Reconfiguring teaching and learning approaches in SADC Education Systems

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ABSTRACT

The adaptation of education systems in the Southern African Development Community (SADC) region to the demands of 21st Century learning is fraught with difficulties. The dominance of traditional teacher-centred approaches restricts students' capacity to acquire digital literacy, critical thinking and problem-solving abilities. Problems, including outdated curricula, strict evaluation procedures, poor teacher preparation, and a lack of digital integration, continue to exist despite initiatives to increase educational access. The efficiency of education in the region is further hampered by socio-economic constraints, infrastructural shortcomings, and differences in policy implementation. This paper looks at how teaching and learning are currently being carried out in the SADC region, and suggests strategy revision in line with international best practices. To improve the calibre and applicability of education, this paper promotes the merging of learner-centred, competency-based and technology-driven pedagogies. The paper emphasises the need for digital transformation, teacher capacity-building and curriculum innovation to provide learners with skills they will need in the future. The paper also looks at how public-private partnerships might help close the digital divide and improve technical and vocational education. The findings indicate that a multi-stakeholder strategy is necessary for SADC countries to effect significant educational transformation. The adoption of flexible learning approaches, investment in digital infrastructure, and policy harmonisation must be given top priority by governments. To successfully apply cutting-edge teaching techniques, educators require ongoing professional development, and businesses can help by coordinating education with labour market demands. To guarantee fair access to high-quality education, inclusive education frameworks should also consider the requirements of marginalised students. SADC can establish a dynamic, skills-oriented education system that promotes social and economic development by reorganising teaching and learning approaches. The paper concludes that to close the skills gap, improve employability and put the region in a competitive position in the global knowledge economy, swift and long-term reforms are required.

Keywords: reconfiguring teaching, competency-based learning, inclusive education, SADC education, teaching and learning

Introduction

Globally, education systems have changed dramatically, moving from traditional teacher-centred methods to more dynamic, student-centred pedagogies. Teachers were the main providers of knowledge in the past, and teaching and learning were mostly dependent on rote memorisation. More participatory and competency-based approaches have gradually supplanted this model, which dominated classrooms for decades, especially in the wake of globalisation, technology improvements and growing needs for 21st Century skills. Learner-centred approaches, which combine digital technologies, problem-based learning and inclusive pedagogies to improve educational outcomes, have been adopted by many established and emerging nations (Schweisfurth, 2013). By emphasising critical thinking, innovation and adaptability above rote memorisation, nations like Finland, Singapore and Canada have effectively transformed their education systems (Darling-Hammond, 2017).

Education systems in the Southern African Development Community (SADC) region are still facing obstacles that prevent the full implementation of contemporary teaching and learning strategies. Even though there has been some improvement in educational access, problems, including out-of-date curricula, strict exams, a lack of teachers and a lack of integration of digital learning, continue to exist (Makgato, 2014). Although there are still differences in terms of quality and results, SADC nations have a comparatively high net primary education enrolment rate of 50.5%, 61.78% for secondary education, and 65% for tertiary education, (Chama-Chiliba *et al*., 2024). The World Bank, UNESCO and UNICEF (2021) note that more than 50% of learners in several SADC countries complete primary school without gaining a basic understanding of reading and numeracy, which raises questions regarding the efficacy of present teaching strategies.

Considering these difficulties, SADC education systems urgently need to reconsider and reorganise their teaching and learning approaches. To raise the standard of education, many nations outside SADC have adopted competency-based curricula, blended learning models, and lifelong learning-focused policies (Chandan *et al*., 2023). For example, as part of its Vision 2050 Strategy, Rwanda has incorporated information and communication technology (ICT) into its education system, while Kenya has switched to a competency-based curriculum (CBC) to encourage students to think critically and develop practical skills (Langworthy & Hirsch-Allen, 2022). SADC nations, which need to close current gaps and make sure that their education systems are adaptable to the needs of a world that is changing quickly, may learn a lot from these reforms.

