



Learners of Rays of Grace Junior School, Njeru, Buikwe District in the computer lab. AI-powered learning tools are increasingly supplementing classroom teaching. PHOTO/GEORGE KATONGOLE

In the age of ChatGPT and AI-powered learning, the traditional classroom is being challenged like never before. As students can now access personalised lessons, instant answers, and adaptive tutoring from home, the question arises: do we still need school the way we used to? **Timothy Kalyegira** explores how Artificial Intelligence (AI) is reshaping education and the skills students will need to thrive in a fast-changing world.

The new school term that was supposed to start on February 2, was postponed by the government to February 10.

This week, I thought I should return to a topic I have discussed endlessly over the past decade or so.

In the Internet era, with an ocean of information at our fingertips, why do we still pay this much attention to traditional formal education?

It has become even more important a question since the arrival three years ago of the generative Artificial Intelligence (AI) system called ChatGPT.

Almost every other sector of the economy has been disrupted to a degree by the Internet, but education is one of the few still stuck in the past.

This is ironic, when one thinks about it. Education, by its nature, should have been one of the first sectors to fully embrace the Internet 25 years ago.

ChatGPT has, within a short time, gone on to become one of the world's most used apps and tools.

It does wonders in every way one can think of it. For writers struggling with a block, AI creates a first draft to help get ideas flowing.

It can draft an email for a time-

## The AI era – why do we still go to school?

pressed CEO or senior manager.

It has become an essential tool for students. According to Google's chat bot Gemini AI, roughly 53 percent of students worldwide now use AI systems for their homework.

Once one tries out these AI bots about four times, there is never a going back. They are the dream personal assistant.

"Educators using AI report saving an average of 5–10 hours per week on administrative tasks like drafting emails, generating rubrics, and creating differentiated lesson plans," notes Gemini AI.

The premise of international schools and other expensive private schools is that they offer an exclusive or high-quality learning and instruction environment.

If this is so, no learning tool or environment today beats AI.

Even in the best traditional schools with spacious classrooms and 30 students per class, a single teacher cannot cater to 30 different personalities and 30 different learning speeds.

As we all know from experience, in the typical classroom, only about five percent of students actively engage with teachers, either by asking or answering questions.

The rest sit passively.

In the new technological era, AI now allows for "Adaptive Content Delivery," where AI-powered tutors adjust difficulty in real-time to each student or pupil.

And the more reserved or shy students can interact one-on-one with AI without the fear of being laughed at or just the anxiety that many feel over attracting attention.

Clearly, it is time for a major, long-overdue overhaul of the education system.

The traditional model of teacher-led, fixed-pace, product-oriented "final essay" format is no longer fit for purpose.

Just as the news media's passive one-to-many listening and passive viewing

2023

The widespread practical adoption of AI in learning began in earnest in the early 2020s, accelerated by the rise of generative AI systems like ChatGPT in 2023. Unlike earlier AI tools, which were limited to adaptive quizzes, automated grading, or subject-specific tutoring, these new systems can provide instant explanations, draft essays, summarise information, and interact conversationally with students.

broadcast format was disrupted by social media's two-day interactive format.

Smartphones have allowed even the quietest of people to actively engage with online content.

Today's pupil and student is native to this two-way environment, the traditional format where a class faces the blackboard and listen to the dictates of a teacher no longer appeals.

All this is just the teaching and learning side.

How about the job market? Given the scary pace at which AI systems improve every four or so months, will there still be jobs for today's students when they finish school?

AI systems are now at par with the best human software engineers, accountants, financial analysts, journalists, social sciences researchers, medical doctors, and other white-collar professionals.

And where even the best humans take weeks, days, or hours to produce good work, AI systems typically take less than 30 seconds following an online prompt.

By the end of this year, 2026, I estimate that AI systems will have become better than humans in 95 percent of formal white-collar tasks and jobs.

And yet schools are still instructing students like its 1999.

There is no going back and there's no stopping AI's advances. We humans can't beat it at speed, punctuation, and, above all, cost.

The skills of the present emphasise knowledge by the student or office worker.

Considering that AI systems can scrape the entire open Internet in a matter of seconds, the skills of the future will have to be different.

AI bots are mostly used as answer engines. The previous era of Google and Yahoo! was of search engines. You were given thousands of links on the search re-

sults page and it was up to you to sift through them.

This sifting is now performed for the user by AI, which in less than 30 seconds produces a synthesised, paragraph-structured reply.

The quality of answer given by AI depends on the quality, depth, and nuance of the question asked.

And so, a new field called Prompt Engineering is starting to take shape.

To know the right questions and prompts to ask AI, one must have a wide base of knowledge, deep insight into a subject-matter, and to know enough about AI's limitations to prompt it into further detail.

You must know the full scope of what you wish to know, for AI to work for you.

In other words, AI will favour the already in-depth mind and widely knowledgeable people.

Alternatively, one must have a deeply curious mind so that when an AI bot gives one an answer, the answer must tickle one to wish to understand more or better of the subject.

So, for parents struggling to find school fees and other requirements this week, the good news is that expensive private and international schools have seen their advantage undercut by AI.

Schools in upcountry towns like Tororo, Hoima, Mbarara, Gulu, Soroti, Masaka, Arua, Kabale, Busia and so on can leapfrog into the AI era and, in effect, launch their pupils into an international learning environment.

Concepts like home schooling are now even more viable in the AI, ChatGPT, Gemini era.

A child can study from home and teach themselves, managing to jump ahead of those attending school.

A brave and exciting new world awaits us. Those who are curious, adventurous, and ambitious will greatly benefit from the AI era.