Leveraging Technology for Education

Econet Wireless Zimbabwe – part of the diversified telecommunications network Econet Wireless Group – began investing in education through its philanthropic activities in 1996. Over the years, the company’s investments have expanded. From granting scholarships impacting over 200,000 students to establishing learning hubs across Zimbabwe, Econet is now making commercial investments in education by leveraging its core business expertise: mobile technology. Launched in 2013, Econet’s EcoSchool aims to improve access to educational content for learners in formal and informal institutes of learning, with the goal of impacting the lives and opportunities of its customers.

MOBILE AND TECHNOLOGY SOLUTIONS FOR EDUCATION

ECONET WIRELESS (ZIMBABWE / MOBILE TELECOMMUNICATIONS)

SUMMARY: Leveraging Technology for Education

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THE EDUCATION ISSUE
By 2050, Africa’s population is expected to double in size and its under 18 population will reach almost 1 billion. This population growth will require greater efforts and investments in education. For example, while primary school completion rates in Zimbabwe have improved and are now estimated at over 80%, the secondary school attendance rate is as low as 50%. There is a high drop-off rate between secondary and tertiary education in Zimbabwe – and across Africa – which results in one of the lowest tertiary school enrolment rates globally at an estimated 6%.

THE BUSINESS CASE
Inspired by the potential of mobile technology to redefine traditional notions of education, Econet seizes the opportunity to address the educational needs of students in Zimbabwe, focusing on the development of new, learner-centric modes of learning. Today, Econet facilitates equitable access to educational content and interactive learning environments delivered through mobile devices.

To make the business case to invest in education, Econet first recognizes the social need and good. However, this investment materialized following an analysis on the commercial benefits of investing in education, including potential new revenue streams and minimal capital investment as existing core competencies and infrastructure could be leveraged. The annual mobile education (mEducation) market size is estimated to reach US$70 billion by 2020, offering a range of revenue opportunities for any mobile operator.

PLANNING FOR IMPACT
Econet’s continual investment in education, starting with scholarships in 1996, led to the identification of gaps in the existing education system. Although scholarships awarded from primary through tertiary education fulfilled Econet’s fundamental desire to improve access to education for children and youth, scholarships alone could not impact the quality of teaching or academic content for better learning outcomes. Econet opted to take a more engaged and comprehensive approach to making an impact on access to quality educational resources and skills development for youth. This approach aimed to equip students with knowledge and skills relevant to meet and exceed the needs of the market for the development of a skilled workforce.

When developing its investment strategy, Econet planned to measure its impact around three aspects: 1) access to education, 2) brand differentiation, and 3) profitability. Some of the indicators used to measure the impact of its investments from the planning stage include education access rates, financial contributions towards education, brand visibility/awareness, visibility of Econet’s business leaders as education champions, revenue growth, sales, number of educators/schools adopting Econet products/services and number of students using Econet products/services.

THE INVESTMENT
Econet’s mEducation portfolio includes products and services that address a broad range of learning needs from primary school all the way through to employment.

Econet’s web-based e-learning platform Ruzivo offers classroom access to educational content tailored to primary students across Zimbabwe. A different service targeting tertiary level learners, Econet Zero, enables access to education websites, including globally-recognized massive open online courses. Additionally, EcoSchool University partners with tertiary institutions in Zimbabwe to provide digital content via the EcoSchool tablet, while EcoSchool Academy offers mobile courses suitable for all learners.

Supplementing EcoSchool is Muzinda Hub, founded in 2014, which aims to promote 21st century skills for Zimbabwean youth through digital and entrepreneurial skills training and development.

In addition to the education solutions it brings through technology, Econet also provides scholarships to 200,000 disadvantaged children to cover school fees and to adolescent youth to support their continued education in secondary school and university.
BE SMART
The inequality that exists in accessing education in Zimbabwe was the motivation for Econet’s investments in education. Ranging from scholarships distributed through its Higher Life Foundation and Capernaum Trust to delivering free digital educational content to learners on tablets, Econet’s investments promote equity and equality and align with government needs in education by enabling access to education for marginalized students and youth, and addressing the short supply of textbooks and educational resources endemic to the country.

The investments are innately outcomes-oriented and results-driven seeking both profitability as well as social returns. Key Performance Indicators are monitored regularly to assess impact on the company’s bottom line and society.

OUTCOME & IMPACT
Econet’s efforts to improve access to educational opportunity have reached over 320,000 students and community members. Through the work conducted at the Muzinda Hub, over 1,000 technology developers have been trained since July 2014, aiming to alleviate Zimbabwe’s high youth unemployment rate and contributing to the development of a skilled workforce.

Econet’s flagships investments in education help to improve its brand differentiation and establish the company as a champion of education. At six months since commercial introduction of its newest service, EcoSchool, user adoption is estimated at 25% of the total tertiary enrolment of Zimbabwe and has driven profitability in Econet’s other lines of business.

There is a high drop-off rate between secondary and tertiary education in Zimbabwe and across Africa which results in one of the lowest tertiary school enrolment rates globally.

LESSONS LEARNED
Econet sees the hope that is imparted on students when they feel supported and empowered. Econet’s commitment to continue its investments in education is driven by the belief that those investments have tangible impact. Econet’s investments provide an opportunity for children and youth to continue their education and to excel personally and academically. These successes reinforce that investments go beyond Key Performance Indicators; they are about people, and ultimately, an investment in the future.

4 McKinsey & Company, and GSMA. Transforming learning through mEducation. 2012.