

The Artist Proof Studio as a Model for Training and Developing Africa's Future Engineers, Technicians and Artisans

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Abstract

Sub-Saharan Africa and Southern Africa in general have high rates of youth unemployment and even underemployment. Many of our governments, administrations and private corporations are perplexed and often run out of options with regards to providing training and up-skilling opportunities to the youth in general. This paper looks at the Artist Proof Studio (APS), an inventive and entrepreneurial print-making company, based in Johannesburg, South Africa. The APS provides learning opportunities for future artists and those in allied fields, through workplace training and experiential learning. They also provide for private patron and corporate partnerships through a series of seminars which are run weekly to equip students and associates with the necessary skills and knowledge in areas including law, business and communications was envisaged to enhance and increase student understanding of future professional practice. Using the business model employed by the APS, the author proposes a similar business model for the development and training of future engineers, technicians and artisans that may be applied across the continent, considering the general conditions that may include under-employment, unemployment and poverty. The paper attempts to address critical issues such as funding for the training and up-skilling of such engineering personnel using the APS business model as a basis for innovation and entrepreneurship in the sector. Purposeful sampling was used to select a small group of individuals (students and administrators) that participated in the survey that highlights the workings of the APS business model. The survey entailed a brief questionnaire answered, telephonically and virtually. It is hoped that aspects of the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the business operating model and the individuals affected may shed light on business processes and methods that could be applied elsewhere on the continent. The author has no affiliation to APS whether financially or otherwise, but does admire their pragmatic approach to developing young artists while promoting commercialization of art production on the continent, even under conditions of low economic growth and limited resources.

Key words: *APS Business Model, Alternative Training and Development*

Introduction

Hilson and Osei (2016:3) claimed that one of the most pressing problems in Sub-Saharan Africa is youth unemployment. They went on to say that this problem had captured the imagination of donors and NGOs and that failure to address the issue had proved to be a major oversight, often with catastrophic results (Hilson & Osei, 2016:3). In their Jobs for Youth in Africa report the African Development Bank Group (ADBG), (2016:1) stated that only one in six was in wage employment, and that at that time one-third were unemployed and discouraged and that the problem was not just unemployment but underemployment.

These disappointing statistics were later reinforced by the International Labour Organization (ILO) (2020:2) report on employment in Africa stating that the youth unemployment rate was highest in southern Africa at 50.3% in 2019. Noting these statistics, this paper attempts to use the APS business model as a possible candidate to mitigate the dire problem of youth unemployment particularly of engineers, technicians and artisans in Southern Africa and the African continent as a whole. Professor Teale (2000) and others have proposed policy interventions such as expansion of agricultural exports, expansion of manufacturing exports” and improvement of technical knowledge as possible solutions to the youth unemployment problem, but the situation still persists. An alternative approach could be that adopted by the APS.

Artist Proof Studio (APS) is an innovative and commercial print-making company, based in Johannesburg, South Africa. It provides learning prospects for future artists and those in allied fields, through workplace training and practical learning (APS, 2021). They also provide for private patron and corporate partnerships through a series of workshops which are run weekly to equip students and associates with the necessary skills and knowledge in areas including legislation, corporate affairs and business communications which is envisaged to enhance and increase student understanding of future professional practice (APS, 2021).

This paper briefly discusses the APS business structure, business model and unemployment in southern Africa as well as some mitigation measures. The paper research methodology is then discussed with a brief discussion of the research findings. The possible application of the APS model to the training of engineering personnel is then proposed before the paper is concluded with recommendation.

APS Business Structure

As depicted in Figure 1, APS has four business units that are integrated to form the company. As can be seen, Training and Education form major components of the company, as do the Sales and Print Production departments. The Sales department generates income by selling art on a commercial basis, some of this art is produced by students while some is produced by world famous artists like William Kentridge (APS, 2021).

The Print Production department is where etchings are produced and reproduced for sale to the public and private companies (APS, 2021).

