

# What social innovation and development can do for a university

*Two projects show how UWC has developed infrastructure to nurture and support a culture of social and scientific innovation across faculties*

**I**nvention and innovation are two different concepts. In the case of an invention, an investment of resources financial or otherwise is made, with the outcome being new knowledge. Innovation, on the other hand, is the outcome of utilising the new knowledge that is the outcome of the invention process to address a market or societal need and thereby results in value creation, which may be monetary or other. As articulated in the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) Report 2010, “Innovation is about creating value from knowledge ... Knowledge is the key input to innovation.”

The University of the Western Cape (UWC) has over the past few years invested time and resources in harnessing innovation that is built on the strengths and successes of the university. UWC has created an institutional infrastructure to nurture and support a culture of social and scientific innovation across faculties. This includes the establishment of a Technology Transfer Office, a Business Development Unit, a Centre for Entrepreneurship and Innovation, and a number of professional entities to take forward specific innovation and commercialisation ventures. These institutional infrastructures are intended to place UWC as a significant player in the global knowledge economy and an innovation hub.

Thus UWC has developed a number of innovation flagship programmes that aim at building on social innovation and development. Among these programmes is the Future-Innovation Lab and the Zenzeleni Project.

Future-Innovation Lab was launched in March 2020, and is a multi-year partnership between UWC and the multinational company Samsung. Samsung South Africa announced its R280-million Equity Equivalent Investment Programme (EEIP) in South Africa in August 2019. The programme includes the Research and Development (R&D) Academy. The Future-Innovation-Lab at UWC is an anchor project of the R&D Academy. The EEIP initiative is projected to have a measurable impact on job creation and make a contribution of nearly R1-billion to the South African economy at large.

The Future-Innovation Lab provides an opportunity to deserving previously disadvantaged youth (between the ages of 18 and 35) to gain skills in software development and digital

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social innovation by means of a structured six-month programme offered by academic and industry experts.

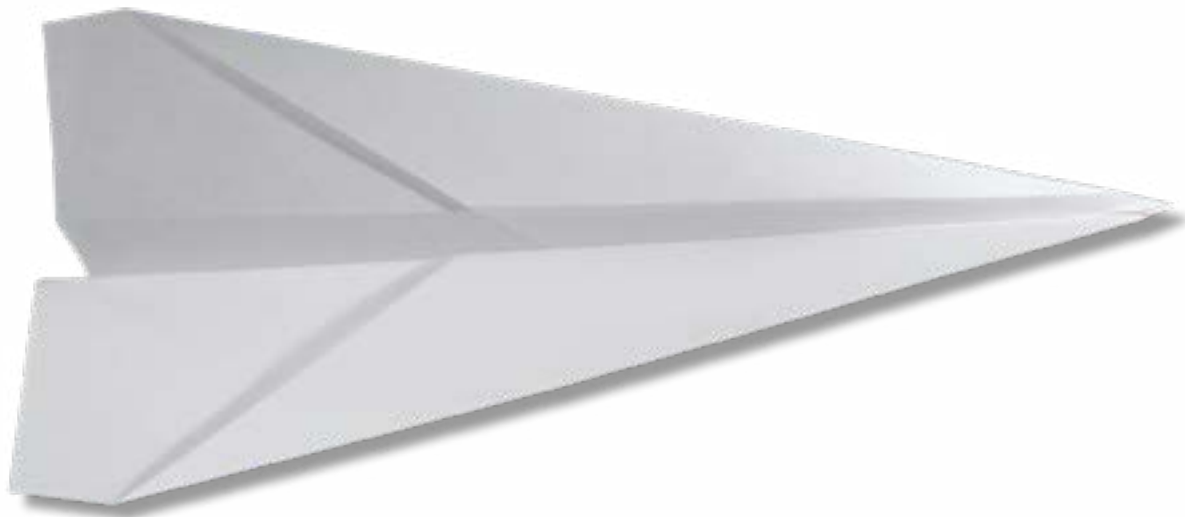
In addition, Samsung and UWC partnered with the Microsoft App Factory to deliver an advanced nine-month software development programme to address the gap in high-demand software skills. The Future-Innovation Lab aims to benefit at least 900 unemployed youth through its programme.

The Zenzeleni Project, by contrast, comprises a partnership between UWC and the community of Mankosi in the Eastern Cape. The project has brought affordable broadband internet access to a community that is largely poverty-stricken. In rural Mankosi, the network covers 30km and is made up of several Wi-Fi access points scattered around “safe” homes in the community. The access points run open-source firmware and software, and the entire system is powered by solar panels installed on the roofs of the host homes. The Zenzeleni Project has empowered local communities and helped a rural community to build South Africa’s first community-owned internet service provider (ISP). It has created income generation through the sale of low-cost

unlimited Wi-Fi connections to the local community.

In order to address local, national and global challenges through innovation, we need a strategy that encourages leadership, innovation and research excellence, growing out of a multi- and interdisciplinary approach. This strategy thus aims to provide direction for solidifying opportunities for UWC’s interdisciplinary research niche strengths, while building a vibrant innovation culture that sustains research excellence by helping to attract and support exceptionally talented students and staff whose insight and creativity is the engine of knowledge creation.

Through the Deputy Vice Chancellor: Research and Innovation, UWC continues to develop strong partnerships (with universities, industry, public agencies, government at various levels and, increasingly, players from the broader society) to support and facilitate the effective development and implementation of new technological and social ideas and products in pursuit of the public good – as exemplified by these two projects.



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