



**JET EDUCATION SERVICES**  
THINK EDUCATION. THINK JET.

A view from the OUTSIDE

Abdullah Verachia  
CEO: The Strategists  
Head of Faculty: Strategy, Sustainability and Digital at GIBS  
Head of the Harvard Senior Executive Programme  
MultiChoice Chair in Sport, media and entertainment

## JET Annual Meeting Key Note Address

Dr Abdullah Verachia is a globally respected strategist, systems thinker and venture builder. He serves as CEO of The Strategists, is a published author, is a senior faculty member at GIBS and leads the Harvard Business School Senior Executive Programme for Africa. Over the years, he has advised governments, Fortune 500 companies and global institutions on navigating disruption and driving innovation. Today, he brings a distinctive 'outside-in perspective' on disruption and the reimagining of education in an era of uncertainty.



### SPEECH TITLE

#### **'Navigating Disruption: Global Trends Shaping the Future of Skills and Learning'.**

In his address, Dr Verachia underscored that we now live in a world marked by constant, rapid and far-reaching shifts, unpredictable, and often abrupt. Political volatility, economic disruption, climate change and technological advancement are no longer isolated events; they have become enduring global realities. For JET and the education sector, this changing context signals a fundamentally altered environment, where policies, school systems and modes of practice can no longer operate as before. These shifts also highlight that sustainability can no longer be understood in the traditional sense; instead, there is a pressing need for continuous re-strategizing. It is evident that business as usual is no longer an option.

Dr Verachia draws lessons from the work he has done with companies in industries outside education. In the Telecommunications sector, mobile phone companies and network providers once thrived on revenues from voice calls and mobile data. Today, that model has been disrupted by the rise of WhatsApp texts and voice calls and the widespread use of fibre and Wi-Fi. The environment has significantly shifted; communication no longer goes through the phone call pipeline and the mobile data pipe has also gone dry. The external environment telecommunications companies operate in has fundamentally shifted, and so have their approach and strategies. Dr Verachia challenged the education sector with a question, 'How will education

respond to its own rapidly changing environment, where technology, policy changes, funding pressures, institutional settings and new learner behaviours are reshaping expectations?' Specifically, he urged JET to consider how these external shifts affect its business model, its capabilities, its alignment with sector priorities and its relationships with partners and funders. A key business question he posed was, 'How is JET planning to increase its clients' and customers' willingness to pay for JET's products?'

Dr Verachia introduced the 'escaped' framework, beginning with an examination of the external environment. He illustrated how companies adapt their strategies in response to rapid environmental changes. For example, Woolworths shifted from being primarily a clothing retailer to a successful food business, developing entirely new capabilities to meet evolving consumer demands. He also referenced Mark Johnson's ideas in *Leading from the Future*<sup>1</sup>, which highlight the importance of forward thinking, where companies continuously and incrementally ask, 'What is it that we do?' as often happens in organisational practices such as annual performance reviews and other structured processes. Dr Verachia challenged educational organisations to ask similar questions: 'What could the future of our organisations look like, and what capabilities must we build to remain relevant in this disruptive landscape?'

1 Johnson, M. W., & Suskewicz, J. (2020). *Lead from the future: How to turn visionary thinking into breakthrough growth*. Harvard Business Review Press.

He pointed to three powerful global shifts shaping learning and skills:

1. **Geopolitical change:** Shifting patterns of trade and multilateral partnerships as well a shift in the development finance landscape
2. **Population growth:** World population growth from 2.6 billion to 9.1 billion in 50 years is straining the resource base and demanding new ways of thinking. Some of these shifts are not short-term, but are systemic and invasive.
3. **Technology and cognitive rewiring:** Data is at the centre of controlling human behaviour through machine learning – from Netflix algorithms shaping what we watch, to Uber Eats altering how we eat, to AI transforming assessment, tutoring and pedagogy. Learners today expect education to mirror the seamless, personalised learning and frictionless experiences they encounter in daily life. Traditional trust in public schooling is waning, and learners increasingly want to be *active participants* in their journeys. New models such as peer learning pods, micro-credentialing and digital platforms are challenging the old system. Institutions are being redefined, and new networks are emerging.

For the education system, this means adapting not only curriculum and pedagogy, but also systems of funding, trust and institutional identity. The funding system has changed due to how the development space has evolved. Funders and partners are now looking into how we shift to systemic strategic investments for systemic impact.

JET needs to think of how to leverage the right types of co-funding platforms. The world has started to focus more on outcomes than activities, with an appreciation for milestone indicators tied to systemic impact, rather than just deliverables. So the key question is: 'As we cognitively rewire, are there ways in which we measure systemic impact differently? Are there ways in which JET plays a bigger role in the shifting education landscape and its funding pool?'

Using the escape framework lens, Dr Verachia challenged JET to consider some key questions:

- What non-education trends are we not taking into account, but should be thinking about? Are there dynamics outside of education that should matter to us or that we should be reflecting on?
- Are there external signals that we should be tracking more actively and consistently?

- What are the strategic responses in terms of our operating rhythm? How do we continue to operate and have systemic impact while responding to some of the factors that are outside of our sector, but affect our sector and how we work?
- JET operates in research, innovation and implementation, and monitoring and evaluation, but not all spaces are equal in terms of leverage, so the key question is: Are we focusing on the highest-leverage spaces, like interoperable data ecosystems, professionalisation and digital credentialing?
- Are we subtracting low-impact, resource-heavy activities rather than adding endlessly to strategy?
- Do we have the right capabilities, strategic foresight, systems thinking and agility to thrive in disruption?
- And how do we differentiate in a crowded landscape, ensuring our identity and values are not mistaken? What is the JET brand and how do people out there see and feel about JET Education Services?

Finally, Dr Verachia grounded his message in a personal story. From a small town in Mpumalanga, a chance opportunity in high school to join a United Nations debate changed the trajectory of his life. That one decision led to him representing South Africa at the United Nations, winning scholarships, and eventually studying at Harvard and Oxford. Yet his journey was also marked by struggle – dropping out for lack of fees, selling recharge vouchers to survive, and relying on unexpected acts of kindness to continue his studies. The lesson, he emphasised, is clear: education's ripple effect is profound. Small interventions, like a scholarship, a debate programme or a bursary can transform not only one life, but entire communities and systems.

Dr Verachia closed with a call: education must think boldly, not just about today's operating environment, but about the future we want to build.

Finally, to view education not in isolation, but in the broader currents of global change, and to harness disruption, not as a threat, but as a catalyst for transformation.

*If education were redesigned from scratch in 2025, what would it look like? How can institutions become platforms rather than just partners? And how do we ensure that in the turbulence of disruption, education remains the pebble that creates ripples of change across society, with humility and conviction?*

Tshegofatso Mashaphu

Tel: +27 11 403 6401

[info@jet.org.za](mailto:info@jet.org.za)

[www.jet.org.za](http://www.jet.org.za)



**Physical address**

18 Glenhove Road

Melrose Estate

Johannesburg

South Africa 2196

**Postal address**

PO Box 178

WITS, 2050

South Africa



**JET EDUCATION SERVICES**  
THINK EDUCATION. THINK JET.