

Venturing towards accessible education

 By Pasqua Heard

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Educate24, a new online learning platform, has launched in the midst of South Africa's education crisis. The platform aims to make skills - necessary for the workplace and for personal development - more accessible to South Africans.



Elsamari Botha and Nawal du Toit

Soccer publication, *Soccer Laduma* created Educate24 in response to its readership showing a dire need for education and jobs. Heading up the platform are Peter du Toit, CEO of Educate24 and Brands Laduma, Nawal du Toit, general manager of Educate24 and Elsamari Botha, course convener at Educate24 and a senior lecturer at UCT.

Educate24 offers courses from R399, teaching assistants who provide feedback to students throughout the course, as well as a SmartCV function that assists students with creating their online CV. Educate24 also offers a free online and phone line service to provide career counselling in the major local dialect. Read more about the Educate24's services on Bizcommunity [here](#) and [on the Educate24 website](#).

The question of access

One of the demands from the ongoing student protests across South Africa is the need for accessible education.

In explaining Educate24's role in the South African education context currently, Botha says, "We cannot say that online education is the solution to this problem [of inaccessibility to education], as the problem is much more complex than that and really needs multiple stakeholders to get involved, but what online education can do is give everyone access to top educators. While this is already possible with online training courses through competitors, Educate24 focuses on skills that are relevant to the South African market.

"Educate24 does not provide you with a degree or diploma, and if that is what you need for your career, you should not be disheartened by what is going on at the universities now. Educate24 is for the person who cannot afford (be it with time or cost) to go to a university or college, but still needs to learn a specific skill, so that he can either get the job, or get ahead in the job. It is for the manager or entrepreneur who is forced to undertake tasks that he or she is maybe not prepared for or trained in, who needs a practical solution fast. Therefore, we focus on providing people with a practical next step: that practical skill that will get you moving towards where you want to go."

According to Botha, in order to make their courses available to those in a lower income bracket, Educate24 has corporate sponsorship and their own CSR programme which will enable the release of a number of free courses soon.

Nawal du Toit adds that accessibility and affordability were amongst the key aims of Educate24, "Obviously technology plays a huge role in making this happen, and with 65% of the population having access to a mobile phone, that is within reach. We've tackled this solution by ensuring that the bulk of our courses are priced at R399. We will soon have monthly debit order options available as we understand that for the poor even R399 is a stretch. This way, they can pay R30 per month and give themselves the opportunity to upskill and move ahead in their careers and their lives."



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According to du Toit, accessibility is also achieved through the platform's low data costs. "All one needs is a R20 bundle to complete the course. Course chapters are downloadable, so you don't have to be connected to engage in the course content."

Skills versus degrees

In a recent [opinion article on News24](#), trend analyst Dion Chang addresses the rising phenomenon that often soft skills, including cognitive skills, are more sought after than degrees.

According to Botha, the article by Chang correctly highlights the discrepancy that has occurred between industry and tertiary education. However, "the difficult role and responsibilities that tertiary institutions have in this climate isn't fully explained." Botha says, "The blame does not (only) lie with tertiary institutions, but also with the schooling system for:

- 1) inadequately preparing learners for further (whatever that form might take) education;
- 2) not breeding a culture of continuous education (which is an absolute necessity with the rate of change introduced by technology); and
- 3) not focusing on building the critical thinking skills that the current job market requires."

Technology disrupts the workforce

Shifting her attention to South African universities, Botha says, "Technology is disrupting the workforce faster than many qualifications can keep up with. In digital marketing, for example, new platforms and new features on existing platforms get introduced almost daily and what consumers want to hear, where and how, changes with these updates and innovations. The typical university syllabus has a much slower turnaround time. However, good institutions focus on teaching core theory and principles (which can easily be applied to new innovations and changes). Through case studies, for example, students are encouraged to apply these principles and critically evaluate courses of action."

Botha points out that universities cannot be entirely to blame when students find themselves lacking modern skills for the workplace, as limited state funding plays a role too. "We [at the universities] therefore indeed focus on teaching students these critical thinking and problem-solving skills that Dion refers to. This becomes near impossible, however, when faced with large undergraduate classes and limited resources for support in the form of tutors, markers, etc. This often means that there is precious little time to stay up-to-date with industry trends, and update the syllabus to reflect the changing industry needs."

Botha explains that technology helps overcome some of the aforementioned barriers by transforming education to enable people to have access to top educators across the globe and to stay up-to-date with industry trends through online short courses.

“We need to rethink what 'an education' means. I'm guessing that the workforce of the future will be able to tailor employees' 'degrees' not only from internal resources and training, but with a mix of university, private (e.g. Educate24) and in-house courses,” concludes Botha.

ABOUT PASQUA HEARD

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