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Philippi satellite Hub provides a vital platform for new audiences

A review of the University of Cape Town's (UCT) first "phygital" Summer School, a combination of live and digital presentations and classes, has shown that its new base at the Philippi Hub has the potential to become a valuable platform for reaching new audiences of lifelong learners.

This community satellite drew "overwhelming interest" from the community with more than 250 applicants. The venues were made available by the UCT Graduate School of Business's (UCT GSB) Solution Space at the hub, and their team used existing relationships with local business partners to advertise the courses.

While COVID-19 regulations meant only 120 applicants could be accommodated (with most venues limited to 15 people per session), these participants were able to connect with the university, most for the first time, said Dr Medeé Rall, head of the Centre for Extra-Mural Studies (EMS) in the Development and Alumni Department.

Learning for all

Rall sees the hub as a vital platform for realising the Summer School's mandate, captured in their mission "Open Learning for All", regardless of their educational background, or where they live.

"The role that Summer School can play in helping to transform UCT into a more inclusive university, part of Vision 2030, is immeasurable," she said. "In Philippi, we were able to reach communities we couldn't before, both in terms of regular audiences and in terms of a working project to put our work in reach of resource-poor communities."

EMS senior education specialist, Dr Zuleiga Adams, and senior intern, Lindokuhle Patiwe, worked on the outreach programme to embed Summer School in these communities. As part of this, lectures were also live-streamed to Ikamva Labantu, a community-driven NGO that delivers social support services to underprivileged communities in Cape Town.

To address the challenge of internet resources for potential participants, the Solution Space team adopted a pragmatic approach to registration, said Rachel Briant, on behalf of the Solution Space.

"Many participants do not have internet access or even an email address. So, we made use of tools such as WhatsApp and in-person registration."

Briant said the team were already looking forward to growing and evolving the programme to better meet the communities' needs. Feedback from participants had shown a need for practical courses; skills that will help job seekers and lead to learnerships and internships, she said.

Phygital combo

On campus, there was a good response to live classes and lectures, said Rall, but still without the full "buzz" of Summer School.

"But going online has now made it possible for more people from around the world, particularly alumni, to experience Summer School's intellectual richness."

Regarding the combination of live and digital participation, Rall cited three key statistics:

- Two-thirds attended online and one-third in person. "We weren't yet back to our normal [in-person] numbers," she said. Limited numbers in venues, prescribed to prevent COVID-19 infections, also affected in-person attendance.
- 53% of participants were alumni, who signed up from all over the world thanks to online offerings. "And that's a substantial group of people who are getting something important from the university," added Rall.
- 15% of participants were under the age of 50.

Young Summer School champions

The phygital Summer School seems to be the optimum model, Rall said. She and her team hope that the online offerings will help to grow the younger audience they are keen to attract and develop into lifelong learners who return to Summer School year after year.

One of Summer School's champions in this is young UCT alumnus and participant Faheem Seedat. Seedat first noticed Summer School in 2019. Curious about 'school' during the middle of January and in need of stimulation, he scouted it out. It was a course on artificial intelligence that hooked him.

"I knew Summer School existed. But I'm the kind of person who likes to go somewhere I haven't been before, where I don't know what to expect." His impressions? Plenty of older people, he said, but after attending a few lectures he started having fun.

"I enjoyed the conversation and the company. There were enough people to create a vibe [this was pre-COVID-19] and not too many to 'subdue' what was happening, which is learning and expanding yourself."

And the in-person classes were a break from online learning.

"I'm a believer in the interaction and energies that play out in real space; the lecturers in front of you. Having their full essence around the room makes a huge difference. The environment was much more relaxed and open; you're free to take in whatever you're particularly interested in at that moment."

Seedat is keen to market the course to other young alumni and friends, and to contribute ideas to attract a younger audience – people keen to learn, to visit UCT's campus and be a part of the community.

Staying hybrid

Rall said that the team had learnt important lessons this year – including the need to offer flexibility. “We will definitely stay hybrid. We discovered even the language and art courses worked well online.”

But the aim is also to reclaim the more social aspects of in-person attendance, with coffee shops, book stalls and meeting places.

This is what regulars miss most. Online can be lonely, said Rosemarie Saunders, who has been coming for 44 years. Another regular attendee, Suzette Raymond, said the attraction remains the “wonderful, interesting courses from top lecturers on offer every year”.

Story by Helen Swingler, UCT News.

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