

The new interactive digital learning platform will facilitate learning both off and online

# Yaaka: The new multimedia app to aid learning in schools

By Billy Rwethungyo

We are deep in the digital age. Technology is impacting almost every aspect of human life. So how best can we harness the power of technology to improve learning in schools?

An innovative solution, the Yaaka Digital Learning Network, which shone at this year's Africa Prize for Engineering Innovation in the United Kingdom, is one source of optimism for Ugandans.

The network was developed in 2015 by Ultimate Multimedia Consult, led by Gerald Businge, a multimedia journalist, who also is a lecturer of digital journalism and multimedia production at Makerere University.

Hindu Nabulumba, the Yaaka Digital Learning Network's brand manager, who represented Ultimate Multimedia Consult in the competition, explains how the platform works.

"This digital learning platform is based on the Ugandan syllabus. It can be used by teachers and learners to share and access academic content. The content is in multimedia form; video, audio and graphics," she says.



Students of Martin Luther King Secondary School in Kireka, Kampala trying out Yaaka tablet computers

### Interactive platform

One of the biggest features of the network is that it is interactive, so the different users can share experiences.

"We designed the platform to make learning interactive. One can interact on the Yaaka network the way one does on Facebook, but only for academics. One can even send a friend request on the network," Nabulumba explains.

"If you are a student from Jinja, you are able to interact with someone from Moroto and together, you can help each other to understand what you are learning."

### Internet connection

"The beauty about this platform is that it is available online and offline. To use it online, you must have access to Internet and to be able to access content offline, you have to come to our offices," Nabulumba explains.

The platform is still only web-based, but the team is working on more ways of making content readily available to different users. A mobile application for the network is also in the offing.

Accessing the content online is free, but since it is a social enterprise, one will need to part with some money if one wants to download the content. The charges per downloads depend on the classes, for example, for P4 content, the charge is sh30,000.

### Yaaka content

The content on the platform is designed by professional and qualified teachers.

"We got some of the best teachers in the country to help us come up with content and the officials at the National Curriculum Development Centre helped us design the content. We want teachers and learners in the rural schools to have access to the same content as those in the good, urban schools."

**Big dreams**

What started as an application to look for possible funding to advance the Yaaka Digital Learning Network project turned out to be something much better than



Nabulumba (centre) and Yaaka team members at the Africa Prize finals

they had envisioned. Nabulumba, who represented the team in the UK, says initially, they did not have high hopes in the project's in the competition.

A total of 16 innovations were selected from eight countries across Africa: South Africa, Mozambique, Uganda, Kenya, Tanzania, Ghana, Cameroon and Nigeria for the Africa Prize this year.

Of the 16 innovations, four finalists, from Uganda, Kenya, South Africa and Nigeria made it to the finals. Nigeria's Godwin Benson of Tuteria walked away with the grand prize of £25,000 (about sh117m), while Yaaka network got £10,000 (about sh47m) as runners-up.

The Africa Prize is meant to encourage talented sub-Saharan African innovators to develop local solutions to challenges in their communities.

Businge says digital learning platforms topping UK's Africa Prize for Engineering Innovation in a continent-wide contest judged by global experts shows the increasing realisation of the role technology can play in improving education and better life for people.

"The win by Yaaka and Tuteria further underscores the importance of helping students and teachers to learn and train from anywhere, anytime on any digital gadget," says Businge.

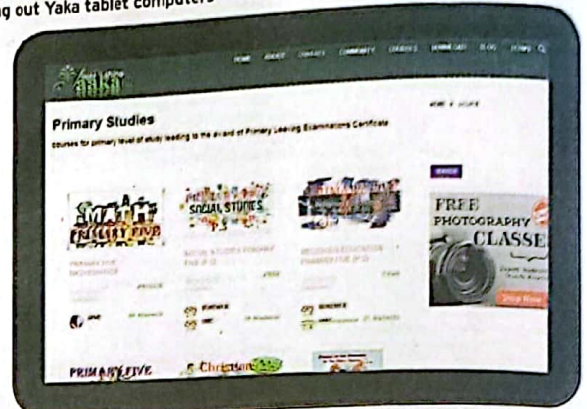
### What they say about Yaaka



**Gerald Businge, team leader, Yaaka Digital Learning Network**  
From the feedback we have, many teachers use our materials and classes while many students are easily accessing notes, assignments and practice quizzes.

**John Baptist Wasswa, parent**  
Yaaka helped my son when he was in P7. He is now in S2. We used to go through the areas that were not clear to him and he passed well. When he joined S1, I found the network useful in subjects such as literature in English and commerce. I was only disappointed that content for technical drawing was not available.

**John Muladi, teacher**  
I find Yaaka a useful platform for my work. As a primary school teacher of social studies and English language, I use the network to check and compare notes with other teachers. I hope we get more of such platforms.



A Yaaka android tablet displaying courses for Ugandan primary schools

### Previous awards

Yaaka has won Nigeria's Tony Elumelu Foundation and the Annual Communication Innovation Awards (ACIA) organised by Uganda Communications Commission (UCC).

With such success, Nabulumba and her team are dreaming big. The team wants the network to be rolled out to 21 African countries and are already in the kitchen cooking a solution for neighbouring Kenya and Rwanda.

First up though, a firm foundation on home turf is the top priority as of now. The team wants to equip as many schools as possible with computers so that they can access the network on their campuses.

### Challenges

Schools that would love to use the platform are financially handicapped. They do not have computers so that the platform can be installed in their schools and cannot afford to access to the content online as well.

"We are still limited by capital. If we had enough money, we would have covered many schools across the country."

On top of the £10,000 (about sh47m) got from the Africa Prize, the Yaaka Digital Learning Network has another \$10,000 (about sh36m) got from previous competitions and well-wishers in the bank. To roll out the network throughout the country, Nabulumba says they will need \$100,000 (about sh360m).

Nabulumba, a journalist by training, has a word of caution to teachers looking forward to using this network to improve performance in their schools; do not forget your roles.

"Even with such digital platforms, the role of teacher never changes. Learners still need teachers," she says.

### TOP TIP

"Even with such digital platforms, the role of teacher never changes. Learners still need teachers," Hindu Nabulumba, Yaaka Digital Learning Network's brand manager.