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SATN SA/IRELAND ENTREPRENEURSHIP PROGRAMME WILL HELP PRODUCE A GENERATION OF JOB-MAKERS

Earlier this March, South African President, Cyril Ramaphosa, launched a R1.4 billion fund for small and medium-sized enterprises and startups (SMEs). Led by the CEO Initiative, a group of the country's leading business people and thinkers, the organization sought to providing institutional support and backing for SMEs, which, according to the World Bank, are a vital part of encouraging economic growth, raising employment rates and boosting national income in developing countries.

At the launch in Johannesburg, Ramaphosa said, "SMEs create the jobs [South Africans] need the most," highlighting some of the expectations facing small business owners and entrepreneurs, who have essentially been called upon both to save and revitalise the country's economy. The President's comments are best reflected in the government's 2012 National Development Plan, which envisions SMEs reducing the current unemployment rate by 6% by 2030, meaning these business owners and entrepreneurs would have to create 11 million jobs over the next 12 years to realise the National Development Plan's goal of 5.4% economic growth during this period.

To say "the pressure is on" for SMEs would be an understatement. Just this January, the Spectator Index ranked South Africa as having the highest rate of youth unemployment in the world at about 52.8%. While the news may have sent shockwaves around on social media, it was unsurprising to those who have been paying attention to the scant employment opportunities facing many young South Africans. Unemployment isn't just a "government problem," but a national crisis which requires the involvement and participation of private citizens, the state, business, and institutions of learning. In an interview with *Inside Education* earlier this year, Minister of Higher Education, Naledi Pandor, said her department would encourage entrepreneurial initiatives and ventures in schools, partnering 36 colleges with businesses across the country to help 845 undergraduates on their quest to become entrepreneurial forces of good for the country.

Like Pandor, Universities of Technology are also taking a proactive role in ensuring they produce South Africa's next job-makers. At the 9th Annual South African Technology Network (SATN) conference, held back in 2016, entrepreneurship and innovation were identified as critical components in creating a class of self-starting graduates who could contribute to the economy in an impactful way. Tshwane University of Technology Vice-Chancellor and SATN Board member, Prof Lourens van Staden, stated that Universities of Technology could prove to be "catalysts" in establishing an entrepreneurial ecosystem which would promote innovation and business.

This year, with the help of both the Technology Innovation Agency (TIA) and the Irish Embassy, SATN is proud to announce the South Africa/Ireland Entrepreneurship Programme, which seeks to act on the demand for more entrepreneurial-minded graduates who will go on to shape and grow the economy. From May 13th to May 17th 2019, two candidates (top entrepreneurial student and staff) from each SATN member institution will travel to Ireland and participate in the training programme, which gives students the opportunity to refine their entrepreneurial ideas, meet with potential investors from Ireland to help them maintain their business,

grow their network of fellow entrepreneurs and business owners, as well as connect with mentors and advisors who will be able to help them on their entrepreneurial journey.

Following the training programme in Ireland, candidates and staff will return to South Africa and along with four Irish mentors, teach the course to a group of about 70 to 100 local candidates in September 2019 in Durban. Overall, the purpose of the project is to create a dynamic five-day programme with a three-month online support which will be NQF credit aligned. This programme will be offered to all students registered at universities to promote lifelong accredited learning.

Whilst the statistics on youth unemployment may be alarming, this initiative strives to make the future appear less scary for young South Africans. There's never been a shortage of talent, drive, creativity, and flair in this country. Rather, all that is required to encourage economic growth and prosperity is opportunity.