

Global Design Thinking Challenge: Making learning in schools more sustainable with design thinking

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Crucial educational indicators on the African continent are lagging. And this is despite huge improvements in pre- and primary school enrollment since the turn of the century, and the high percentage of African countries' GDP investment in education, which is on par with the highest in the world. And now, as the worst of a global pandemic subsides, Africa confronts an aftermath, in which educational gains have been reversed and fissures have grown wider.

The basic building blocks of quality education must be addressed, and urgently. Equal access for genders, equipped teachers and decent resources are essential – especially if Africa is to tap into the wealth of human capital that exists in its burgeoning youth population. But while we work to improve these key markers, it's also important to ask ourselves: What future is education preparing us for?

“Preparing for the world of work can be a nerve-racking experience in this day and age,” says Richard Perez, founding director of [UCT's Hasso Plattner d-school Afrika](#), who explains how technology, globalisation and the rapid rate of environmental change is transforming our basic understanding about what we need to know and the skills that will be essential to thriving in the future. “The most relevant skills today take a human-centred approach that is big on problem exploration, empathy and co-creation, understands the value in connecting with local realities, knowledge and systems, and recognises the power of creativity and wild ideas.”

“We must focus on future learning skills: collaboration, communication, critical thinking, and creativity. And we can even take it a step further by including the Design Thinking mindset in education programmes built on empathy experimentation and engagement principles to ensure inclusivity”, adds Claudia Nicolai, academic director of the [HPI School of Design Thinking](#).

Global design thinking for global education

In a global community effort, the d-school Afrika's is joining 12 Global Design Thinking Alliance members in tackling the topic of basic education challenges in Africa and beyond, and the future outcomes of education. As we co-develop solutions, we'll keep in mind the targets of the fourth United Nations sustainable development goal of quality education, including equal access, affordability and relevance.

The Global Design Thinking Alliance is a network of institutions that teach, research, and further develop the methods and mindsets of Design Thinking. Bringing together Design Thinking schools from 12 countries on four continents, [the Global Design Thinking Challenge](#) focuses on sustainable learning in schools in Africa and beyond.

From a design-thinking perspective, we wish to challenge established notions of what education must look like, and instead centre learning. We hope to build on the principles of experimentation, engagement and empathy to impact the learning environment in all its facets, whether we are looking at challenges related to students, teachers, administrators, policy makers or the system as a whole.

“The goal of this global impact initiative is to challenge current educational systems, bring the Design Thinking mindsets to schools, and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all,” says programme lead Sherif Osman.

Multidisciplinary student teams from each institution will collaborate in their local contexts and apply design thinking to develop innovative solutions ensuring inclusive and equitable quality education. This way, we work together to connect a global problem with meaningful impact at the local level.

Our learning approach is to combine Design Thinking from a life-centred perspective with human-centeredness and systems thinking. We apply life-centred design to an innovation process; we keep in mind the entire planet. We zoom out to view the big picture, and we zoom in to discover even the most minor details. We look far ahead into the future and consider all possible consequences when developing a solution to a problem.

The Global Design Thinking Challenge runs for four weeks, kicking off at the [Design Thinking ImpAct Conference](#) on 15 September at the Hasso Plattner Institute in Potsdam, Germany. The winning teams have the opportunity to present their most inspiring solutions at the [d.confestival in Cape Town](#) on 14 October.

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