The pressing need to align SADC education systems with international teaching and learning trends inspired this paper. Adopting cutting-edge teaching strategies that equip students for the workforce of the future is essential as the region's economies work to become knowledge-driven and competitive. To improve student engagement, critical thinking and the development of practical skills, this paper

examines the current teaching and learning approaches used in SADC nations, assesses their efficacy, and suggests ways to restructure education. This paper intends to provide a framework for changing education in SADC countries to better prepare students for opportunities both domestically and abroad, by evaluating regional restrictions and incorporating lessons from global best practices.

Education Systems Approach in SADC Countries

Due to socio-economic factors, legislative changes and historical legacies, the education systems of SADC nations combine traditional and cutting-edge teaching and learning methodologies. Although there are continuous attempts to embrace more competency-based and inclusive approaches, many nations still mostly rely on teacher-centred, exam-driven methodologies (Chandan *et al*., 2023). South Africa, for example, has put in place the Curriculum and Assessment Policy Statement (CAPS), which promotes structured learning. However, the policy has drawn criticism for being overly content-heavy and restricting critical thinking (Kokela, 2017). Namibia, on the other hand, has launched the Learner-Centred Education (LCE) approach which promotes interactive teaching methods. However, its full implementation has been hampered by issues to do with teacher training and resource allocation (Awases, 2015). The Government of Zimbabwe has fundamentally transformed its education and introduced the heritage-based Education 5.0 philosophy, which is focused on equipping learners with critical thinking, problem-solving and entrepreneurial skills that enable the generation of innovations, the establishment of start-up companies, and the production of goods and services which benefit society. With programmes like the Nine-Year Continuous Basic Education Reform, which encourage flexibility in learning routes, Mauritius has made progress in integrating digital learning (Ittea *et al*., 2022). Although these strategies represent advancements, the efficacy and scalability of these reforms are still impacted by differences in SADC nations' technical infrastructure, teacher preparation and resource availability.

SADC Education Agenda

Regional and global frameworks for enhancing the quality, accessibility and relevance of education serve as the foundation for the SADC's education agenda. The goal of the agenda is to provide inclusive, equitable and lifelong learning opportunities for everyone (Chakabwata, 2025). It is based on the SADC Protocol on Education and Training (1997) and is in line with the African Union's Agenda 2063 and the Sustainable Development Goal 4 (SDG 4) (Elfert, 2019). Expanding early childhood education, improving technical and vocational education and training (TVET), integrating digital learning to close the technological divide, and harmonising education policies among member states, are some of the main areas of concentration. To better meet the demands of the labour market, the SADC Regional Indicative Strategic Development Plan (RISDP) 2020-2030 also highlights the necessity of curricula revisions (Drewes & van Aswegen, 2024), competency-based education and teacher capacity building.

Notwithstanding these initiatives, obstacles like inequalities in funding for education, gaps in the application of policies, and deficiencies in infrastructure, continue to stand in the way of realising the full potential of the agenda.

Challenges in Meeting the SADC Agenda

Many obstacles stand in the way of achieving the full potential of the SADC education agenda. Inadequate funding is one of the main challenges facing member states, which results in a lack of trained teachers, inadequate resources for learning, and subpar infrastructure, particularly in rural areas (Chakabwata & Mukazi, 2022). Differences in how policies are implemented across nations lead to varied success; some countries make headway on curricula reforms, while others lag behind because of political unrest or financial limitations. Another significant issue is the sluggish adoption of ICT and digital learning in the classroom, which is made worse by the fact that many schools lack access to digital devices, electricity and internet connectivity (Ittea *et al*., 2022). Efforts to switch from traditional teaching methods to competency-based and learner-centred approaches are weakened by a lack of teachers and insufficient professional development programmes. The quality and accessibility of education are further hampered by socio-economic issues like poverty, high dropout rates and language obstacles (Chakabwata & Mukazi, 2022). The goal of a unified and future-ready education system in SADC is still elusive without strategic investment, improved regional cooperation and creative reforms.

