



I Snubbed Bill Gates

The wrong idea of success made him ignore Bill Gates. Today, Prof. Noah Midamba, the Vice Chancellor of KCA University in Nairobi, aspires to change young people's mindset by closing the gap between academia and industry.

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"Mindset is everything," says Midamba. In July 2014, he visited Busan, South Korea, where he attended the World Education Leaders Forum. One of the things that stood out for him was the country's global outlook. "Beyond excelling in academics, South Korean students are encouraged to travel, as employers consider global exposure a key factor when hiring," Midamba says, adding that to his surprise, his South Korean aide spoke Swahili better than he does. Students are also encouraged to apply knowledge to solve real-life challenges. This has seen the country match

initiatives from leading economies, such as Japan and USA. Such lessons, plus a personal experience in the 70s, are what drive Midamba to change the entrepreneurial mindset and training approach in Kenya.

Bill... Who?

In the mid-70s, Midamba met Microsoft Founder Bill Gates. Gates had been invited to discuss an idea he had with the University of Puget Sound's International Business class. Among the students was Midamba, who was pursuing a major in business and a minor in public policy

after leaving his job at the UN's Food and Agriculture Organization. Back then, Midamba, considered suits and ties as the benchmark of success. So when Gates walked in dressed in jeans, Midamba wrote him off immediately. "Bill came dressed like a 'hippie': torn jeans, unkempt hair... He looked like a loser to me," Midamba says. Towards the end of his speech, Gates requested the students to buy shares of his company for a 30% return on investment in five years. Midamba ignored the request. Instead, he loaned the amount—USD100—to a friend and fellow student, Stan Kowski, who

invested it in Microsoft.

Today, Stan is a prominent businessman in Michigan, USA. Every time Midamba visits him, Stan retells the "USD100-loan story", as it is the return on this investment that birthed his business empire. This incident is why Midamba teaches young people to never ignore any opportunity at face value.

The Gap in University Education

Addressing chancellors, vice chancellors, and university chairpersons at a recent retreat, Midamba explained the need for public education institutions to come down from the ivory tower of education, which allows only a few to rise while the rest have a dead-end option in technical institutions and polytechnics. He also advocates for the change of how institutions like the Kenya Universities and Colleges Central Placement Service (KUCCPS) work. "It is 58 years since Kenya's universities grew from one to more than 70. As such, it is retrogressive for a group of people to choose universities, campuses, and courses for students. We

have students whose dreams died with the admission letter, as they got stuck with courses they are least interested in," says Midamba. His contribution to the changes at Joint Admissions Board (JAB) to KUCCPS earned him the 2014 International Award on Outstanding Contribution to Education in Kenya and Africa during the Advisory Council of World Chancellors and Vice Chancellors Congress held in Mumbai, India.

"Major infrastructure projects in Kenya are staffed by expatriates and migrant labour, whereas we have many institutions offering technical and engineering courses," says Midamba, lauding President Uhuru Kenyatta's challenge to local universities to "develop courses for the oil and gas sector". "The many unemployed youth walking round with certificates that are not relevant to the job market is a clear sign that we have a mismatch between

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academia and the market," he says.

With only one of six graduates assured of formal employment, Midamba believes it is time for a mindset shift. Graduates need to see problems as opportunities for them to offer solutions and employ themselves. "Opportunities exist in every neighbourhood, and it is time universities train their students to spot and utilize them," Midamba says. "The amount of garbage in Nairobi is an incredible opportunity in many a developed country, but locally, we pile a dumpsite and move to the next site to build another one." Aside from enabling young Kenyans to see opportunities around them, Midamba is also passionate about celebrating innovators. "We need to have something like the Smithsonian Museum in the USA, where every invention in the country is listed to promote the growth of the innovation culture." To foster this mindset-shift, Midamba is starting from the classroom: how the students learn.

Incubator with a Difference

When Midamba joined KCA University

in May 2010, entrepreneurial teaching comprised the classic "attend lectures and sit exams" approach. He wanted to make it more practical, so the university didn't just produce classroom entrepreneurs. "Entrepreneurship is a journey, and at each stage, the idea is tested," he says, narrating how KCA University's incubator came to be. "It took two years of training and visiting successful incubators in the USA and Israel for us to fully internalize the concept and create an incubator that was personal and practical—where students could be trained to use local resources and exploit gaps in the market to create products and services that could sell."

The incubator liaises with the artisans in Kariobangi, a famous centre for SMEs located 10km from the University. The artisans fabricate the required machinery for the entrepreneurs at an affordable cost. The students also get to test their

ideas with the artisans. The incubator's activities have drawn the attention of a leading newspaper in Kenya, which has started serializing some of its students. Among those covered is Fredrick Okoth, whose honey and peanut butter processing company Nutristar Enterprise is ready to move out of the incubator. "By matching the market and faculty knowledge, innovation lives beyond incubation," Midamba says. In 2015, KCA University will partner with Babson University, USA (a Forbes-ranked top entrepreneurship university) to offer joint trainings to entrepreneurs in East Africa, all to improve how entrepreneurship is taught in Kenya. Midamba believes entrepreneurial classes should be given by a faculty made up of entrepreneurs, and graduate programmes should be supervised by retired company executives. It is for this reason that the current incubation centre manager is Joshua Nyangidi, who runs a fully-fledged restaurant outside his daily job at the incubator, and the students' coursework is building their own business models and their ultimate exam is getting their business to run successfully.