

Design Thinking can help prepare graduates for the working world and policymakers for real economic recovery

Source: Hasso Plattner School of Design Thinking at the University of Cape Town

At first glance, it looks as though the group of young adults is building Lego. But these are actually students at the Hasso Plattner School of Design Thinking at the University of Cape Town, or HPI d-school, and they're using the colourful blocks to design a prototype.

Their prototype represents policy reform ideas around transitioning from informal to formal economies. It's a complex system represented by very basic materials.

Design Thinking in education

This is Design Thinking in action: human-centred, problem-solving activities that teams use to better understand and innovatively address real-world challenges.

Design Thinking can be used very successfully as an academic programme that goes beyond traditional university practices. It allows universities to prepare a more resilient, adaptive student cohort. These graduates are often more competent to enter economies facing constant change. This is particularly important when higher education institutions are training students for jobs that might not yet exist or that might have changed or become redundant by the time they graduate.

The HPI d-school's founding director, Richard Perez, reflects on how Design Thinking fits into our present reality.

"We're living in a time of rapid transformation in terms of what's required for a country's workforce," says Perez. "As the World Economic Forum has put it, [in a few years] more than one third of skills (35%) that are considered important in today's workforce will have changed. Design Thinking programmes that nurture both creativity and critical thinking around complex challenges offer students an opportunity to develop core skills for the workplace of the Fourth Industrial Revolution."

He adds: "Our aim at UCT's d-school is to better prepare students for a changing workplace by nurturing Design Thinking mindsets."

Design Thinking in the workplace

There is a major skills mismatch between graduates and the workplace in South Africa. Early indications suggest that Design Thinking, which is a very new addition to the country's higher education landscape, might provide some of the tools to help universities ensure that their graduates are more prepared to enter formal employment.

Design Thinking embodies three core approaches to education for a changing workplace:

- A shift towards interdisciplinary and collaborative learning;
- an alignment with student-centred and adaptive learning pathways; and
- experiential learning.

Perez explains: "These approaches facilitate students' readiness for the working world. This is done by exposing them to a variety of mindsets and worldviews through interdisciplinary, peer-to-peer learning. Students are also given a better understanding of contextual issues through exposure to various lived realities."

For example, if a project focuses on exploring informal economies, students will actually get out of the classroom and into the spaces these economies occupy. They will talk to informal traders and spend time observing their day-to-day activities.

Importantly, they're also immersed in the labour market's emerging realities through embedded applications of knowledge in real-world projects. Students are introduced to a rich blend of governmental, industry, academic, and social challenges. They navigate these, building an internal and external understanding of business practice and human relationships.

Design Thinking in policymaking

Design Thinking offers a citizen-centric approach to problem-solving that has proved particularly useful in the development of collaborative public strategy solutions. It is an emerging approach to addressing public policy and enhancing service delivery. To this end, the Capacity Building Programme for Employment Promotion (CBPEP) funded a Design Thinking in Practice programme for the Government Technical Advisory Centre (GTAC). The programme included a strategic review of GTAC's value proposition and a workshop to explore how Design Thinking could be incorporated into GTAC's capacity-building work. The programme involved multiple stakeholders – including South Africa's national departments of Small Business Development and Higher Education and Training, and the Western Cape Department of Economic Development and Tourism – working in diverse and multidisciplinary teams.

Participants were immersed in the process of design-led innovation, giving them insights into client-centred problem-solving and an understanding of how to apply Design Thinking practically in a wide range of real-world settings. Throughout the process, the clients – who, in this case, are South African citizens – are always at the centre of the solution.

An efficient, responsive public sector is predicated on a return to citizen-centric thinking. With empathy at the core of the Design Thinking framework, it lends itself well to social and developmental objectives. Empathy is a key phase, as explained by CBPEP and Letsema Management Consultancy, in the report for GTAC's Strategic Review and Design Thinking workshop: "In this context we are often furthest removed from our users – the citizens who make use of public services – and so the challenge of designing for the user rather than ourselves is even more acute. This kind of empathy allows policymakers to truly understand the needs of citizens and so develop citizen-centric solutions that respond to and meet those needs."