Need for Reconfiguration

The pressing need for high-quality, timely and future-focused education drives the need to rethink teaching and learning strategies in SADC education systems. Many classes in the region still use traditional teacher-centred teaching approaches, which have not been successful in giving students the digital, critical thinking and problem-solving skills they need to succeed in the workforce of the 21st Century (Urenje *et al*., 2021). Effective learning outcomes are nevertheless hampered by issues including outdated curricula, strict evaluation processes, and restricted use of technology, notwithstanding regulatory initiatives (Chakabwata & Mukazi, 2022). Educational institutions must transition to competency-based and flexible learning strategies that encourage creativity and adaptation, especially in the context of the Fourth Industrial Revolution (4IR) and the fast pace of globalisation. Comparative research indicates that employability rates and learning outcomes have increased dramatically in nations that have successfully implemented learner-centred, digital and skill-based education models. The Namibian College of Open Learning (NAMCOL), for example, integrates learner-centred, digital and skill-based education by offering online and blended learning programmes for out-of-school youth and adult learners. This model has successfully expanded

access to education (Ntinda, 2022). SADC nations run the risk of increasing the skills gap, slowing economic growth and falling short of international educational standards if they do not implement immediate reforms. By addressing current deficiencies, gaining knowledge from international best practices, and putting forward long-term solutions to improve learning quality and relevance in the area, this study investigates ways of transforming education in SADC.

Objectives of the Study

Using insights from global best practices, this study analyses current teaching and learning approaches in SADC nations, identifies key challenges, and suggests strategic reforms to improve learner engagement, critical thinking and skill development. Specifically, the study seeks to:

1. Evaluate the effectiveness of the existing teaching and learning approaches used in SADC education systems.
2. Determine the main challenges and gaps preventing the region's attainment of quality education and skills development.
3. Investigate how SADC might benefit from international best practices in education reform.
4. Propose strategic recommendations for changing the educational landscape to improve student engagement, critical thinking and preparedness for the future.

Reconfiguring Teaching and Learning

Students in the region come from a variety of backgrounds — from rural and marginalised communities dealing with serious issues, to urban centres with comparatively greater educational resources (Tagliabue, 2022). A significant portion of primary school learners in SADC countries struggle with basic reading and mathematics (UNESCO *et al*., 2022). UNESCO, African Union, ADEA and UNICEF (2022) attribute this to the fact that many children enter the education system with foundational literacy and numeracy skills below expected levels. Many children enter the formal education system without the necessary social and cognitive skills due to differentiated access to foundational early childhood education. Students often acquire theoretical information as they advance in the formal education pathway, but lack the technical, critical thinking and problem-solving abilities required of the modern workforce. For UNESCO, African Union, ADEA and UNICEF (2022), this reality reflects the shortcomings of conventional teaching approaches.

According to Sibanda *et al*. (2023), the efficiency of education in SADC is also influenced by the learning environment. Poor transportation infrastructure, especially in rural areas, forces many pupils to walk several kilometres to get to school. Poverty is a significant obstacle to education, with low-income families finding it difficult to afford tuition, school supplies and uniforms, which leads

to high dropout rates. Some schools in the region operate in overcrowded or under-resourced environments, and there are wide variations in the availability of educational resources like well-equipped classrooms, libraries and science laboratories. Due to limited access to digital equipment, electricity and internet connectivity, many students are unable to take advantage of e-learning options, which further exacerbates educational inequality (Ittea *et al*., 2022). Richer schools and metropolitan institutions, on the other hand, have better resources, which results in a disparity in learning outcomes and experiences (Sibanda *et al*., 2023*)*.

A change to more adaptable, inclusive and technologically integrated teaching and learning approaches is necessary to address these issues. All students, regardless of their socio-economic circumstances, should have equal access to competency-based education, blended learning strategies and investments in teacher preparation and school infrastructure. According to Chibambo (2024), policymakers and educators can close gaps and promote a more equitable and future-ready education system in SADC through focused interventions that recognise the realities of learner contexts and the skills gaps that currently exist.

