or death situation for a small company. With this in mind, the biggest loss is for the bright young minds who could greatly benefit from an internship on such a project, developing entrepreneurial skills, communication skills, critical thinking, time management and much, much more. Additionally, such internship could be recognised as part of Honors or Master's Program, which would not delay educational milestones for students.

Therefore we need to re-think collaborations between all three stakeholders: government, industry and universities in order to improve the success of students and, as a result, create a bigger economic impact down the line.

Becoming competitive

Biotechnology in South Africa is still in its infancy stage; there are not many big companies who have their R&D structures locally, and often companies invest in manufacturing and distribution facilities only. However, if we want to be compete with European, Australasian and North American biotechnology markets, we need to change the old-school approach of both government and universities, as well as improve collaboration between all stakeholders.

For this Science Bridge is proposing a competitive internship programme, which would be supported by all parties: government, universities and private sector.

Universities should change their policies in regards to external projects as well as recognition of industry internships. The government should allow traditional competitive approach to internships, with recruitment of students who apply by sending a CV and cover letter. Such applications could be preceded by an application bootcamp, such as one of the courses already available on Science Bridge website.

This competitive structure would prepare graduates for real life application systems and equip them with important job-hunting skills. This would allow for internships, where students could learn relevant business skills as well as conduct scientific experiments, which would contribute to progress of the startups. Such a talent pipe-line would allow not only the

retention of talented students in the local job market but it would also create socio-economic empowerment of biotechnology sector.

Is the proposed system a golden solution to the current situation? I don't know, but shall we find out?

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Martyna Scibiorek is the founder of Science Bridge, a company that specialises in stimulating the biotechnology sector of South Africa by providing various human capital management solutions such as coaching, networking, facilitation, training and much more.

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