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Using the power of language and technology to open a window on economics

Translating over 1 000 economic terms into South Africa's 11 official languages is at the heart of the EcoDoc app, recently launched within the University of Cape Town's (UCT) School of Economics. The aim is to make it easier for economics students to understand terms and definitions in their home languages.

"Economics is a jargon-heavy discipline, and students are expected to pick up many terms in a short space of time. This is made doubly difficult if English isn't your first language. The [EcoDoc app](#) aims to help bridge that divide," said project creator and UCT Economics lecturer, Leigh Neethling.

Students can type in a concept and get the translation or an explanation in the South African language of their choice. This is vitally important, as many economics terms are English-specific.

The project, a first for a South African university, has great potential at UCT, where Economics classes are among the 10 largest classes on campus. Neethling explained that many students struggle with Economics, and there is a big discrepancy in performance between students who speak English as a first language and students for whom English is a second or even third language. The language barrier puts many students at a clear disadvantage.

"Research shows that a lot of dropout happens after first or second year at university. If we can encourage students to keep participating in lectures and tutorials in ways that are easier and engaging for them, we have a better chance of getting good outcomes," said Neethling.

Empowering students

Students are able to use the app in their own time and at their own pace. "Empowering students to take ownership of their own learning in a way that suits them best is a key goal. We feel strongly about making Economics more accessible and exciting for students," said Neethling.

The EcoDoc app, which was launched late in 2020, stems from an Economics dictionary created by Professor Mbulungeni Madiba when he was the director of the Multilingual Education Programme at UCT's Centre for Higher Education Development (CHED).

Neethling obtained permission to use the checked and verified resource and employed two UCT students to build the back-end for the app. The two students continue to manage the app and have worked tirelessly to ensure that other students have the best experience when using it.

The app is available for download on the Google Play Store. A version that can also be used on iPhones and Mac computers is in development.

Valuable feedback

First-year Economics students have been part of the development of the app as they were invited to form focus groups. They gave valuable feedback on how they interacted with the app and whether they found the terms relatively easy. The response was positive, with students saying they appreciated how concepts were explained clearly in languages they could understand and relate to.

"It's heartwarming to hear that students have enjoyed using the app. It is a work in progress, but we hope it leads to welcoming more students to the discipline of economics. We also hope it helps students to improve their marks and that they continue to pursue economics as a subject as they move through university."

The acting dean of UCT's Faculty of Commerce, Edwin Muchapondwa, has commended Neethling for taking strides to provide blended learning opportunities in the School of Economics.

"I appreciate the way Commerce staff are responding to the needs of their students. As the creator and driving force behind EcoDoc, Leigh is now working on getting more students to interact with the app as well as securing additional funding to expand the app to new platforms and include new features such as graphics."

Neethling was awarded a UCT 2019 Teaching Innovation Grant from CHED to fund the development of the app.

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