National governments have a major influence on how education policies are formulated, how funds are distributed, and how everyone has fair access to high-quality education. To establish learning environments that encourage critical thinking and practical skills, education ministries must prioritise curriculum revisions, teacher preparation and infrastructure development. There must be ongoing teacher professional development to embrace cutting-edge teaching strategies, including inquiry-based learning, differentiated instruction, and the use of digital technologies. Communities and parents can help students by promoting improved school resources and reiterating educational principles at home. Through apprenticeships, industry-aligned training programmes and digital learning resources, the private sector can assist in closing skills gaps, especially in technology and vocational training. Global institutions like the World Bank, UNICEF and UNESCO can help by implementing policies, exchanging best practices and providing funds for projects.

Several instructional models can be used to successfully address these learning needs. By giving students real-world problem-solving skills and practical capabilities, the Competency-Based Education (CBE) paradigm ensures that learning is outcome-driven rather than just content-based, in line with Wyne *et al*. (2021). Blended learning methods which integrate digital and online resources with traditional classroom instruction, might increase access to high-quality education, especially in rural areas which traditionally face teacher shortages. By offering a variety of interaction, representation and evaluation options to

meet the requirements of students with disabilities and other diverse learners, the Universal Design for Learning (UDL) framework, also used by Kang and Kim (2021), guarantees inclusivity. The Public-Private Partnership (PPP) model promotes cooperation between public and private organisations to improve infrastructure development, technology integration and resource mobilisation in schools (Ogunode *et al*., 2023).

Current Status of Education in SADC

Although many students gain general knowledge and abilities, there is still a lack of acceptable values, attitudes and behaviours that are essential for both professional and personal growth (Elfert, 2019). Traditional teaching approaches, which still predominate in classrooms, do not adequately prepare students for a rapidly evolving world that is fuelled by innovation, entrepreneurship and digital transformation. Education in SADC countries needs to shift from traditional methods to more contemporary, inclusive and responsive learning models if it is to be relevant (Kokela, 2017).

Challenges Facing the Education System

The efficacy of education in the region is restricted by several systemic and structural problems. The digital age and literacy divide are two significant issues as many teachers and students lack access to technical tools and digital abilities which are critical for contemporary learning (Ntinda, 2022). Socio-economic hurdles like poverty, especially in disadvantaged communities, impede fair access to high-quality education (Tagliabue, 2022). Learners with disabilities are underserved since many schools often struggle to provide special needs education (Hinds *et al*., 2022).

Because rural communities frequently experience infrastructure deficiencies, including poor internet connectivity, insufficient energy and inadequate learning facilities, geographic differences exacerbate the education gap (Parolin & Lee, 2021). Students in rural locations find it challenging to access the same opportunities as their urban counterparts due to the digital divide. Most schools lack proper psychological support networks, even though mental health concerns among students are becoming more widely acknowledged as a barrier to effective education (UNESCO *et al*., 2022). These difficulties are exacerbated by a lack of financial resources, which has an impact on the accessibility of teacher preparation programmes, contemporary educational resources and essential technology advancements (Chakabwata, 2025).

Proposed Educational Reconfiguration

The approach detailed in Figure 1 promotes an inclusive, adaptable education system that incorporates innovation and entrepreneurship into the curriculum

to address the challenges confronting SADC region education systems. This approach seeks to give students real-world skills that will enable them to be self-sufficient and employable in a rapidly changing economic environment.

