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MEDIA RELEASE

UP student projects help local schools kick-start online teaching and learning amid COVID-19 lockdown

PRETORIA – A collaboration between local schools and students at UP’s Faculty of Engineering, Built Environment and Information Technology is finding innovative ways to ensure that teaching and learning continue online while the country is in lockdown to contain the spread of COVID-19.

In the Faculty’s compulsory undergraduate module, Community-based Project Module (JCP), students are expected to work 40 hours in the community and then reflect on their experiences. With the lockdown linked to COVID-19, the JCP students have experienced challenges in completing their 40 hours, but in collaboration with local communities, they have found creative new projects as the need for technical support for teachers doing online teaching becomes apparent.

Twenty-nine JCP students are at various stages of helping teachers from Tsako Thabo Secondary School in Mamelodi, Blue Hills College in Midrand, Laerskool Menlopark and Pretoria Secondary School implement their online teaching programmes. These projects require new and unique levels of interaction with the community. Support includes developing PowerPoint presentations, updating mark sheets, making online forms available and creating databases. Students are also assisting in finding solutions for teachers to allow learners to upload assignments. Innovative teachers implement online classes via Google Classroom and WhatsApp, which requires support from the UP students.

Reflecting on her project so far, Nishsai Veerappa, a second-year BCom (Informatics) student, said she had a new-found appreciation for teachers. “I did not realise how difficult a teacher’s job is, especially in the current pandemic. Learners rely on these presentations to learn the work that they should have learnt in their classroom.”

Veerappa said the experience had given her new ideas about how to engage an audience and communicate with her own team members. “I am learning how to make the children engage and pay attention to what is being taught. It is done by using various visual techniques and asking questions in a variety of different ways. I am also learning how to communicate with my supervisor and team members without face-to-face communication.”

The e-service projects constitute a new endeavour for the students in the module. The teachers and UP students had to think of options that would accommodate the profile of the learners, as online education is new territory for both the learners and teachers. While other JCP community projects have included the development of apps, websites and educational videos, these new e-service community projects open numerous new opportunities for the students to provide a meaningful service to the communities.

Ruben de Jager, also a second-year BCom (Informatics) student, said: “I am learning ways to communicate with a community of teachers and to understand their work environment and the lengths they would go to for their learners.

“Problem-solving skills and technological skills are required, not only from us, but also from the teachers and learners,” he added about the collaboration.

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ABOUT THE UNIVERSITY OF PRETORIA

The University of Pretoria (UP) is one of the largest contact and residential universities in South Africa, with its administration offices located on the Hatfield Campus, Pretoria. This 112-year-old institution is also the largest producer of research in South Africa.

Spread over seven campuses, it has nine faculties and a business school, the Gordon Institute of Business Science (GIBS). It is the only university in the country that has a Faculty of Veterinary Science which is ranked top in Africa, and overall has 120 academic departments, as well as 92 centres and institutes, accommodating more than 55 000 students and offering about 1 100 study programmes.

UP is one of the top five universities in South Africa, according to the 2019-2020 rankings by the Center for World University Rankings. It is also ranked among the top 100 universities worldwide in three fields of study (veterinary science, theology and law), and among the top 1% in eight fields of study (agricultural sciences, clinical medicine, engineering, environment/ecology, immunology, microbiology, plant and animal sciences and social sciences).

In June 2019, the annual UK Financial Times Executive Education Rankings once again ranked GIBS as the top South African and African business school. The University also has an extensive community engagement programme with approximately 33 000 students involved in community upliftment. Furthermore, UP is building considerable capacities and strengths for the Fourth Industrial Revolution by preparing students for the world beyond university and offering work-readiness and entrepreneurship training to its students.

As one of South Africa’s research-intensive universities, UP launched the *Future Africa Campus* in March 2019 as a hub for inter- and transdisciplinary research networks within UP and the global research community to maximise 4IR innovation and address the challenges and stresses our continent and world is facing. In addition UP also launched the Javett Art Centre in September 2019 as a driver of transdisciplinary research development between the Humanities and other faculties. In 2020 UP will launch Engineering 4.0. as a hub not only for Smart Cities and Transport, but also to link the vast resources in technology and data sciences to other faculties via Future Africa. These initiatives are stimulating new thinking at the frontier of ‘science for transformation’.

For more information, go to www.up.ac.za