



Setting the scene

The fourth and last CoP session for 2018 heard an inspiring account of the Maharishi Institute’s vision, approach and success in empowering young people through education, by founder and philanthropic social entrepreneur Dr Taddy Blecher.

The Maharishi Institute gives young people – who would otherwise have no hope of obtaining a tertiary level education – access to quality business education in an environment that builds the whole person and provides the support they need to benefit from the opportunities offered. It does this through distance learning and in partnership with a range of accredited international and/or local educational institutions.

This session drew to a close the CoP’s exploration of some of the many aspects of youth employability and initiatives working to enhance youth employability and get young people into employment. The focus in 2019 will shift to exploring the theme of empowering young people to create their own employment.



Overview of the presentation

Dr Taddy Blecher began by sharing his personal journey. This ranged from failing student who ‘couldn’t find meaning’ in his textbooks, to teaching himself how to learn, to academic and professional success as an actuary; and then – after a last-minute decision not to immigrate – to helping learners in township schools achieve significantly improved results¹, only to find so many of these young people subsequently unemployed and without hope of doing anything further with their lives.



Informed by these experiences, the Maharishi Institute was built on the premise that if education was ‘alive enough’, it could transform the lives of marginalised young people. It set out to prove that such students could be successful, despite their educational, financial and emotional disadvantages, provided they could be helped to develop their full human potential.

Taddy asserts that for education to be worthy of the name, it should attend to young people’s well-being and develop them as ‘whole human beings’. Because people are complicated, with many challenges, education has to be multifaceted and to cover much more than just subject content. To be effective, it also has to cover what Taddy describes as ‘the white space in-between’.

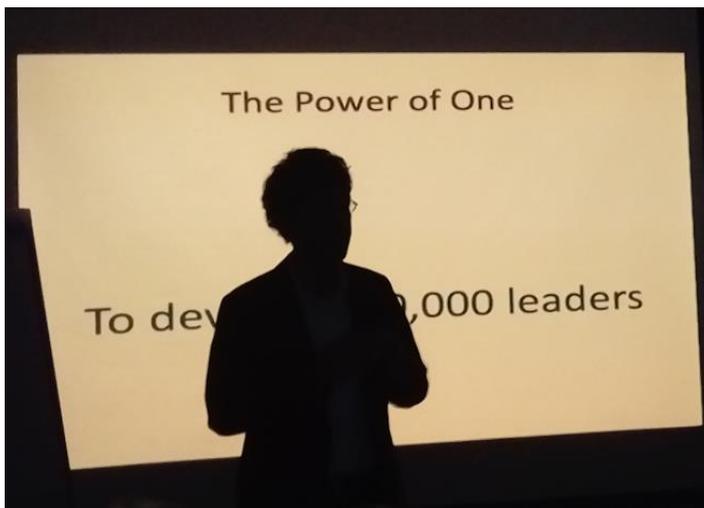
For marginalised students, a large part of this ‘in-between space’ is made up of emotional challenges. Of the 247 students who started the degree course in 2018 at the Johannesburg CBD campus, 66% were found to have severely elevated stress levels and 40% to be suffering from chronic depression. In addition, while all the students had passed matric, none of them could be regarded as

¹ Reaching 9000 learners in Alexandra, Soweto and Davyton, whose results increased by an average of 25% over 100 000 school marks during a 3-year period, while a control group’s results dropped by 1%.

functioning at grade 12 level in English, maths or computer skills. Only 12 of the 247 had competency levels commensurate with grades 9 - 11, and 95% were only at grade 8 or primary school level.

The Maharishi Institute's response is to take these students 'on a journey of healing and growth'.

New entrants begin with a 4-week course that explores the quality of 'greatness', and what qualities they would like to develop in their own lives. This is followed by an intensive 2-week course called 'the business of life', which deals with healing, forgiveness and finding one's life purpose. Students are taken away from campus and into nature in gender separate groups. This is when many of the 'extraordinary and terrible' experiences that these students have endured, emerge. Expert facilitators are on hand to help students deal with their emotions and fears. To address their academic deficits, students then spend the rest of the first year working to bridge the gaps in their numeracy and communication skills.



Currently 850 full time students are enrolled for the full business degree course (with up to 1000 doing short courses) at the Johannesburg campus. The degree course runs over 4 years, during which students work towards an internationally recognised American business degree by distance learning. During this time they also obtain an additional 4 SETA based certificates.

Students are on campus for 10 hours a day, and are given a midday meal. Every morning starts with yoga and Transcendental Meditation (with a second session in the afternoon). Students focus on one subject at a time, to avoid the difficulties that many people have with multi-tasking and dealing with different kinds of content at the same time.

The Maharishi Institute's quest is to create 100 000 leaders with principles, values and skills. So far, 17580 students have completed the business degree course and graduated into employment (a placement rate of 95%). Many of them are in prestigious senior positions in national and global companies and some are entrepreneurs, through an academy with Sir Richard Branson. At least 70% of these graduates would not have been accepted for degree studies at a public South African university.