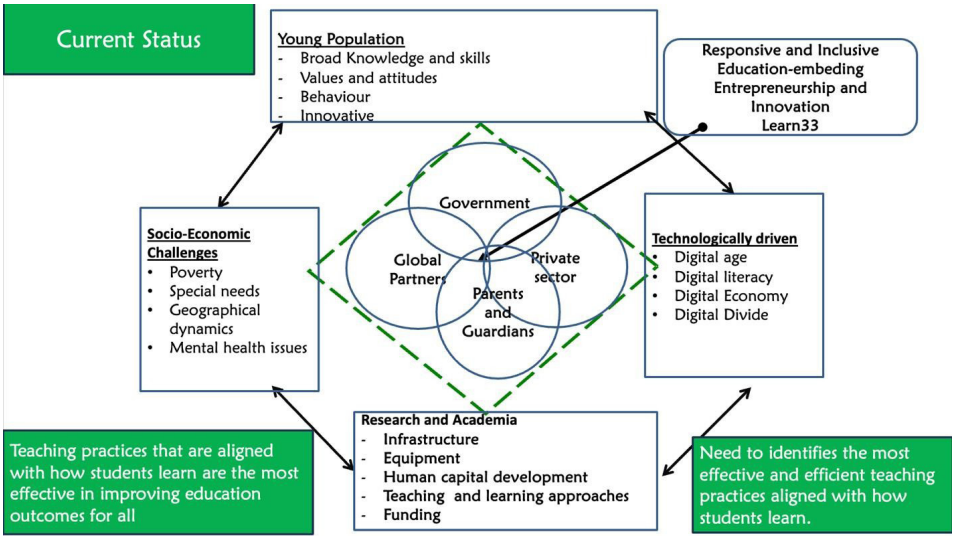


Figure 1: Reconfigured teaching and learning model
Source: Author

One of the main recommendations of the current study is the adaptation of technology-driven learning, where digital platforms, e-learning materials and interactive technologies take centre stage in knowledge acquisition. Additionally, instructional strategies must align with preferred student learning methods. This entails determining and putting into practice efficient teaching strategies that are adapted to a variety of learning preferences. Human capital development, which includes preparing educators to use cutting-edge teaching techniques, contemporary pedagogies and digital resources, is another essential component. To enhance learning environments, financing and investment in education must be given top priority. More funding will enable the provision of digital learning resources, improved internet access and school infrastructure upgrades to guarantee that all students, regardless of background, receive top-notch education.

Desired Educational Outcomes

Improved technological proficiency and digital literacy are anticipated results, guaranteeing that pupils are ready for contemporary workplaces and entrepreneurial endeavours. By incorporating innovation and entrepreneurship into the classroom, students will be better equipped to solve problems and think critically, which will increase their ability to adjust to shifting market conditions.

This strategy will guarantee that children from all backgrounds have equitable access to education by bridging the socio-economic and digital divides. The concept supports inclusive education, which ensures that students from underprivileged communities and those with special needs get the help they need to thrive. The goal of this redesigned education system is to produce a generation of capable, creative and tech-savvy students who will significantly drive the socio-economic advancement of the SADC region.

Expanding digital infrastructure, including internet access, affordable gadgets, and e-learning platforms, especially in underprivileged rural areas, is one of the first stages. It is imperative that governments and education stakeholders provide schools with digital resources, computer laboratories and smart classrooms so that all students have an equal opportunity to gain from technology-enhanced instruction. Digital literacy must also be included in teacher preparation programmes to guarantee that teachers are prepared to use contemporary resources in the classroom. Online and mobile learning applications can also aid in closing the educational gap by allowing students in remote locations to access high-quality content at their own pace. Implementing interactive and student-centred strategies like virtual reality (VR) simulations, gamification and AI-driven personalised learning, may result in greater learner engagement in learning processes and increase success.

To meet the demands of students in the technology age, several tried and true models can be used. By allowing students to interact with digital content at home while class time is devoted to discussions and problem-solving, the Flipped Classroom Model, which has been successfully adopted in nations like the US and Finland, flips the traditional learning paradigm (Kiljunen *et al*., 2024). Introduced in nations like Uruguay and Rwanda, the One Laptop Per Child (OLPC) initiative has shown how giving learners access to personal learning devices may improve digital literacy and self-directed learning (Ghafoori, 2024*)*. Secondary and vocational education can benefit from adaptations of the Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs) model, which is being used by universities across the globe to give students access to top-notch educational materials from international organisations (Tao *et al*., 2022).