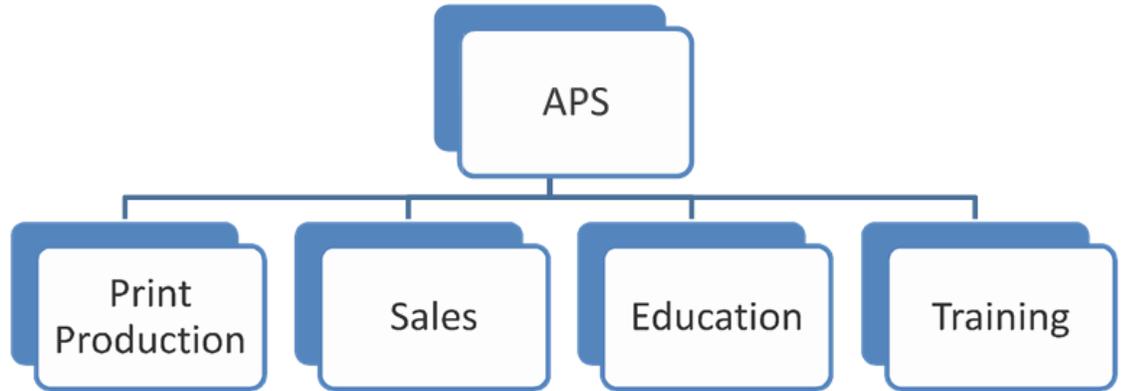


Figure 1: APS Business Structure (APS, 2021)

A review of the APS Annual Report of 2016-2017, (APS, 2019) showed that the main income generators were sales from William Kentridge 44%, and internal Artists (which including students’ work) at 34%. Student Registrations only accounted for 1% of APS Income while Grants and Donations accounted for 11%. The APS Income Statement is shown in Table 1.

Table 1

APS Income Statement

Income (2019)	Line Item Percentages (%)
Sales (William Kentridge)	44
Artist Sales	34
Grants & Donations	11
Printing Projects	4
Contract Income	5
Registration Fees	1
Interest	1

Adapted from APS (2019)

APS Business Model

As mentioned above the company sells art produced in partnership with famous artists as well as student artists who are involved in the print-making process. The company also does exhibitions for partner artists and the students who are ready to exhibit. These are students that are typically in 4th or 5th year of study. The company selects these students on registration after reviewing their portfolios and assigning artists as mentors and guides. The company has various levels of sponsorship that include the Bursary Fund (R 200 - R 10,000), Individual Student Sponsorship (R 20,000 per year) and Corporate Partnership (R 54,000 - R 600,000) (APS, 2021). The APS thus provides the public both individuals and private companies with the opportunity to support and develop up-coming artists from communities around Johannesburg and beyond. It would seem that the profit incentive which drives most businesses could still be maintained while involved in the training of young artists, as demonstrated by APS.

Unemployment in Southern Africa and Possible Mitigation Measures

In discussing the dire state of youth unemployment in South Africa Makwakwa (2017) stated that young graduates found it hard to become part of the active economic population of the country and that youths from poor and low-income families were more likely to suffer the most as they dealt with the effects of unemployment, anxiety and depression overcame them as they struggled to crack the labour market and have the means to support themselves and their families.

In an effort to remedy the high unemployment rate De Lannoy, Graham, Patel and Leibbrandt (2017) suggested that “There is a need to develop – or renew – a broad social compact to address youth unemployment, which brings employers, training providers, trade unions, government, youth themselves and other relevant stakeholders on board”. The authors propose solutions to the youth unemployment problem as a combination of: Government Intervention, Economic Growth in Local Industry and Community Involvement. Without reviewing the data it can be inferred anecdotally that solutions to the unemployment problem are urgently needed especially with regards to the technically trained graduates and diplomates from the engineering sector like engineers, technicians and artisans who are seeking solutions from the Green Economy and the 4IR (Fourth Industrial Revolution) (Gordon, 2019).

Table 2
APS Questionnaire

Question	Answer
1. Gender of the interviewee and training background.	
2. What is your highest qualification?	
3. How long have you been with APS?	
4. How do you support your work?	
5. What materials and tools do you use?	
6. Do you have a mentor? How do you generate ideas for your art?	
7. How long is your apprenticeship? Do you work independently?	
8. What have you learned at APS? What's your vision for yourself?	
9. Do you keep normal office hours?	
10. Would you go to a traditional university to learn your craft as an artist?	
11. What additional resources do you need to launch your career as an artist?	
12. Do you think that engineers could be trained in a similar manner?	