Some unique features that enhance student success:

Work experience – degree students work during their last 3 years of study, either in the Maharishi Institute's own call centre or IT business process centre, or in other organisations. This both enriches their understanding and prepares them for the workplace².

Job placement – all aspects of the job search are challenging for young people without networks and resources, so the Maharishi Institute 'doesn't stop until every graduate has a job placement'. Support includes a clothing library of interview clothes and money for transport.

Consciousness-based education (CBE) – this approach improves a student's ability to learn by developing the student as a whole person, and by making learning meaningful by relating it to the student as a person and

² Anyone ordering from any Nando's outlet in the country will be assisted by a Maharishi Institute student.

to the world. A key methodology used in CBE is Transcendental Meditation, which improves cognitive functioning so that students are able to think more clearly and creatively, learn more quickly and retain larger amounts of information.

Unique approach to funding education:

Lowest cost – Currently the cost per student is a quarter of what it would be at a public South African university. The Maharishi Institute is resource-constrained and receives no government funding. It aims to continue to reduce or remove costs in every way possible.

Paying it forward – every graduate, on becoming employed, starts funding another student. In effect, students pay back half of the initial amount loaned to them by working while studying, and pay the other half forward to help the next person, creating a sustainable funding cycle.

Students help to maintain and run the campus – this includes such tasks as managing the library as well as cleaning floors and cooking – and for older students, teaching the new entrants.

Low monthly fee payment – students pay R200 per month, which is partly aimed at creating a sense of value and involvement. For the Maharishi Institute, attitude is everything – and as Taddy explains, difficult to change. “Students come in with a sense of entitlement, or anger, or blame. But if we want our students to become powerful, we have to move them away from this mindset and get them to start taking responsibility for their own lives.”

Thoughts on some burning issues:

Fees must fall – It should be that we help disadvantaged youth get an education, but once successful, why should they not help other young people to do the same? This would help to relieve the burden on our country’s small tax base.

The Fourth Industrial Revolution – Although everything points to this being potentially devastating in terms of jobs, it is fascinating that the World Economic Forum’s list of top 10 critical skills for future careers does not mention technology. Instead, we see attributes and skills such as complex problem solving, critical thinking, creativity, people management, emotional intelligence, decision-making and cognitive flexibility, which humans will need in order to interact effectively and successfully with technology. This tells us that education should be all about the human element and human development.

Visions of the future also describe a world of digital education where cloud-based robotic tutors on tablets will curate everything we need to know. The problem is that this misses the mark on how students actually learn: none of the critical top 10 skills can easily be learnt alone, or online, or without effort: they take practice, and demand rich human interaction.

Breaking the poverty cycle – This lies at the core of the Maharishi Institute’s vision and purpose, and permeates every facet of its operations. Tracking of graduates shows that a high proportion maintains employment beyond the initial placement and that they are currently earning between R50 000 and 2.4 million per year. “if you take the salaries that graduates are earning now, and they keep working at that

“We are trying to create a completely disruptive university model where we get down to a dollar a day per student for education, and eventually a dollar a day to run the institution, including providing food. We could then really scale and really help the poor – which is our dream.”

“We can only learn to be complex thinkers and to manage relationships with AI by practising those skills with other human beings, and with a variety of problems, big and small.”

salary until they retire, they together will earn over 28 billion, and uplift 150 000 family members between them – and all this is being achieved by people who would never have had the opportunity of being successful in the world.”

Bringing about change – Shifting mindsets takes time, and it is not an overnight journey. “While on one level the Maharishi Institute is working closely with government, on another level people think we ‘are crazy’, and that it is ‘not possible’ to do what we are doing.”

“You need to have something beautiful at the core, that you believe in and can test and prove that it works. You have to stick with it, to get the methodology right, and to be in for the long term.”

Impacting the education system

The school system – The Maharishi Institute is working closely with the Department of Basic Education on several initiatives to improve the outcomes of schooling and develop ‘can do’ mindsets. One of them, called ‘*employment and entrepreneurship education in schools*’ is being piloted this year in Senior Phase classes in 73 schools across three provinces. Based on the existing CAPS curriculum, it is about learning in an engaged way and aims to ‘put meaningful projects into every subject’ that will help learners develop attributes and skills such as empathy, creativity, problem solving, communication and the ability to work with others. It is anticipated that this approach will have been implemented across the country by 2022, with project results forming part of learners’ year marks.

The university system – The Maharishi Institute is involved in a national initiative aimed at helping universities become more sustainable and efficient in terms of funding.

CoP comments and questions for clarification

““This is **so exciting**. We have the most wonderful people in South Africa, and with proper education we could be the greatest country in the world – and you are the way to do it”.

In response to a question about **those who are not being reached** (“What about the others?”), and the underlying sadness of this:

“The truth is we each have to do what we can, with the people we can do it with. If we worried about everyone and everything else, we would never get up in the morning. We have to run the journey as best we can: to stay focussed, make sure it works, and then find ways to scale it.”

On being **open to learning from other solutions**, such as the Kenya youth initiative called ‘working in the hot sun’ that encourages young people to become entrepreneurial:

“Human beings are infinite, and there is no one right way. We have to be open to all kinds of learning. We have to find a way, put it together, and make sure it works – but it has to work as an entire system, and on every level, including economically.

