

Khanya Mtshali for THENSA: Hello Mbuso! So lovely to connect with you again. Congratulations on being accepted into the HP Cambridge Partnership for Education EdTech Fellowship. Tell me, how did you find out about the fellowship and what made you want to apply for it?

Mbuso Ngongo: This programme was brought to my attention by one of my mentors who is employed by the University of South Africa's (UNISA) Directorate for Technology Transfer and Commercialisation (DITTC). Our initiative is being supported by the university through their incubation programme following our winning the UNISA innovation challenge in 2021. The partnership between HP and Cambridge university is a collaboration of giants, therefore, I just wanted to put our name out there so that they know we are here and that they should know we are focused on making a difference in the education of the African Child using modern and inclusive technology. When we read a brief about the programme we discovered that their vision is to "work together to develop EdTech interventions that could help millions of children to fulfil their potential." This statement resonated well with our vision and mission as an organisation and personally.

THENSA: What do you hope to gain from the HP Cambridge Partnership for Education EdTech Fellowship?

Ngongo: We're looking forward to engaging and collaborating with the leaders from various countries playing in the space of academia, education, government, private sector and NGO across the world. We believe we will learn very much through this interaction, and it will help us improve our unique offering. We are currently at the pilot phase, and we are on the lookout to collaborate with researchers who can help us analyse the empirical data we are generating as we are navigating this new space to measure true value and impact of our intervention. We are looking for investors to invest in our vision and partners who are leaders in their fields to form strategic partnerships.

THENSA: At the DSI-THENSA Five-Day Entrepreneurship Programme held October in Durban, you had one of the most memorable elevator pitches for your business UMBalabala. How has your business been doing since we saw you last?

Ngongo: The DSI-THENSA Entrepreneurship Programme is one of the most memorable events in my entrepreneurial journey. The manner that the business plan training was conducted remains the most creative and practical training program I have come across. The annual financial statements and projections were one of the most difficult concepts for myself prior to attending this workshop. However, the manner it was unpacked in a

practical way was highly innovative. You know, we made envelopes and sold them, it was such a fun way to learn. This training was offered at a time when we were moving from prototype phase to pilot, as a path towards commercialisation. We are now at the pilot phase with a pilot set to run this year in at least two primary schools in Kwa-Zulu Natal (KZN).



However, we are proud to have generated some revenue and attracted investments, to the extent we have been able to subsidise one student in her post graduate studies at a university in 2023. During the training our project received a THENSA award, recognised as “The Most Bankable Business Idea.” Notably, during the inaugural UNISA Innovation Festival held on the 2nd of December 2022, at the UNISA head quarters in Sunnyside, Pretoria, we also scooped two awards, namely: “The Most Bankable Pitch” as voted by the judges and The People’s Favourite Pitch as voted by the attendees, an award which was shared in equal votes

with another participant. Moreover, we had the opportunity to pitch our business during the closing ceremony of the Blue Ocean Awards held in Paris, France last month.

THENSA: Did the DSI-THENSA Five-Day Entrepreneurship Programme assist you in refining some part of your business? If so, could you unpack which element of your business benefited most from the sessions?

Ngongo: I have cited the production of envelopes which was gamified. Through this exercise we learned practically the issues of quality control. It has allowed us to be conscious of these issues as we produce more prototypes for the pilot phase. We have also adopted budget techniques and have a budget for the year in advance, which is reviewed quarterly with our Board of Advisory members.

THENSA: Do you believe the HP Cambridge Partnership for Education EdTech Fellowship will assist in your professional and personal growth as an entrepreneur? And if so, describe how and why?

Ngongo: In Nguni languages there is a saying “indlela ibuzwa kwabaphambili”, which contextually means you can only ask directions from those ahead of you, those who have been there. Africa, largely as an underdeveloped

continent, and South Africa, in particular, as one of the developing countries in the continent can only learn from the developed countries. The UK is one of the best countries in the world. It's been a super power for many years historically. We now have an opportunity to tap into that greatness, to learn from, to influence policy and to form lifelong collaborations. This opportunity will present itself in multiple ways including being trained at one of the worlds finest, and one of the oldest universities.

THENSA: You were selected to be part of this programme from 400 applicants from 32 countries. What does this kind of achievement mean to you at this stage of your life and academic career?

Ngcongco: It's very easy to miss the magnitude of this achievement hidden under the numbers. The 32 countries represent millions of people if not billions of human beings. Within the 400 applicants there are so many talented people out there who have applied and are doing incredible things. These are human beings who are trying their best to make a change in the education sector using technology. This achievement is a really humbling moment for me, it is an historic moment which adds more colour to the collage of our journey.



THENSA: What sort of advice would you impart to your fellow students who were part of the DSI-THENSA Five-Day Entrepreneurship Programme?

Ngcongco: Firstly, I will pass on two pieces of advice given to me by my mother, who said "if you don't succeed try again", and also told me by the principle of three Q's: "qala, qhubeka, qeda", which translates to "get started, keep at it, and finish what you start." Secondly, I will say never underestimate the power of a simple idea you already have. To say, find your passion and keep working on it, and focus on removing someone's pain.

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