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16 November 2017

UCT's Innovation Lab sparks great excitement

An 'Innovation Lab' complete with Virtual Reality, 3D goggles, a drone, a 3D printer, Amazon Echo, an Emotiv headset and credit card-sized computers, has been launched at the University of Cape Town, bringing theory to life for hundreds of students.

Students flocked to the Information Systems department's 'Think Tank' room to try out a range of gadgets and equipment. They said they were very excited about the enterprising new lab, which would give them the opportunity to try out tech they wouldn't normally have access to.

The lab has been set up for students to "come and play without rules, where they can discover and figure out new things," Kevin Johnston, Head of the Information Systems (IS) department in UCT's Faculty of Commerce, told the launch on Tuesday night.

The lab was launched by Sam Paddock, who is co-founder and CEO of GetSmarter, the Cape Town-based TechEd company, which collaborates with leading universities to offer certified online short courses to working professionals. GetSmarter was recently acquired by Nasdaq-listed 2U in a deal valued at US\$103 million.

Paddock said he was thrilled to continue his involvement in the IS department, where he had been an Honours student in 2004. Paddock explained how his success in online learning had its roots at UCT, when he had worked on a group project.

"In my fourth year I had this crazy idea of what it would be like to learn online. For the next six months, four of us worked on a group project in a basement in the department. It was an incredibly inspiring place to learn. Special things happen when people get together around inspiring opportunities in labs."

He said his UCT experience had been seminal in his development.

"UCT and my experience in the IS department is seminal to where I am today. It fills me with great pride to be a UCT alumni."

Paddock said GetSmarter's partnership with 2U would make the company stronger.

“Them – the world leaders in online degree programmes, and us - the world leaders in short courses, have a huge opportunity to build the best digital education in the world, and that’s super-exciting.”

He said the Innovation Lab was a way of helping students to “accelerate their own progress and advance their careers”.

Johnston said he hoped students and staff from his department, as well as other faculties and departments, would come together to trade ideas while working in the lab.

“We want students to take themselves – and us – to places where neither of us have ever been. Tech is a constantly shifting field, and UCT needs to be at the forefront of change.”

ENDS

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