



Otto Pohl for The New York Times

Students at the Community and Individual Development Action City Campus in Johannesburg use computers from the former trading floor of Investec, an investment bank that donated its building for the campus.

A New University, Filling Apartheid's Gaps

By OTTO POHL

JOHANNESBURG — There are more than 17,000 accountants registered in South Africa, but only 360 of them are black.

Although the postapartheid government has pledged to help blacks enter the professional classes, it has had limited success. Taddy Blecher thinks he may have a solution.

He and three associates have started a university, called Community and Individual Development Action City Campus, which many education and management experts think is the most innovative attempt so far to help South Africa erase the social imbalances of apartheid.

"I don't like to use the word 'miracle,' but it's an exceptional educational institution," says Tom Peters, the author and management expert, who visited the campus a year ago. "It's one of the most extraordinary quests in terms of the 99 percent of the country that was left behind when apartheid was dismantled."

The inability of poor countries to provide high-quality education has tended to increase the gap between rich and poor. But knowledge is now freely available electronically. It is this change the university is trying to harness.

"We don't need to build huge particle accelerators, or pay professors enormous amounts of money," Mr. Blecher said. "Let the rich countries do that. But let's access their knowledge and immediately make a difference."

By relying on the support of the South African business community, which is eager to hire qualified graduates, the university can offer its education almost free of charge. A four-year bachelor of business degree, the only degree offered so far, costs 5,350 rand (about \$800).

There are no professors. Classes are taught by visiting business people, who donate their time, and by a small number of paid lecturers. Classes are beamed throughout the building to the 1,600 students by television. The lectures are frequently interrupted so that student volun-

teers can lead small groups to review the material.

A noticeable energy buzzes down the hallways. "I'm getting an opportunity I wouldn't be getting anywhere else," says Ricardo Mahadave, 21, a third-year student who commutes more than two hours a day to class. Like virtually all students there, he is the first member of his family to attend a university.

It is still early to predict the long-term success and financial stability of the university. The first class will

Helping blacks enter South Africa's professional classes.

graduate in May. Experts think the students will not have a hard time finding jobs. "I think the leadership of the country will embrace these kids, not because they have to, but because they will want to," said Jonathan Levy, an online learning consultant and former vice president of Harvard Business School Publishing, after a visit to the university.

The university is housed in the former headquarters of Investec, a South African investment bank that abandoned the building when, together with virtually the entire business community, it moved to the suburbs a few years back.

When Mr. Blecher approached Investec to ask for the building, the university was little more than an idea. "When I first met Taddy there was nothing," said Lisa Kropman, head of social investment at the bank. Donating the building was "a huge leap of faith."

But for a company that employs almost 200 accountants and had just committed to hiring more blacks, it was a leap of faith encouraged by self-interest. In exchange for the building and a commitment to pay

for operating costs, Investec is able to recruit the best students. "There are not enough young black people choosing the finance sector, so this university really helps us enormously," Ms. Kropman said. "We've taken the top 20 students already."

Other major firms, including Microsoft, the Kellogg Foundation and PricewaterhouseCoopers, have also signed on as sponsors.

Applications flooded in even before the campus opened.

"We had 3,000 applications to an imaginary university," Mr. Blecher said of the time after he quit his consulting career and floated the idea of the college four years ago. This year, 7,500 students have applied for the 500 slots open in the freshman class.

Mr. Blecher, the university's chief executive, hopes to soon have 9,000 students at this location, and then wants to start new campuses across South Africa.

A series of innovations and ideas help shape the experience at the university.

To smooth the transition between school and work, students are required to wear a suit and tie to class four days a week. Those who cannot afford to dress up are given clothing that has been donated.

Students are encouraged to practice Transcendental Meditation. For a half-hour at the beginning and end of each school day, the hallways fall silent.

To extend the college's impact, students are required to return to their village or township during semester breaks and lead short courses on subjects they have studied.

"We still have a huge way to go, but we're absolutely convinced that through innovation it is completely possible to break poor nations out of poverty," Mr. Blecher said.

Some students have more concrete dreams.

"An Audi TT," Christine Nonyane, 20, says without hesitation. "Silver gray. One day I'll be driving that car."