What we can’t do is to continue with a rote-based system – it kills a child’s spirit.”

You have described an amazing journey with major successes, but one that has not been without challenges. **What one thing you would you do differently?**

“It is not so much about doing any one thing differently – because everything about this kind of work is hard, and it is a given that it will be full of challenges, especially if one is innovating. Rather, it is about what we would do the same – which is about how education can fully develop, ‘wake up’ and transform a human being – and how getting this right can change the world.”

To prepare for the future, how can we introduce change in schools so that it becomes part of the system? We need to do something now.

“On government’s behalf, the Maharishi Institute has been researching ways of moving the school system towards developing meta cognition and a proper skills base in the youth. Key principles to emerge are that one has to start while children are young, and that the experiences have to be repeated and built up. This means starting with play-based learning in grade R (for which Lego will be a major partner), and building up certain types of experience as children progress through the grades, so by the time they leave at the end of grade 12, they will just be thinking differently.

This initiative would welcome involvement by individuals and organisations wanting to help in transforming the school system. The Maharishi Institute has the platform, and is learning, but doesn’t have all the answers. Please reach out and let’s work together.”

@CoP

Group Discussion

Participants in this session ranged widely across different types of organisations, as they usually do. Despite this, they are connected by their common interest in youth development and the value they place on the human element— whether they work to improve the outcomes of those still at school, or to support a more impactful and sustainable transition into employment, self-employment or post-school study.

Participants formed groups to share an aspect of work that they felt they or their organisation did well and that others in the room might benefit from; and then to identify something that they needed that might be achieved through collaboration with others in the room.

What we do really well

- Co-creation – curriculum development
- Bringing soft skills and self-knowledge to interns
- Bringing a sense of hope – integrating the psychosocial aspect into development programmes
- Understanding people’s emotional needs
- Understanding systems at a functional level
- Teaching reading literacy to prisoners, who then teach others to read
- Building connectivity between stakeholders
- Providing training, mainly on technical skills, that enhances employability; and making available maths and science material and an entrepreneurship toolkit
- Implementing a bursary and work integrated learning (WIL) programme to provide skills in commerce and IT
- Providing training in life skills, to change behaviours of both teachers and learners
- Stimulating interest and improving learner results in science
- Using memory training and teaching of reading to improve learner results in underachieving schools
- Implementing a programme to place young people as mentors in schools

What we need help with

- Marketing
- Literacy development – changing attitudes to reading

- Connection to a supply of interns
- Bridge between youth leaving tertiary institutions and receiving agents
- Integration of psychosocial aspects into academic programmes
- A softening of attitudes – breaking out of ‘stuck-ness’
- Fundraising
- Accessing accredited life skills training at a reasonable cost, specifically to build capacity (e.g. in financial literacy) and widen the experience of young people acting as mentors
- A change of thinking on Life Orientation – instead of presenting it as a separate stand-alone subject, integrating it into the main curricula to be addressed by subject teachers who have a better understanding of the relevance of the subject to the real world.
- Greater awareness of emerging employment possibilities, e.g. the growing field of cyber security
- Capacitating teachers to make a shift towards a forward-thinking mindset, whatever subject they teach
- Making connections with a diverse range of workplaces, to build sustainability in placing young people
- Linking up with like-minded partners who are able to influence the education system to prepare learners differently, so they develop skills that they will need in the future
- Leveraging available content materials, for increased access to and better use of these resources
- Bringing corporates and schools together, with corporates sharing skills, not only giving money
- The kind of plough-back that the Maharishi Institute achieves

Facilitator's summing up

In closing, facilitator Charles Marriott drew attention to the way many of the concepts highlighted by Dr Taddy Blecher in describing the vision and work of the Maharishi Institute resonate with ideas that have come to be associated with the CoP:

- Collaboration
- Innovation
- Sustainability
- Working from the inside out/ from the ground up
- Relevance
- Resourcefulness

... with a strong emphasis on the behavioural element.

CoP takeaways from the session

The positive message for those of us dealing with young people who have been rejected

The value of long-term commitment and believing in what you are doing

That change takes time – the need to understand the system components and environment and to take time

to get the model right before scaling up

The value of learners earning the privilege to learn, by contributing in kind – while learning what work is

That there is no such thing as a worthless young person, but rather poor teaching and destructive environments

The importance of believing in the potential of every child

That in South Africa we have all the tools and resources needed to be successful – we just need to have the courage to make it happen

The importance of paying attention to the figures, and reducing costs – not depending on CSI funding, but leveraging the very same young people you are educating for sustainability

That not everything should be about results, but rather about what you can do for your fellow human beings

The need to give more attention to the child's needs and not to use a one-size-fits-all approach – accepting that as adults we don't have all the answers for young people

That you can take young people who don't fit and turn them into gold

The value of focussing on the learners – allowing them to 'not be perfect', and changing the way we treat them

The value of doing well what we specialise in as organisations and sharing this with others

That if you do the groundwork early and thoroughly, the results will follow

The value of ploughing back – this is a classic case of 'education with a heart'



Attendees