

## **Transcending Boundaries to solve Africa's biggest challenge: squandered talent**

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Africa's potential is boundless. Home to almost 200 million young people aged 15 to 24 and blessed with abundant natural resources, it has the capacity for incredible economic development. Unfortunately, the African education system faces numerous challenges, and what should hold immense potential is instead a ticking time bomb.

High quality secondary, vocational, technical and higher education systems are key drivers of economic growth in Africa. An educated and skilled population is critical to the continent's future, but there is a growing imbalance between the need to ensure quality education and available resources. In most of the countries, the annual budget allocated by the government has not kept pace with the need, but universities are welcoming more and more students. In Cote d'Ivoire, for example, there is a total capacity of 20,000 seats, but public universities faced a demand of 60,000 new students in 2014 and 80,000 in 2015. Because of that pressure on the public infrastructures, the quality of training has declined and the education system has become more irrelevant, as the system is unable to produce the quality of graduate students needed by the labour market. African countries have to show more imagination and creativity to adapt and refine their education systems. Due to an increasing demand for talent, the private sector has the most to gain from a systemic change in how effectively and efficiently youth skills are matched to jobs. As such, it must be at the forefront of finding solutions to youth unemployment in Africa.

The development of higher education in Africa is currently facing three major challenges. Firstly, supply and demand. While there are opportunities for graduates in the public sector, the private sector has little to offer. Our universities unfortunately offer programs which develop mostly general skills. The public administration is more likely to hire people with general skills, while the private sector looks for more specific and professional skills. Graduates therefore have less chance of being hired in the private sector. There is a real mismatch between the type of training programmes available and labour market needs, which means the majority of graduates cannot find employment easily.

Secondly, there are simply not enough schools for the number of pupils interested in higher education. Again, in Cote d'Ivoire, there are only five public universities able which can offer only 20,000 seats each year. The lack of capacity for a high pupil intake means teaching conditions have deteriorated rapidly.

Thirdly, there is a lack of funding for training and research, especially for equipment in science and technologies, engineering and medical sciences. Low educational expenses lead to inadequate staffing, equipment and materials. In these circumstances, maintaining the quality of education at an acceptable level becomes a challenge.

Finally, many students, looking for quality in education, leave the country for foreign universities and only a few will return to serve the country with their talents.

In light of the increasing need to solve what is becoming the continent's biggest problem – squandered talent – private companies can step in and help. Professionals can help judge universities' programme content and help the development of professional qualifications.

A business chairperson on the board of a school can advise teaching staff on a curriculum which better mirrors the reality of the current labour market. Many professionals are involved in the education system as teachers or lecturers. The presence of professionals is essential to the balance of education provided and the adequacy of training with a labour market in constant evolution.

Private companies can also help to implement tutored projects. Under the responsibility of a teacher, a group of students can lead a professional project for a sponsor, be it a company or trade association. These projects, which can be technical, events-driven or humanitarian, are an opportunity for students to work in professional situations on a specific case for which they must demonstrate autonomy and initiative. This not only allows them to discover the business environment, it also gives schools an idea of how graduates would cope in a professional situation.

Businesses can help provide alternating courses at university, which intersperse experience in a private company with theoretical training periods at university, whether through a professionalisation contract or an apprenticeship contract. They can also promote exchanges between universities, financing students trips and tuition fees for one semester in foreign universities, with a view to students gaining experience of studying and living abroad. Such multicultural and international experience is essential for today's global labour market.

Financing universities and supplying them with advanced technology equipment is another key way for private companies to contribute to a higher quality of education. Digital libraries will allow students to have access to infinite sources of data and building more rooms and amphitheatres will increase university capacity. Helping to implement Massive Open Online Courses and distance learning can also be a solution to the overcrowded public institutions of higher education. Funding associate professors' trips and scientific laboratories, research and innovation, would also help. Finally, corporations should grant scholarships to the best African students to help finance their studies at prestigious institutions around the world, so that they can apply their knowledge in the African field. Olam started doing this in 2015 through the [Olam Scholarship Programme](#), which aims to create a generation of change catalysts for Sub Saharan Africa.

Ultimately, the inclusion of the private sector in the production of knowledge is a great benefit for both the economy and society, as state universities seek new revenue and companies try to close a yawning skills gap in fast-changing industries. Equally importantly, by motivating local staff to invest in local talent and recognizing the impact it can have on business, the private sector will see long-term and profitable investments on employment. It is the private sector that has most to gain, by harnessing a wide talent pool, trained by the private sector and eager to enter the labour market. In turn, such partnerships would contribute to the creation of a successful cycle. Private sector players would help the government fill gaps in the educational system, resulting in sustainable growth and a positive net social impact.