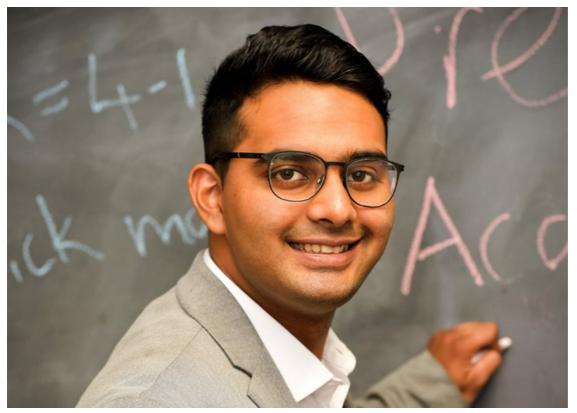# How Shivad Singh built a revolutionary educational app at 19

By Imran Salie

22 Jun 2023

At just 19 years old, Shivad Singh from Durban built an online education app that creates access to affordable quality education for all. He has expanded to a number of countries in the African continent and is now about to launch in Afghanistan to provide education access to women.

Shivad Singh | image supplied

He is the first education company that will launch with the Vodapay app through his platform DigiClass. Singh is also currently developing a Whatsapp chatbot that teaches numeracy, literacy, and coding for kids.

On his achievements, Singh says that persistence is the one factor for his success. "Never give up, never. For example, I recently had a meeting with the COO of one of the largest education companies in Africa. That meeting took four years to get in person with her," he says.

We caught up with Singh to find out more about his inspirations and the plans he has for his DigiClass platform...

▦ *What motivated you to start an online education app?*

There are copious reasons why I started an online education business and web app. I researched the problems of education and learned that in South Africa, less than 50% of children entering Grade 1 complete high school 12 years later.

This figure drops well below 50% in the rest of the continent. Globally, sub-Saharan Africa has the highest rates of education exclusion. Over one-fifth of children between the ages of about six and 11 are out of school, followed by one-third of youth between the ages of 12 and 14.

Personally, I am a firm believer in how education can change the world for the better. In 1925 my great-grandfather became the first Indian in South Africa to matriculate and that changed the course of my family's trajectory.

This event shaped our family as we learned the value of education and gave us an appreciation for how education can emancipate one from their social circumstances. Like my great-grandfather, I was blessed with a life-changing opportunity in the form of a scholarship from Investec to study at a tertiary institution.

Whilst at University, I managed to realise my dream but also interrogated my privilege as I saw how many kids in my country do not have access to quality education as well as put my path to be part of the solution for the kids of South Africa and the rest of the world.

In May 2019 at the age of 24, I started Head Start in the hopes of giving all children access to quality education and the chance to change the world. At 28 that dream is even more important as we saw the devastation caused by Covid-19 and the inequality gap becoming wider. I hope to use my privilege and experience to try to provide a level playing field for all.

⊞ *What sparked this idea, and what impact do you hope it will have on children's education?*

Learning about the devastating problems of education in Africa, I then researched products in South Africa that could solve these problems. I believe that at the time there were few digital products that can both solve the problem and reach the scale need for significant impact.

I then researched over 500 of the leading education companies globally and I was so impressed with the quality of the content and platforms. I then asked the question, "What if we bring the leading education companies globally to Africa?"

So that's what we did. We now have over 15 exclusive licenses for these companies. We then created DigiClass, which is a *Netflix* for education, where we aggregated some of these content partners in one platform.

In terms of impact, our mission is to ensure that all learners in developing countries receive a world-class education that is accessible and affordable. Learners will have a cost-effective, democratized, and world-class education. We hope that they have an improvement in learner results, intellectual development, mental-wellbeing and reduce the digital divide.

⊞ *What were some of the challenges you faced in building the app and how did you overcome them?*

It took some time in asking exactly what we require for the app, so we created a business requirement specification and a functional requirement specification (Just google them if you don't know what they are). By planning properly you will decrease the costs and mistakes that you make down the line.

A challenge that we faced was that we realised there were some things we no longer needed or needed in the app and then iterated. It's important to start building and try to keep your costs as lean as possible and iterate as you go.

Since we are a technology-first education company, we may have issues when it comes to the maintenance of our platforms, just like all tech companies. We have an amazing tech and product team that ensures that if anything goes wrong with our platforms, we resolve it almost immediately. There is quick communication between all team members to ensure that the work is done and nothing is missed.

⠿ *How did you manage to expand your app to multiple countries in Africa?*

As CEO, I oversee the vision, strategy, and strategic partnerships. We are an Africa-first country and are currently in five African countries.

Since we have mobile apps and web apps it is easier to scale digitally.