Innovative, learner-centred and technology-driven approaches must be combined to improve engagement, inclusion and skill development to successfully restructure teaching and learning in SADC countries. Prioritising competency-based learning will guarantee that students gain useful real-world skills instead of just content memorisation. This approach develops critical thinking, creativity and problem-solving skills — all essential for today's workforce. Another successful strategy is Project-based Learning (PBL) which enables students to work together on real-world projects that improve their analytical, research and collaborative abilities. In nations like Singapore and Finland, this approach has proven effective in producing well-rounded students (Crespí *et al*., 2022).

Experiential and vocational learning should be prioritised, particularly in TVET institutions, to give students practical skills that improve their employability. Differentiated instruction should be used to accommodate children from different backgrounds, with different learning requirements and abilities, considering the socio-economic difficulties facing the children. This will guarantee that no student is left behind.

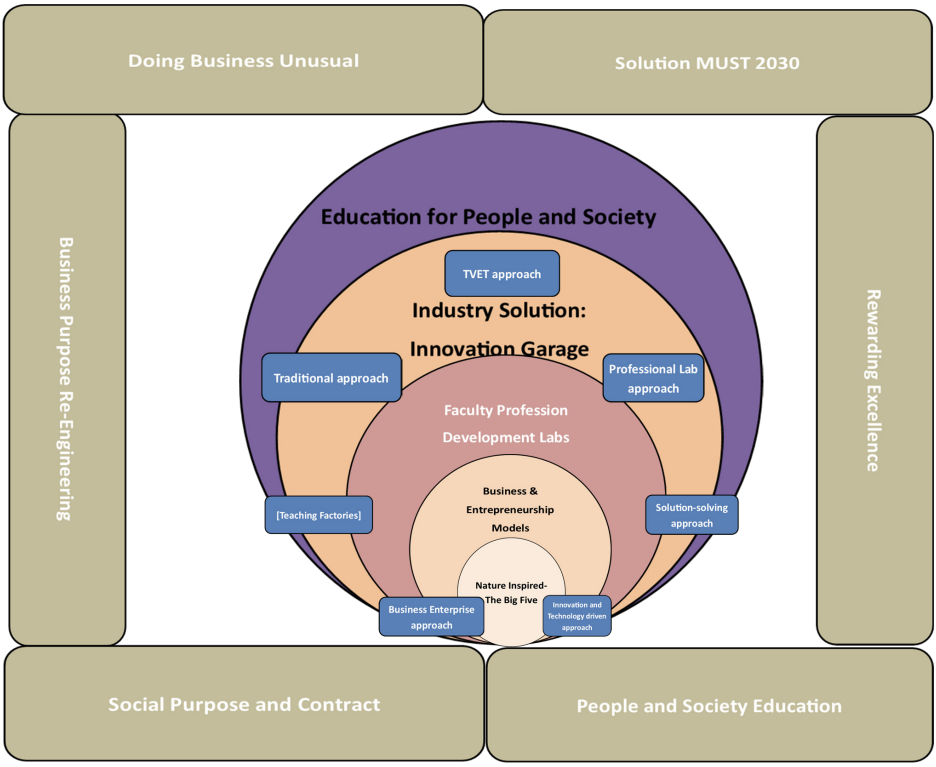


Figure 2: Interrelated approach to teaching and learning
Source: Author

Interrelated Approaches to Reconfiguring Teaching and Learning in SADC

By giving students technical and practical skills that directly match industry demands, the TVET approach makes education more employment-oriented. By offering practical training in industries like engineering, agriculture and hospitality, nations like South Africa and Botswana have turned to TVET institutions to lower youth unemployment (Hondonga *et al*., 2024*)*. With the help of well-equipped laboratories and simulation centres, the Professional Labs Approach, which supplements TVET, guarantees that students obtain practical experience, especially in STEM (science, technology, engineering and mathematics) education. By providing a controlled setting for students to experiment and

innovate, Namibia's investment in STEM laboratories, for instance, improves technical competency (Laseinde & Dada, 2024).