Due to COVID-19 restrictions (APS Administration Staffer, 2021) and APS confidentiality concerns a virtual interview was finally convened with a Course Lecturer (female), a Trainer (female) and seven students (1 female and 6 males).

Findings

Some results gleaned from the virtual interview (Group Interview) (Saunders et. al.,2016) indicated that there were more male students than females at APS. Most students came to APS directly from school although some joined after some years working in other fields. Students were attracted to APS because of its reputation and community outreach.

Students generally were not in a position to enter university because of financial constraints or because their grades would not allow. Students also stated that they did not consider university, university of technology or TVET training because they felt that APS provided hands-on training that was suited to their interests. The APS model provides students with sponsorship that enables them to survive while training and enables them to simultaneously pursue some entrepreneurial activities (APS, 2021). Most importantly APS provides the platform for training in print-making, allows for student mentorship in the different aspects of the art industry and allows students to network and build relations with practicing artists. The group interview approach seemed to have highlighted “key themes” that the questionnaire sought to address (Saunders, 2016:420). The APS team showed remarkable agility with regards to working under the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic in that students and staff worked on a rotation basis when necessary, while some meetings were done virtually.

As alluded to by various authors, the problem of youth unemployment and underemployment in Africa is a serious challenge. Hilson and Osei (2016) in addressing this challenge propose formalization of artisanal and small scale mining as an alternative source of employment for youth already involved in the sector. The ILO (2020) in their report on youth employment (and under utilization) in Africa specifically refer to the challenges, statistics, trends, role of education and training and policy recommendations.

They propose that in order to realize the reduction of youth unemployment economic growth, and agro-industrialization, greater involvement of the education and training sector, active labour market and increased public employment services, harnessing the benefits of the digital economy and reducing the youth NEET (Neither in Employment, Education or Training) rate as proposed policy considerations for stakeholders. In this paper a pragmatic approach as implemented by APS is proposed as an alternative mechanism to address youth unemployment based on community involvement and private sector funding.

Application to the Training of Engineers, Technicians and Artisans

It appears that the Business Model used by APS is both integrated and far-reaching. They have succeeded in bringing together practicing artists and students to work side by side, while training and hands-on print-making is focused-on in a commercial environment. They have also secured funding for students by allowing the public and private companies the opportunity to contribute to the development of artists who are sharpening their skills daily. Students pay a registration fee, after which their portfolios are reviewed and are continuously mentored and guided throughout their time at APS (which is usually 4 to 5 years).

The application to the training of unemployed engineers, technicians and artisans is almost “cut and paste”. Firstly, a platform should be created for these categories of engineering personnel to meet and interact, while rubbing shoulders with professionals and those active in the field. Secondly, funding for these personnel should be made available using a similar model to that of APS where the community and private companies active in the field directly support students either individually or corporately. Thirdly, the financial incentive for entrepreneurship should be created where engineering students should show their prowess and market their products and solutions to the community and private industry.

Conclusions

This paper has attempted to look at the Artist Proof Studio business model, which trains and works with young up and coming artists by providing materials, studio space, mentorship and funding in their career development and establishment as artists. By reviewing the APS business model and operating strategy, it is hoped that lessons learned could be applied for the training of unemployed engineers, technicians and artisans, who typically have theoretical knowledge but lack the opportunity to practice their trade in the company and under the guidance of qualified engineering personnel.

Recommendations

The paper recommends that the APS business model could be applied for the training of engineering personnel provided that spaces (platforms) are created for interaction of these categories of personnel with their practicing counterparts, and that funding opportunities are created for trainees from individuals and companies and that entrepreneurship is encouraged throughout the trainee development process.

Finally, the APS is advised to place emphasis on the development of more female artists, who may face bigger hurdles to entry of the art industry and may need more support. The author is of the opinion that if artists can be developed as done by APS, engineers, technicians and artisans (of the future) can also be supported in this manner. The challenge would be the paradigm shift required of stakeholders who are involved in the training, educating and certification of this vital human resource.

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