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SOUTH AFRICA

'Historic' partnership to turn graduates into job creators

Meneesha Govender 17 October 2019

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As South Africa faces catastrophic unemployment rates, the South African Technology Network (SATN) and various stakeholders are partnering to ensure that graduates "are no longer job seekers but job creators", according to SATN CEO Dr Anshu Padayachee.

Speaking at the opening of a five-day short course for emerging graduate entrepreneurs held in Durban from 7 to 11 October, Padayachee said that, while students have good ideas for creating viable start-ups, acquiring funding for their businesses or innovations appears to be a major challenge.

In an effort to address this challenge, SATN has partnered with Cork Institute of Technology, Galway-Mayo Institute of Technology (GMIT) and the Irish Embassy, as well as local partners such as the Department of Labour, the Department of Higher Education and Training, investors, businesses and funding agencies, to ensure that students have the necessary tools to be successful entrepreneurs.

Practical solutions

"This is a historic moment in South Africa in that we have researched, developed and are implementing a state-of-the-art practical solution to reduce unemployment, increase skills, create innovation and job opportunities for the large number of unemployed youth, women and disabled people in our country," said Padayachee.

"We trust this will contribute significantly to lowering unemployment and reducing high levels of poverty. The SATN member institutions are committed to participating in this social contract with government, business, investment entities and communities to ensure that we tackle these pressing issues in our country."

Together with the Irish delegation and local academics, SATN has devised a theoretical and practical five-day course curriculum that is aligned with the South African Qualifications Authority. A total of 60 students from 11 South African universities of technology (or technology-focused universities), the South African Technology Innovation Agency and two African universities (Namibia University of Science and Technology and the Technical University of Kenya) are involved in the programme which includes an assessment and certification component.

As the programme grows, it is hoped to benefit not only South African entrepreneurs, but more students in other parts of Africa. SATN estimates that, by the end of 2019, there will be 50 new start-ups all headed by students participating in this course.

International partners

The Hincks Centre for Entrepreneurship Excellence, which is part of the School of Business at Cork Institute of Technology, is a partner in theoretical research, staff exchange and curriculum development for the programme. Dr Helen McGuirk, who heads the centre and has been involved with the programme since a pilot session was held in Galway, Ireland, in May 2019, said the Hincks Centre "supports entrepreneurship in all its forms through education, training and research".

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"We were delighted to welcome students and staff from SATN to Ireland in May [2019]," she said. "This visit gave us the opportunity to develop and pilot the new short course to students and facilitate a workshop for faculty on contemporary entrepreneurship education, cutting-edge research and the importance of an entrepreneurship ecosystem in higher education institutes."

In South Africa, McGuirk was part of the team that prepared and marked the assessment component of the short course. She also facilitated a 'train the trainer' session for faculty of participating universities.

'The local connection'

Nontokozo Ngcobo, manager of the Durban University of Technology (DUT) Entrepreneurship Centre in Pietermaritzburg, is co-facilitator of the entrepreneurship curriculum, taking it to local academics, entrepreneurship support departments and students. DUT's partnership in this programme has been undertaken with the aim to establish a more sustainable entrepreneurship ecosystem so students and faculty can collectively have a greater impact and create economic value in South Africa.

"One of the DUT's strategic objectives is to contribute towards strengthening innovation and entrepreneurial education platforms as new entrepreneurial centres, including the DUT Midlands Entrepreneurship Centre, are established and as the university transforms into being entrepreneurial," said Ngcobo.

"The centre is designed to provide entrepreneurial education using a more action-orientated approach with the latest entrepreneurial education pedagogies and practical tools."

Part of the delegation that visited Ireland in May, Ngcobo said: "The aim of the visit was to expose South African students to an Irish perspective of entrepreneurship education, practice and ethics. It was also to benchmark with Irish universities on entrepreneurship pedagogies and curriculum delivery."

'People must remain employed'

At the opening of the programme Teboho Maruping, commissioner of the Unemployment Insurance Fund (UIF) in South Africa, stressed the South African government's commitment to the programme. Of particular concern for him was that 45% of the people walking through the doors of the UIF to claim assistance are 45 years old and younger and should still be working. "People must remain employed," said Maruping.

Quoting Malcolm Gladwell, Maruping said by being involved in programmes like these, stakeholders can effectively help turn the unemployment time bomb into a "positive epidemic".

He pledged that all up-and-coming entrepreneurs on the programme will receive assistance from the UIF in the way of 'free' labour for 12 months: people on the UIF database will be matched to a new business that develops out of the programme, where they can learn new skills or build on existing skills while claiming compensation from the UIF.

"It's a simple idea but I hope it's a way to start a positive epidemic in South Africa," the commissioner said.

Student feedback

University World News spoke to Sibulele Tyala, a second-year Software Development student at the Central University of Technology (CUT) in the Free State, South Africa. He, along with five other students from different departments at CUT, attended the programme in Durban.

In 2017 this aspiring entrepreneur began his first business selling clothing door-to-door. He noticed that, while people did not necessarily want the clothing, they bought it because they admired his work ethic. Today, the young entrepreneur is working on building a

digital marketing agency and business acquisition venture.

Tyala described last week's course as "tremendously beneficial".

"From business models to marketing to branding – we were put through five days of intense but enjoyable training that I found tremendously beneficial.

"Hungry, aspiring entrepreneurs met high-performance academics and established entrepreneurs who taught us how to network and connected us with individuals who have achieved what we aim to achieve."

Tyala said he valued the expertise and perspectives shared by the Irish delegation because, even while Ireland and South Africa are so different, "any marketplace will reward people who are willing to put in the hard work".

His words were echoed by Michael Shovelin, a lecturer in finance at GMIT, who said: "If this week is anything to go by, it looks like we are on the cusp of a wave of ongoing collaboration and partnership, involving participation by both students and staff in all aspects of entrepreneurship. It is fascinating to see that many of the challenges and obstacles to establishing, growing and developing a business are the same despite the fact that our countries are in different hemispheres."

This story is sponsored by SATN.

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