By motivating students to participate in critical thinking and problem-solving exercises, the Problem-Solving Approach connects to these techniques. This approach is frequently utilised in project-based learning, where students collaborate to solve industrial and societal issues. In a similar vein, the Innovation and Technology-Driven Method modernises education delivery by combining digital technologies, robotics, artificial intelligence (AI) and online learning platforms. Through the provision of digital resources and interactive learning opportunities, Rwanda's Smart Classroom Project serves as an illustration of how technology might close the achievement gap (Nsabimana *et al*., 2024). The Business Enterprise Model integrates entrepreneurship education, which teaches students how to launch and run enterprises, to further increase the relevance of education to economic development. For example, Mauritius has incorporated entrepreneurship education into its curriculum to encourage graduates to work for themselves and be financially resilient (Stouraitis & Tsanis, 2025*)*.

The Teaching Factory concept, in which businesses and educational institutions work together to develop production-based learning environments, is a crucial element that blends various strategies. This approach guarantees that students in nations like Germany gain both intellectual and practical skills at the same time by allowing them to work on real industry projects while they study (Saputro *et al*., 2021). The traditional approach is still useful in fundamental education, especially for reading, numeracy and cultural education, even though modernisation is necessary. To guarantee that students acquire both theoretical knowledge and 21st Century abilities, it must be combined with creative teaching strategies.

Building a Future-Ready Education System in SADC

Determining the important skills needed to propel innovation, economic growth and social development in the region is crucial to successfully reorganise teaching and learning in SADC. These abilities, which include digital literacy, problem-solving, entrepreneurship and STEM competence, must be in line with worldwide trends. Establishing regional centres of excellence can be crucial in promoting specialised training, research and innovation in important industries like business, manufacturing, technology and agriculture. These facilities would act as centres for best practices, giving students access to state-of-the-art training and promoting international cooperation. To guarantee that education changes are successfully implemented, a supporting model that includes government funding, public-private partnerships and policy alignment is required to continue these efforts.

The creation of a regional curriculum that allows for local adjustments while standardising high-quality education throughout SADC is essential to this change. In order to create a systematic learning route where students acquire

core abilities early, and gradually specialise based on their talents and interests, this curriculum should guarantee smooth transitions from primary school to university.

Building modern educators — teachers who are well-equipped with digital resources, new teaching approaches and adaptive pedagogical skills to enhance creativity and critical thinking in students — is a crucial component of this shift. By facilitating smart learning environments, real-time data collection for personalised learning, and virtual communication between students and educators around the region, the integration of the Internet of things (IoT) has the potential to significantly transform education. Additionally, innovation and entrepreneurship must be ingrained in the education system to promote independence and job development.

SADC nations can produce a generation of job creators rather than job seekers by introducing pupils to business concepts, startup incubation and problem-solving techniques throughout their early education. Finally, utilising contemporary innovations to develop a sustainable, inclusive and future-ready educational framework while acknowledging the advantages and lessons of conventional educational institutions is referred to as 'building on the past to shape the future'.

Conclusion

To address the enduring issues of outmoded pedagogies, insufficient digital integration and socio-economic gaps that impede high-quality education, SADC education systems must reconfigure their teaching and learning methodologies. The effectiveness of learning is nevertheless constrained by problems including strict assessment procedures, inadequate teacher preparation, and a lack of digital infrastructure, despite advancements in expanding educational access. The necessity of a competency-based, learner-centred and technology-driven educational paradigm that complies with international best practices has been emphasised in this study. SADC countries can improve critical thinking, skills development and student engagement by using digital technologies, encouraging creativity and strengthening teacher capacity.

The main forces behind these reforms include harmonised policies among member states, PPPs and increasing investment in educational infrastructure. To guarantee fair learning opportunities, especially for underserved areas, inclusive education frameworks need to be reinforced. SADC nations can close the skills gap, increase employability and build a robust education system that promotes long-term socio-economic development by utilising digital transformation and a multi-stakeholder approach. To adapt SADC's education systems to the needs of a world that is changing rapidly, immediate and consistent action is needed.

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