



## **THE UWC DIGITAL INCLUSION AND FEMALE ENTREPRENEURSHIP SERIES**

### **The Importance of Education in Reducing the Digital Divide**

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When reflecting on issues of digital inclusion and female entrepreneurship, I believe it is important to start by considering South Africa's skills landscape. According to the global gender gap index, South Africa is ranked number 18 out of the 156 countries surveyed. The index measures a number of factors, including economic participation, education, health and mortality rates, as well as political empowerment. In fact, South Africa is ranked highly on political empowerment, but when it comes to economic participation and education, the sectors which have the greatest impact on digital inclusion, the numbers tell a different story.

What the data shows is that we have to ensure universal access to digital skills programmes and related resources for every town, city and village across South Africa. The current government policies are geared to provide universal access to basic education support to every child, but the reality is that the education pipeline is very leaky, and South Africa is losing far too many young people in the education system.

Further evaluation should thus take place to determine how our education environment prepares and motivates young people to take up entrepreneurship. We should question the extent to which our entrepreneurship ecosystem enables young people to flourish, regardless of the socio-economic challenges that they face.

In gaining universal access to primary education, most young girls have a good start in South Africa with the opportunity to build digital skills and draw upon other resources to give them support and ideas about their first ventures into entrepreneurship. But the pipeline starts to leak quickly when they reach secondary and higher education, because various social and economic factors come into play that have an impact on their decision to remain in higher education.

### **The Power of partnerships**

The Zenzeleni project of the University of the Western Cape is a good example of a community-powered intervention enabling digital access. Situated in the rural Mankosi community, Zenzeleni is South Africa's first community co-operative providing cheap communication resources to bridge the digital divide, while specifically showcasing the potential of partnerships in reducing the digital divide.

The results of Zenzeleni have been very encouraging and clearly show the way forward in supporting collective community projects to address technology access needs. Financial support should be made available to such projects.

### **Ensuring Coordination**

From a policy perspective South Africa fares well as a country, but this primary success does not always translate directly into solving the needs of female entrepreneurs, particularly in the technology business sectors. Interventions thus need to present an understanding of the needs of female entrepreneurs, avail an easily accessible skills and funding process, and ensure clear access to market.

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As a key policy objective, early exposure to key technology areas through education, should continue to be a priority for South Africa. Here schools, TVET colleges and institutions of higher learning can play a major role in reducing the digital divide, providing the necessary skills to girls which will expose them to digital innovation from a very young age. Except for institutions of education, business and NGOs should continue to play a key role in entrepreneurship programmes that are geared towards supporting women.

Research institutions can also play a key role in bringing together the most important players to support grassroots level needs, and this would particularly be beneficial for young entrepreneurs working within areas of emerging technology. Such partnerships can play a critical role in supporting female entrepreneurs in working towards the use of key technologies. The insights provided by academic research can further enhance the industrial and commercial offering for these women.