

UCT Online High School: redefining the online education system in SA

By [Evan-Lee Courie](#)

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In recent years, South Africa has seen a rise in online learning thanks to the fourth industrial revolution. As a result of the advancement of technology, education has become more accessible, providing an abundance of information in various forms - from e-books and infographics, to visual aids and videos - learning materials are now readily available at the touch of a button, whether it be a smartphone, tablet or notebook.

However, in South Africa, the high cost of data, limited access to computers or laptops, and internet connectivity challenges have been to the disadvantage of many learners and students looking to benefit from online learning.

"South Africa is relatively far behind the curve currently. The technology and the expertise are here, but we struggle with some of the fundamental enablers such as reliable electricity, affordable data and enabling legislation. Without these fundamentals, it's more challenging for these new modalities to truly flourish," says Robert Paddock, CEO and co-founder of Valentre Institute, an education technology impact company that partners with leading education institutions to offer aspirational high school experiences to learners worldwide.



Robert Paddock, CEO and co-founder of Valentre Institute. Image supplied

Valentre Institute partnered with the University of Cape Town to create the UCT Online High School which was launched in July 2021. It's been reported that it's the first university on the African continent to extend its offering to secondary schooling through an online education system.



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Online education is a very broad term that's interpreted differently by many - some expect live classes on various streaming services throughout the day, others expect a more blended learning experience, while some expect to just find content on a platform.

"For all online education providers in South Africa, there is work to do to ensure that the market increasingly understands the differences between the modalities, and empower them to make the most-informed decision for their child and find the best fit," says Paddock.

As a relatively new modality in South Africa, one of the hardest things for an online education provider is to ensure that their market understands exactly what they are signing up for.

"An online school is attractive for a number of learners in each grade who have unique and specific needs relevant to their environment which can be better met through online learning," says Banele Lukhele, UCT Online High School's executive head of school and chief academic officer.



Banele Lukhele, UCT Online High School's executive head of school and chief academic officer. Image supplied

Paddock's view on online learning is that "education technology presents the best possible opportunity for us to provide every learner in South Africa with access to a high-quality education. Within the traditional system, we're about to lose nearly half of the teachers in the system by 2030; our youth population is exploding; and the budget per learner is decreasing. With a system that is already under immense strain, we simply have to start thinking differently about how to solve the hard challenge of educating our youth, and technology presents the best opportunity to leapfrog the current challenges".

Adds Lukhele: "Online learning is an exciting area of continual innovation, and so we are always learning. This is the beauty of it - we can adapt, evolve, and streamline a lot quicker than traditional schooling which, at the heart of it, is best for the learner as the main goal is to educate, enrich and progress a learner throughout their high school career."

Speaking of innovation, since its launch in July 2021, UCT Online High School was only offered to Grades 8-11 and now in 2023 has welcomed its first class of Grade 12 with over 4,000 learners.

Lukhele is excited to help these learners take their final steps before entering the working world or their tertiary education institution of choice.

"Over and above the enhancements mentioned previously, this year we are paying particular focus on differentiated support for the different grades. In line with this, we have a particular academic calendar set out for the matrics that will ensure all of the content is covered before they write their prelims and final NSC exams. We have also allocated a fair amount of time to revision, which will be augmented by additional resources and academic support to cover knowledge gaps and exam-related skills," says Lukhele.

"They will be able to adjust to blended learning should they decide to study further and they will be prepared for remote or blended workspaces if that is their next step."

Technology presents promising possibilities to the education industry

Lukhele believes that the education industry is being more intentional about the work done by teachers and the work that is done by technology. "At UCT Online High School, we see ourselves at the front of this innovation. We keep a pulse on tech innovation and apply our minds to how we can use this to enhance what we offer in order to remain affordable without compromising the quality of learning that happens. In a few years, I see UCT Online High School leading conversations and supporting the growth of accessible education across the country and the continent," she says.

Paddock believes that in the next 10 years, every learner in South Africa will have a personal digital tutor, providing them with truly individualised content, remediation and support to give them the best possible chance of reaching their academic potential.



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Access to education

As tough economic times continue to become more of an everyday reality for many South Africans, Paddock says that they are seeing an ever-increasing number of families who would love to be part of UCT Online High School but simply cannot afford some or all of the current tuition fees.

"Currently, we successfully partner with four major corporate sponsors who support over 150 learners' continued enrolment at UCT Online High School. As a result of these initiatives and partnerships, we at Valentre Institute are on a mission to increase access to quality online education by securing additional scholarship opportunities for our potential learners. It is

clear though that we cannot do this alone and will be rolling out our corporate partner campaign with a call to action — be part of a growing community committed to making a real difference in the lives of South Africa's high school youth (and potentially those of our adult matric learners as well)."

Notably, the UCT Online High School ecosystem has been designed to service South African students from a broad range of socioeconomic means.

"Our free curriculum (SA National Senior Curriculum, CAPS-aligned) is about accelerating access to world-class high school education so that we can unleash South Africa's potential. Thanks to the Michael & Susan Dell Foundation, we were able to make our cutting-edge online curriculum freely available to any learner, teacher or parent in South Africa," adds Lukhele.

Despite the fact that South Africa still faces many challenges in the education sector, there's no doubt that technology is playing a crucial role in making education more accessible and affordable for all South Africans.

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