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Construction gets underway for Africa's first Design Thinking school to be located at UCT

Africa's first school dedicated to design thinking located at the University of Cape Town's (UCT) Middle Campus is officially under construction, with groundbreaking having begun this month.

The d-school's sponsor, Hasso Plattner Foundation (HPF), is funding the new building, which will play a strategic role as part of UCT's 2030 vision.

HPF's building donation to UCT is a commitment to ensure that design thinking reaches the university's 28 000 students and enhances their educational experience. "This provides the impetus for the d-school to grow continuously to become the African centre of excellence in design-led thinking. It aligns with UCT's 2030 vision to position itself as a global university in Africa, focused on unleashing human potential for a fair and just future," says HPF.

"The physical growth of the d-school will help to further develop and deliver sought-after, uniquely African programmes empowering people in the mindset of design-led thinking, to enable the creation of impactful human-centred solutions in an ever-changing world."

UCT's Vice-Chancellor Professor Mamokgethi Phakeng says the university is "honoured to be amongst only two other institutions: Stanford University in the United States and Potsdam University in Germany" to have a d-school.

"In the last five years, as the d-school has established its programmes within our institution, we have seen how design thinking can unleash our graduates' potential to lead within diverse contexts, work across disciplines and tap into their creativity to respond to real world challenges," says Phakeng.

"The many problems raised by the coronavirus pandemic have put into sharp focus not only how much the world needs this kind of creative thinking, but how much Africa shares with the rest of the world. This is a very good time to be building a place for the d-school to do its excellent and transforming work."

At the d-school, students learn about design thinking, a globally recognised creative approach to solving complex problems. It is a process that draws on collaboration in diversity while aiming to foster a deeper understanding of problems to ensure impactful responses.

The d-school's founding director, Richard Perez, says the new building will be a place for co-creation and collaboration across the university's faculties.

"It will be a place on campus that will attract students and staff from different disciplines to come together to learn the mindset and the practice of design thinking as a driver of innovation and new outcomes within our African context," says Perez.

"The teaching and learning spaces in the building will also be very unique as these will support the concept of flexible spaces where students are able to build their own classrooms.

"This building is sending a message that UCT understands the importance of remaining relevant by creating new teaching and learning environments both face-to-face and virtual that are needed in order to capacitate students for the future.

"It is a move away from the traditional lecture theatres to developing spaces and teaching environments that drive co-creation, collaboration and innovation. And a space where industry and students from different faculties and disciplines can learn to work together in multi-disciplinary and trans-disciplinary teams on real world complex challenges."

Perez says design thinking is a valuable addition to students' learning experience at the UCT.

"Design thinking is seen as a key graduate attribute for the future of work. It provides students an opportunity to learn how to work creatively and innovatively in multi-disciplinary teams whilst developing and testing solutions that address the complex challenges and uncertainty of tomorrow's world," says Perez.

The Cape Town d-school was established in 2015. Its new home at UCT will have multiple floors and standout design.

The new 4-storey building will be home to the Hasso Plattner School of Design Thinking at UCT, known also as the d-school. It is targeting a 6 Green Star rating from the Green Building Council of South Africa and aiming to be the first 6 Star-rated Green Star academic building in Africa.

Since its inception, the d-school has been temporary located at UCT's Graduate School of Business campus at the V&A Waterfront.

The d-school is a department of the Centre for Higher Education Development (CHED) at UCT. This is significant, given the focus of CHED research and practice on higher education teaching, learning and curriculum. The d-school's mission is focused strongly on these areas of education and its programmes will have implications for staff, student and curriculum development.

Additionally, the d-school has a transversal (cross-faculty) approach in the same way that CHED does. Thus the association of the work of the d-school with the work of CHED is entirely consonant.

Construction of the new d-school building is set to be complete by early 2022.

For more about the d-school, visit www.dschoolluct.ac.za



The d-school will stand at the entrance of Middle Campus, with students being able to access it easily via a footbridge. Photo: HPF



An architect's impression of the new d-school on UCT's Middle Campus.

Photo: HPF

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