

Innovation Award

The School of Information Systems and Technology (IS&T), at UKZN was recently awarded the IBM Faculty Award with a further boost of \$12 000 for their highly innovative and successful NextEd Programme.

The NextEd Programme developed by IS&T's Head of School, Professor Manoj Maharaj, lecturers Mr Craig Blewett and Ms Rose Quilling, is a first for any South African University and uses web based technology to facilitate the development of a world-wide virtual collaborative education network.

The Programme uses Web 2.0 technologies such as Facebook, Youtube, Blogs, podcasts and many others that students are familiar with to support teaching and learning. Furthermore a virtual university was set up in a 3D world called Second Life, where the students are able to attend lectures, meet their team members from around the world, and simply hang out.

The NextEd philosophy is to provide a collaborative environment where all participants collaborate on an equal footing, and contribute and benefit in a collaborative style. Further to this is the need to provide a haven where imperfect learners and educators,

can create platforms where they can engage in a highly effective way.

One of the key objectives of the NextEd Programme is to embrace a social learning approach, where students learn by constructing their knowledge in groups.

The Virtual University also allows various institutions to share expertise and consequently to be able to provide students with the best possible learning experience. Increasingly, research is showing that the student demographic is changing from full-time school leavers to professional, employed adults who are returning to universities to enhance their qualifications or indeed change their qualifications altogether.

"Since these professional students cannot leave their workplace to study full-time, it is necessary for us to bring the University to them," said Professor Maharaj.

He added: "This allows our University to reach out to potential students throughout the world and increases access to education to individuals and communities in remote areas who would otherwise not be able to get to a university campus."

This year, the NextEd Programme is being extended to include

Daystar University in Kenya, with many other universities and courses in the pipeline in the future.

Mr Blewett said the ultimate goal is to facilitate a collaborative network for not only institutions but individuals to connect and grow and to empower participants to propagate their learning through to their networks, thus resulting in a viral growth in the learning.

He said: "For years we have been looking for an approach with which to teach students that supports social construction of knowledge and now for the first time, we have a whole bunch of applications that not only support this form of learning, but which students choose to use each day."

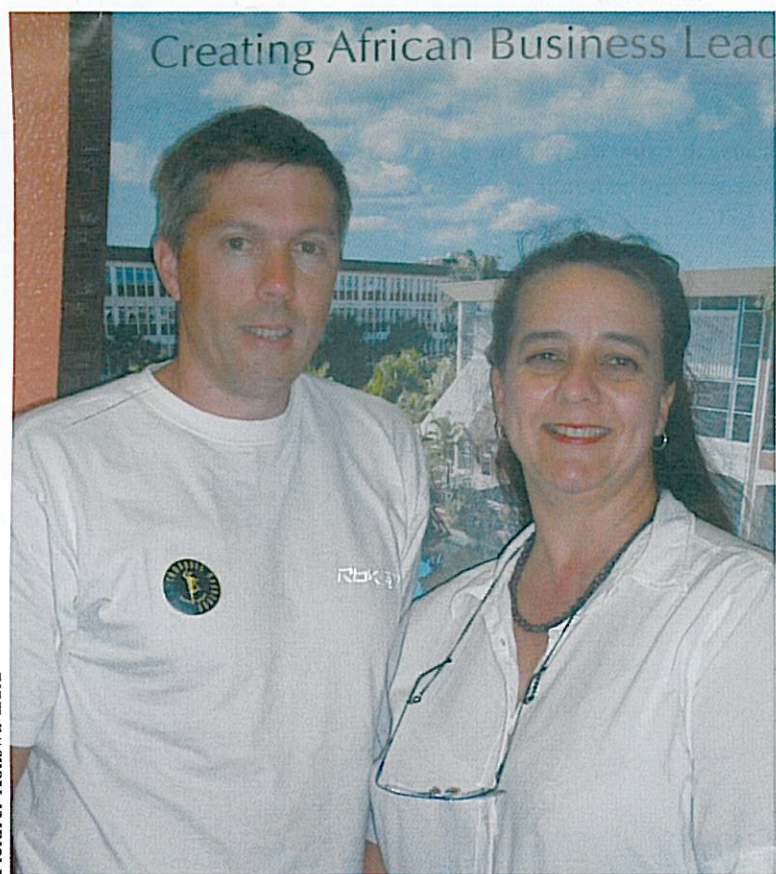
Currently, two fourth year modules, Computer Mediated Communications and Special Topics in IS&T, have been used to test the implementation of these new approaches with very encouraging results.

Ms Quilling added: "The true power of these environments is the ability to collaborate with other universities around the world. We've already run shared courses with the University of Massachusetts which was a great opportunity for our students to work in virtual teams with other members from around the world.

"We are also challenging people on their understanding of how universities should work and the boundaries are falling away. Africa is no longer on the lower end of the scale. Our students are dynamic and have gained confidence in this virtual university. It gives them the space to explore this new environment and to showcase their knowledge. The NextEd Programme is in line with the University's vision and mission to be research driven and to focus on the needs of Africa as a community."

At the South African Computer Lecturers Association (SACLA) conference in July 2008, Ms Quilling and Mr Blewett's paper on their work earned them the Best Paper Award.

- Xoliswa Zulu



Mr Craig Blewett and Ms Rose Quilling.

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Exchange student

FACULTY of Management Studies (Pietermaritzburg campus), Mr Njabulo Mathe has just returned from a fruitful four-month student exchange programme in Belgium.



Mr Njabulo Mathe.

Mr Mathe was the first student to benefit from the tripartite agreement that involves joint research, lecturing and the development of staff between UKZN and the Universities of Liege in Belgium and Lubumbashi in the Democratic Republic of Congo.

"It was a fantastic experience to be there. The food, the people it was great. I learned a lot from our cultural differences. It was indeed an eye opener for me and I feel very privileged that I was chosen," said Mr Mathe.

Mr Mathe is currently doing his honours degree specialising in finance and says he aspires to be an Investment Banker.

With the guidance of Mr Barry Strydom, Head of Department, Mr Mathe was able to select the courses that would be suitable for his BCom.

Before departing to Belgium Mr Mathe attended French evenings classes to overcome language barriers.

"Without those classes I was going to have a huge problem in understanding the language. People over there are very loyal to what they speak," said Mr Mathe.

He received a bursary from Nedbank last year and will join the banking group next year at their Johannesburg head office.

- Sabelo Nyuswa

Partnership for vision screening

THE Head of the Department of Optometry at UKZN Mr Khathutshelo Mashige has announced a joint initiative with World Vision International (WVI) – South Africa. The two organisations will offer free vision screening tests to children in communities identified by WVI. Children that are identified as having a vision problem will then be referred to the Department of Optometry's state-of-the-art paediatric clinic on the Westville campus.

WVI's South Africa Office was created in 1950 as an emergency relief, development and advocacy agency. The organisation's mission is based on Christian principles and its vision for every child is "life in all its fullness, our prayer for every heart and the will to make it so". World Vision South Africa focuses on children as the heritage and future of the community. Currently the organisation has a total of 500 050 children registered and in receipt of its services.

Mr Mashige says that, "the Department of Optometry was excited to collaborate with an organisation such as that of World Vision South Africa due to its strong commitment to uplifting the lives of children in poverty-stricken communities."

For further information, contact Mr Mashige on 031-2607352 or Ms Precious Geveza at Precious_Geveza@wvi.org

- MaryAnn Francis

