

# Smart Skills Centres can bridge the digital skills divide

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Last year, Qatar launched its first 'Education City' in an ambitious attempt to revolutionise education infrastructure development. The city houses 50 local and international education-related institutions offering education from basic kindergarten level to doctoral programmes, all in one, centralised space. Qatar's Education City is located on the western edge of its capital city, Doha, and includes technology labs, primary and secondary schools, technical and vocational colleges, innovation incubators, and eight foreign university campuses including top global universities such as Carnegie Mellon (a private research university based in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania). This provides a central hub for education excellence and for innovation and collaboration to thrive.



In South Africa, the skills development landscape is vast and fragmented, with multiple stakeholders from skills development providers to skills authorities such as [Chieta](#). Recent data from the Boston Consulting Group suggested that South Africa had the largest share of mismatched workers, at a staggering 50% of 30 emerging market economies. The skills mismatch is a root cause and one of the main contributing factors to the high unemployment rate in the country. According to Statistics SA, unemployment in the fourth quarter of 2021 was 35,3% with youth unemployment at a stratospheric 66,5%. The high unemployment rates require decisive action on the part of government, business, and civil society.

Focusing on the skills mismatch as a root cause of the unemployment problem, leads to a series of questions. Does South Africa need a grand strategy on skills matching and what would that look like? How do we promote local and international collaboration in addressing the skills mismatch in South Africa? Does South Africa need a 'Skills City' in every province to bring together the local and international skills community for more positive results? How we bridge the digital skills divide between urban and rural?

A coordinated effort at greater collaboration may take the form of a dedicated Skills City. To bridge the digital skills divide between urban and rural may require Smart Skills Centres in every corner of the country. This could form the pillars of a grand strategy aimed at enabling skills development for the future of work.

The concept of Smart Skills Centres is aimed at bridging the digital skills divide by taking skills development and training directly to rural communities. In this way, the cost burden placed on poor learners such as transport and data costs are eradicated, and learners are more engaged through the immersive skills experience.

Chieta's very first, fully automated, Smart Skills Centre is planned for Sadhana Bay in the Western Cape. This will be followed by the KZN centre in the deep rural community of Babanango. Chieta's plan is to have a fully automated, end-to-end digitised, Smart Skills Centre in every province of the country by 2025. This will provide the basis for bridging the digital skills divide in nuanced ways. For example, the Smart Skills Centres will provide digital boardrooms, digitised training experiences such as virtual reality (VR) training for welders and chemical operators, virtual interview facilities, free training courses with credentials, and many more digitised skills development and training programmes in collaboration with institutions of higher learning.

Smart Skills Centres may provide innovative ways for responsible organisations to access work areas such as digitised boardrooms and connect to services using affordable or subsidised workspaces. Our Smart Skills Centres will reconfigure our value delivery model by connecting skills services and data in innovative and collaborative ways to create new value. Ultimately, Smart Skills Centres may provide a means for addressing the skills mismatch by ensuring that industry gets closer to talent in more digitised ways, and digital skills such as coding, software development, and data analytics, are popularised and provided to community members from the comfort of their own communities.

An increasingly digital world requires digital solutions, and Chieta's Smart Skills Centres may be the start of a digital skills revolution.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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