

African startups go beyond "find a tutor" model to improve educational outcomes

 By [Tom Jackson](#)

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Disrupt Africa's recently-released [Future of Work: Exploring the African Digital Work Landscape 2018](#) report found Nigeria was a leader in the space, hosting almost half of the continent's on-demand tutoring startups, with South Africa also well represented.



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This is a relatively new sector, with just shy of 65 per cent of Africa's "find a tutor" startups having launched in or after 2016. Yet these companies are increasingly diversifying their offerings in order to improve educational outcomes.

One of the world's oldest professions, even tutoring is gradually being bought into the on-demand fold. "Find a tutor" platforms have the potential to have a significant positive impact on educational outcomes.

Matthew Henshall is the founder and chief executive officer (CEO) of the Cape Town-based SkillUp Tutors, which offers parents and students access to thousands of highly skilled and vetted tutors based on grades, subject, location, and budget.

The startup has achieved a number of notable landmarks, having been picked for the legal incubation programme run by Webber Wentzel and secured a Series A funding round from Knife Capital. Henshall said such platforms intend to make education more effective.

"By effective, I mean easier to use, safer, and more affordable for students and parents by reducing high commissions which are inherent to the industry. Through his studies, Benjamin Bloom, an educational researcher, found that one-on-one tutoring is 98% more effective than traditional classrooms. This is such a tremendous outcome that personal tutors cannot be ignored," he said.

One-on-one tutoring, however, is traditionally expensive, and if it is cheap it is likely directly proportional to quality. Henshall believes this is where "find-a-tutor" platforms can change the curve.

"By maintaining high levels of quality, largely through building trust in communities through technology, they are able to make tutoring more affordable," he said.

"It will no longer become a service for the most affluent, but for everyone."

Effectiveness of one-on-one learning

Godwin Benson is the 27-year-old Nigerian systems engineer behind online tutoring platform Tuteria. Benson last year won the Royal Academy of Engineering (RAEng) Africa Prize for Engineering Innovation, for his work with the startup, which launched in 2015 and is an online platform that links students to qualified tutors in their area. Users are able to find the skills they want to learn via the app, set their budget, and get connected to the nearest tutor.

Benson echoes Henshall's point that one-on-one learning has been proven to be the most effective way to learn. "Tutoring platforms like Tuteria, therefore, help to simplify the process of finding verified and competent tutors to achieve the learners' desired educational goals. Tutoring helps students learn at their own pace and style, which helps improve their subject mastery in a non-threatening environment."

Yet in order to further improve outcomes, startups in this space are going beyond simply connecting students to tutors. Tuteria last week rolled out a mobile-friendly online resume builder called CareerLyft, which offers ready-to-go templates and allows users to share their resumes with friends. It is also heavily focused on quality-monitoring.

"We not only provide the platform to connect learners with tutors, we provide them with unforgettable positive learning experiences," said Benson. "How we achieve this is by monitoring the progress of their lessons via an inbuilt system that enables learners and tutors to give us feedback on every single lesson, and also via reviews and ratings at the end of every month. This process ensures that beyond getting them tutors that match their requirements, we also ensure that actual progress is made towards achieving the learners' goals."

SkillUp is also diversifying, launching an online lesson space last month and last week announcing the launch of its own coding course. Henshall said finding a tutor was only the first step of the journey, with SkillUp – like Tuteria – keen to ensure outcomes were positive.

"We want to make sure the tutor is helping students reach their goals. A large part of our effort goes into building a platform where students and tutors can monitor and track students progress and goals. The tutor offers ongoing support and we make sure it is easy for a tutor to flag any problems with students so parents can keep track and be proactive," he said.

Student progress, goal tracking

"We also have tools like online lessons which build on the simple act of finding a tutor and make the education more effective. Find-a-tutor is making education more efficient, what we're now trying to do is be more a part of that journey in helping students succeed, and that requires making it more effective."

Africans are proving more than keen to use platforms like Tuteria and SkillUp, on a continent where the quality of education provision varies hugely depending on location and income.

Benson said Africans want to improve their quality of life through education, and many are already familiar with the concept of one-on-one tutoring.

"They typically attempt finding tutors by asking friends or colleagues, or from the school which their children attend. However, tutoring platforms eliminate the harrowing frustration involved in finding a very good tutor by themselves, and provide other services like monitoring lessons, safeguarding payments and ensuring professional service delivery, which inspires many customers to use such services," he said.

"We've seen a huge market acceptance of our service. Many Africans still have trust challenges with paying online, but there have been positive developments and we believe that, progressively, more Africans will have better trust for online platforms, which will make the entire process seamless."

Henshall agreed that in Africa, as in the rest of the world, education is one of the most important things for families. "However, unlike Southeast Asia, Africans do not spend as high a percentage of household income on private education to get their children a step ahead. This is largely simply due to different economic climates and opportunities once students are ready to enter the working world," he said.

"One thing we have also seen, especially in South Africa, is higher trust barriers. Customers are more hesitant to try a new service. While we pride ourself on only the highest levels of safety and trust, for many clients using our service this might be one of the first online payments they have done or one of the first few e-commerce websites they've used. Inviting someone into your house to tutor your child requires really believing and trusting in the brand, at SkillUp we focus wholly on building this trust and showing true representations of our tutors."

ABOUT TOM JACKSON

Co-founder @DisruptAfrica. Tech and business journalist in Africa. Passionate about the vibrant tech startups scene in Africa, Tom can usually be found sniffing out the continent's most exciting new companies and entrepreneurs, funding rounds and any other developments within the growing ecosystem

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