

Wide Scope

START AN UPRISING!

Who better to develop university-fee crowdfunding, on-demand tutoring and on-campus pregnancy testing than students themselves? How UCT Upstarts develops young, innovative thinkers into agents of social change

By Simon Capstick-Dale



“Upstarts is a bit of a quiet revolution happening at UCT. We’re getting out of the classroom, we’re getting students to think about real issues and what they can do—where they are—starting right now,” says Dr Francois Bonnici, director at the Bertha Centre for Social Innovation & Entrepreneurship.

Now in its third year, UCT Upstarts is in the business of launching into action the brightest ideas of South Africa’s most talented young social entrepreneurs. A joint initiative between the Bertha Centre and Super Stage (a live, open innovation “brainstorming marketplace”), Upstarts premiered in 2015 with pop-up hubs to support social entrepreneurship and innovation on the University of Cape Town’s upper campus. The student startup nation has since gone from strength to strength, and 2017 sees a further improved platform and the introduction of a brand-new wellness intervention.

Students—across all faculties, from first year to honours—join the 12-week programme as members of a multidisciplinary

team who take on the challenge of finding viable solutions to real-world problems faced by everyday South Africans.

“I don’t see any reason for differentiation between entrepreneurship and social entrepreneurship. Every entrepreneur out there should be using their business to make the world work better. With Upstarts, we want to create a culture where business and social upliftment are fully integrated, and the emphasis is not solely on wealth accumulation,” says the wonder woman behind Upstarts and founder of Super Stage, Gina Levy.

In finding answers to real-world problems faced in South Africa, these young people become a generation of proactive, self-empowered individuals in the habit of creating their own opportunities and looking introspectively to change the world rather than relying on others to make it happen. “When students find something that’s an injustice and at odds with how they believe the world should be, that’s the kind of problem they should go solve,” says Mark

Horner, founder of education enterprise Siyavula, and coach for UCT Upstarts 2016.

An integral part of the Upstarts education for students is learning how to break free from the mould of prescribed, outdated employment opportunities and roles that aren't aligned with today's entrepreneurial landscape: "Getting students to realise they're able to follow non-traditional career paths and aspire to become something that doesn't even exist yet is a big part of what we're trying to achieve," says Levy. "We also teach students the intrinsic value in doing what they love and creating the world around them."

UCT Upstarts is hosted on a double-decker bus, where handpicked social entrepreneurs and business innovators present talks, workshops and 'do-shops' to help students through the phases of their startup journey. The invited coaches are there to build the students' confidence before they enter the marketplace with their needs-driven ideas that are capable of transforming South Africa into the place they've always dreamt it could be. "Working in a silo, there's little opportunity for the cross-pollination of ideas and networking, but UCT Upstarts is very hands-on. We bring the world to campus for these students, who develop personal relationships with movers and shakers they might never otherwise have had access to. Coaches are also role models for some students who haven't yet had anyone in their lives to look up to," adds Levy.

Each year, UCT Upstarts culminates in the Idea Auction evening where a selection of teams with the most compelling, innovative and socially impactful solutions pitch their world-changing ideas to a live-bidding audience with the resources to put them in business right away. "Students pitch exactly what they need for their startup at the auction. In addition to money, bidders provide them with access

From top to bottom:

Dadewethu: "I didn't think something that started as a small idea could turn into something so big."

Plug-Ed: "We'll take what we learn and develop the software side of our company."

Lwazi: "It's not just about making money but paying it forward."

to resources such as mentors, accelerator programmes and media exposure so they can potentially go into business on the same night," explains Levy.

CLASS OF 2016

In the wake of nationwide student protests over fees, the Social Innovation Challenge set for UCT Upstarts 2016 was to formulate innovative ideas to "Re-educate Education". The bold task for students was to reinvent the education landscape, with the purpose of increasing overall accessibility and affordability.

The eight teams that qualified for the Idea Auction in September most certainly answered this call, demonstrating their ability to find dynamic solutions to socio-economic issues in our schools and universities. UCT vice-chancellor Dr Max Price commended the young entrepreneurs for their vision to be job creators rather than job seekers: "These students are going to be the employers, innovators and creators of a new society."

2016 UCT Upstarts sponsors and partners included the Bertha Foundation, UCT's HPI d-school (School of Design Thinking), SAB Foundation, Relate Bracelets, Standard Bank and Red Bull Amaphiko. Guests who attended the Idea Auction pledged more than R100 000 in cash plus resources in the form of networks, incubation spaces, travel opportunities and media exposure worth R1 million—all to make the game-changing ideas of the students come to fruition.

"At Upstarts, our currency is opportunity, so it was amazing to see so many 'opportunity bidders' showing their support for these young innovators, and especially watching students give donations to fund the ideas of their peers—something that really proves just how impactful this platform is," notes Levy.