We researched other strategic partners that we were interested in working with, received referrals, and leveraged the great work that we did in South Africa as a case study to get into these new growth markets.

⠿ *Can you share some insights into your experience as a young entrepreneur, managing a growing team, and driving digital skills-based learning?*

When starting out there were many lows and it was extremely difficult. The initial funding from SAB Foundation allowed me to grow the business while sustaining myself at a minimum level. I also had to work a full-time job to get a salary to fund the business, until it was earning revenue.

Head Start was basically my "side hustle". I also felt that some people didn't take me seriously since I was so young when starting Head Start (24 at the time), especially when I shaved!). However, when you present to them, and answer any question they have they can see that you know your stuff and are the real deal.

Slowly we started getting customers and know we are in the growth phase which is one of the most exciting parts of being an entrepreneur.

In terms of managing a growing team, I learned many mistakes along the way. I know the power of having an amazing culture which is stemmed from the values that you need to live by. We treat and are kind to our employees.

There are a lot of jokes and banter in the group chat and I love it. In terms of growing a team, we only hire the best. I actually hire a lot of my friends because I know them for years and I don't even need to do an interview with them. It's important to only work with people that you are willing to get stuck in an airport with or go for a coffee.

In terms of driving skills-based learning, it's one of the most important facets of education. However, we place a large focus on Early Childhood Development which is the foundation for everything.

It's important to know your one's and twp's before learning linear algebra or coding. Getting the basics right will make the learning process for our customers and learners easier.

⠿ *Can you share any specific examples of how your platform promotes and nurtures digital skills among students?*

Firstly, our platform teaches the foundational skills of what's currently in the school syllabus for ages one-18. Learners learn numeracy, literacy, physics, etc.

We will soon be introducing coding and robotics that not only provide learners with digital skills but also provide them with the critical thinking and problem-solving skills that will make them a success in life, even if they don't become software engineers.

We have also partnered with a company that provides skills training for over 500 jobs and even automatically created a CV for the learner based on inputted data.

⊞ *What are your future plans and goals for DigiClass?*

- We are launching in new schools, partnering with resellers across South Africa and Africa, and working with banks, retailers, telcos, and other corporates via CSI and CSR.
- We are the first education company that will launch one of the leading telecommunication companies in South Africa.
- We will be launching our education platform with one of the largest banks in South Africa.
- Our team is also rapidly expanding and we are growing our salesforce.
- In terms of new product development, we are developing an online coding school called Code A2Z that teaches coding and robotics to ages two-18 and over.
- We are developing a mental health and wellness platform that provides exercises, meditation, yoga, tai chi, and brain training to kids.
- We are developing a WhatsApp chatbot that teaches numeracy, literacy, and coding for kids.
- We are also developing a WhatsApp chatbot that acts as an assistant for teachers and teaches them how to teach learners.

⊞ *What advice would you give to other young individuals aspiring to create opportunities for themselves?*

It is great to be excited by your idea, but know that this can be a difficult and challenging journey. To solve this, create a powerful vision and mission for your life and business that will energize you and enable you to not give up and keep on going when you may be in a low space.

Test your idea as quickly as possible and get feedback from prospective customers. You should continually iterate and get version one up and running as soon as possible. Think about how you can save as much money as possible when you are starting out.

Move fast and get things done quickly! This allows you to do in one day what some large companies may only be able to do in a week, month, or even year.

Find a mentor - If you don't have a mentor now, you can find mentors in the authors of your favourite books or videos on YouTube. You should show value first and let the relationship develop naturally.

Always do your best in any project, and whatever happens thereafter is beyond your control - be unattached to the outcome.

If you are disappointed in your current situation, never blame yourself. However, it is up to you to make opportunities for yourself. You can contact and reach out to people, and call and send your sales presentation to 100s of customers for example.

Never stop learning - Google, YouTube, books, and courses are your best friends when it comes to learning new skills to do with your field of interest.

If it seems like you have failed, those failures are actually pointing you in the right direction for success.

ABOUT IMRAN SALIE

Bizcommunity Editor: Automotive, Entrepreneurship, Education
- #YouthMonth: How Shivad Singh built a revolutionary educational app at 19 - 22 Jun 2023
- #AfricaMonth: Lavina Ramkissoon explores the implications of generative AI for Africa's future - 25 May 2023
- #AfricaMonth: Software startup Cloud23's remarkable impact on the African market - 23 May 2023
- #AfricaTechWeek: Unleashing the power of AI in Africa: Expert insights and predictions - 12 May 2023
- #EcomAfrica: Boardroom confidence in cybersecurity crucial for e-commerce success - 21 Apr 2023

View my profile and articles...