

Bring on the books

Totsie Memela-Khambula, CEO of Eduloan, wants to reinvent SA by making education accessible, affordable and fashionable.

Totsie Memela-Khambula



By [Mandy de Waal](#), ITWeb contributor
14 Jun 2011

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Education is a sustainable route to wealth creation, says Totsie Memela-Khambula.

South Africa has the highest youth unemployment rate in the world, with one-third of youngsters between 15 and 24 years old out of a job, school or place of higher learning. Another shocking statistic is the number of youths in jail. A third of all those imprisoned are under the age of 25.

Totsie Memela-Khambula is a woman who wants to do something about this. Previously the head of PostBank, changing the lives of the marginalised is a major focus for Memela-Khambula. At the South African Post Office she did much to improve the lot of the unbanked. Now she's focusing on tackling education in South Africa by helping people get affordable loans for learning.

"Access to finance enables a better life for people," says Memela-Khambula. "If you look at poor countries that have grown year-on-year, it is because of the programmes that have been put in place to ensure access to finance." Memela-Khambula says that too often people look for the easy way out of poverty, which is crime or to become a 'tenderpreneur'. "This is hardly sustainable and this is why we see so many young people in jail. The sustainable route to wealth creation is, of course, through education."

Invaluable lesson

This passion for education comes from Memela-Khambula's mother. "My father was a gardener who later worked as a clerical person at the JSE, and my mother was a domestic worker. It was my mother who taught us about the value of learning through emphasising education. I was able to go to school and create a better life for my own children. My mother always used to say that the only thing that can take you out of poverty is education."

Lose the bling

At school you are important if you have bling or a particular brand of shoe.

Established in 1996, Eduloan was SA's first private company to focus solely on educational loans and has financed over R2.7 billion in these loans to 530 000 tertiary students. Early in 2007, the company did a BEE deal with Circle Capital Ventures, an empowerment investment company chaired by Dr Mamphela Ramphele and led by her son Hlumelo Biko, and backed by Standard Bank.

A big issue for Memela-Khambula is the disparity between universities and public Further Education and Training (FET) colleges. "For every four university graduates there is one person in an FET college who develops the basic skills to become a plumber or an electrician. When you tell people about FET colleges they are seen as 'uncool', but the truth is that South Africa needs builders, town planners, civil engineers and electrical engineers to build this country's infrastructure. Yes there's a place for people with a Bachelor's Degree in Arts, but the balance is currently skewed."

Employment equity remains a top complaint for IT companies, but working with FET colleges to ensure they deliver appropriate skills with a more ready pool of engineers, computer programmers, systems engineers and IT managers would benefit this country's ICT sector. "What FET colleges need to do is to start ensuring that they too attract the best skills in the marketplace. They also need to copy university outreach programmes that advertise at schools and do much to make their offering more attractive."

Pecking order

Memela-Khambula says another issue is that South Africans have a snobbish social pecking order that needs to change. "We see plumbers at the bottom of the ladder, yet loads of Mozambicans and Zimbabweans have these skills which are very valuable to society and the economy. We need to change this thinking. We need to balance the intake at FET colleges and we need to ensure

that when people go to university, they have the ability to pass. We really don't prepare our children well enough for university.”

The biggest challenge, however, is changing people's mindsets about the importance of education. “We need to do this at a community level and teach people about the culture of learning. At school you are important if you have bling or a particular brand of shoe, rather than being a person who focuses on books. If you are hard-working at school you are seen as a nerd. We need to teach people that being a nerd is very cool, and this is the responsibility of teachers, parents and the entire community.”

This is all a matter of values, according to Memela-Khambula, who says people need to reprioritise their values to put education ahead of materialism. She's 100% right, of course, and making school cool could not only improve unemployment and entrepreneurialism, but would impact the rate of youth in prisons. Education contributes directly to economic growth. Viva education, viva!



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