

Independent Evaluator Summary Report for Uplands Outreach 1 September 2020

During August 2020 an independent review of Uplands Outreach and its major programmes was undertaken. Information was collected via the following: focus groups for all programmes, individual interviews, observations of online contact sessions, a review of cohort session recordings, and a review of journal entries and assignments. Participants at eight different primary, combined and high schools were interviewed together with Uplands Outreach staff members and the Insikazi Circuit Manager. Programme participants are principals, deputy principals, heads of department and/or teachers, along with graduates of these long-standing programmes in the Insikazi School Circuit.

This report highlights the systemic alignment nature of Uplands Outreach's programmes, working in a multi-layered manner at circuit, school leader, educator, and learner level simultaneously - as their Theory of Change. None of the programmes works in isolation, hence this unified summary report.

Having conducted annual assessments of these programmes in the Insikazi Circuit over the past six years, I have richly-nuanced insights into the work and impact of the Uplands Outreach programmes. This proved to be invaluable during this unprecedented year of 2020, as the pandemic disrupted all standard operating procedures and schools. At the time of analysis, site visits were still prohibited and only Grade 12 and 7 learners were physically back at school in the majority of schools in the country. Evaluation practices shifted online, as a result of the pandemic.

Findings are grouped as follows below. Under each programme I have summarised the positive effects of the programme and the noteworthy challenges of each.

- A. Evaluation of the School Leadership Programme
- B. Evaluation of the Teacher Development Programme
- C. Evaluation of the Digital Literacy Programme
- D. Evaluation of Uplands Outreach as a whole
- E. Assessment of Uplands Outreach using essential elements of high performing non-profits
- F. Conclusion and Recommendations

A. Evaluation of the School Leadership Programme

Positive effects of the school leadership programme:

The majority of schools interviewed were headed by Principals who had attained the previous University of Johannesburg's Advanced Certificate of Education (ACE) qualification through Uplands Outreach, and who were actively encouraging the current participants from their schools. They have been engaged with the newly established Advanced Diploma in Education for the past three years, and they are committed to completing their studies this year as their promotion prospects depend on it. Their motivation is also fuelled by the intensive support of the Uplands Outreach team and the Professors who conduct the course.

1. Current Cohort - Advanced Diploma in Education course

Positive effects:

When I viewed a contact session between the University of Johannesburg professors and the current participants it became clear that:

- Professors Raj Mestry and Pierre du Plessis are deeply engaged with their students. They are appreciative of the effort put in by both the participants and Uplands Outreach staff, understanding the pressures that the school leaders are under at present.

- The students relate very well to the professors, appreciating their encouragement to complete their portfolios accurately. They rely heavily on the guidance of Mrs Violah Moya, who reviews their portfolios and their journals regularly, providing vital feedback.
- They receive constant encouragement, empathy and motivation from every member of the Uplands Outreach Team that is crucial in these challenging times. They feel empowered to seek solutions rather than depending on the Provincial Department of Basic Education to provide the answers.
- Although attending lectures online was new to them, they engaged with the coursework and lecturers confidently.

Challenges:

- The course participants miss the social interaction, as well as the emotional support that they give each other when they visit the Japhet Outreach Centre at Uplands.
- Internet connectivity is often poor, and their devices do not always provide an easy platform on which to work.
- Their schools are actively engaged in teaching, so they are very busy, even though the majority of schools across South Africa have been closed for most classes.

2. Principals who attended previous ACE courses at Uplands Outreach

On interviewing these Principals, it became clear that their knowledge, skills and attitudes were in sharp contrast with those of the majority of South African school leaders. It was confirmed by Mr Mandrew Nyambi in my interview with him that the Insikazi Circuit is the only one in the district that has maintained such extensive distance and classroom teaching throughout the lockdown. These Principals had made it possible for teachers to conduct distance learning and had opened more classes once lockdown was eased, due to:

- The digital literacy of some of their teachers who have been trained at Uplands Outreach. They set up Whatsapp groups with their learners, sent them videos of lessons, received completed worksheets and could provide feedback even during Level 5 lockdown. These teachers used their own data, so committed were they to continue teaching.
- Their having sourced additional PPEs from sponsors, the local chief or Uplands Outreach.
- Their teachers being motivated to care for the children and feel responsible for their future at the expense of their own concerns about safety.
- The strong relationship that these Principals have forged with their teachers, parents and the wider community to support teaching and learning. They learnt the importance of **communication** during their ACE studies, and they implement this practice continuously in their leadership of their schools. Although only some classes were being taught in physical classrooms, all the teachers came to school to assist their colleagues.
- The leadership of their Circuit Manager whose close interaction with and support by Uplands Outreach means that the Circuit is united in its effort to improve even further on last year's performance. Communication is valued very highly, and the Circuit Manager himself visited schools to conduct training in Covid-19 coping mechanisms. He holds regular meetings, helping these Principals to remain focused and deal with challenges.
- The knowledge and skills of the Principals honed during the ACE Courses enabled them to devise plans to accommodate learners on alternating days, complete or adapt the curriculum, divert some of their budget to provide necessities such as water, and manage the provision of nutrition for the learners who rely on school meals. At one school 85% of learners benefitted from meals even though they were not attending school.

Most noteworthy challenges:

- The need to platoon children, as the numbers of children in each class are too many to accommodate them every day. This is a great worry to the Principals as children are safer at school and they need to receive school meals.
- Theft from schools: one school suffered the death of their long-serving security guard and all their computers. The children and teachers have benefitted so much by being part of the modern world of technology, and they feel the loss of life and equipment profoundly.
- Assisting teachers whose families have been impacted medically, emotionally or financially by Covid-19.

B. Evaluation of the Standard Bank Teacher Development Programme

Participants were asked to freely volunteer their insights and feedback regarding the continued effectiveness of the teacher development programme amidst an unprecedented time of crisis and relentless uncertainty. Mr Nyambi's opinion was sought once more. As a curriculum driver, he remains overwhelmingly appreciative of the contribution of Uplands Outreach, empowered by the donor, Standard Bank.

As mentioned above, Mr Nyambi asserts that the Insikazi Circuit is the only circuit in the district that has maintained extensive distance and classroom teaching throughout all levels of the lockdown. Mr Nyambi attributes much of the circuit's success to the digital literacy skills garnered through the programme offerings of Uplands Outreach, amplified by their quick response to the urgent need for data and airtime resources and PPE that enabled the continuation of PLC collaboration and essential teaching and learning activities.

As I composed my feedback during an extraordinary year, I found it helpful to revisit the over-arching purpose of the teacher development programme at Uplands Outreach, which is *"to boost teacher effectiveness by forming vibrant Professional Learning Communities (PLCs) of Foundation Phase and Intermediate Phase teachers"*. In general, the Foundation Phase cohort of teachers focus their professional development activities on boosting literacy, while Intermediate Phase teachers focus more on Mathematic (numeracy). I noticed that there was a constant reinforcement in content shared in these subject areas within the two phases. Best-practice pedagogy underpins these activities, to boost literacy and numeracy skills. A number of the participants have attended this teacher development programme with remarkable dedication and enthusiasm for four years, and they assert that they still learn something new every week.

Positive effects of the teacher development programme:

- There is a tremendous amount of social support being offered by the Uplands Outreach team as well as from colleagues, in addition to the academic growth offered by the programme contact session content. Social and emotional support is crucial at a time like this, and I recommend that professional development (so that these support skills can be afforded to learners via the teachers) and ongoing support become a mainstay of the programme in a post-pandemic 2021.
- The personal development sessions already held were particularly valued, for instance "Stress Management during COVID-19" (by psychologist Kathy Knott) and Craig Carolan's "Wellness Workshop – The PERMA Model for Wellbeing and Happiness". Several participants mentioned that they learned about 'ikigai' (finding your purpose in life) during Craig's workshop and that this had triggered positive reflective thought for them. Their attitude towards their work is positively impacted by such presentations.
- Although they could not attend the AMESA conference this year, they believe that they develop by presenting topics themselves, and by witnessing their colleagues doing likewise.

This format of peer-led learning has been embraced during the online contact sessions (using Google Meet).

- They are also being exposed to methodologies, resources and teachers from Uplands who offer their professional experience as guests during the online contact sessions.
- Participants noted that their Steering Committee has been consulted via an online Google Meet, and ongoing needs analysis is performed via this channel of communication, as well as numerous one-on-one conversations with Uplands Outreach staff (particularly Violah Moya and Boy-boy Ndhlovu) and through their reflection journals, which they now submit as Word documents via email.
- At the time of our focus group interaction, I was impressed to learn that the average attendance of contact sessions during 2020 remains remarkably high. The provision of essential data and airtime as a resource during this time has significantly enabled this. Noted below are some of the challenges that can at times detract from the online experience.
- Overall, I am able to confirm that Uplands Outreach has done exceptionally well in adapting this programme to the needs of the participants during a time of crisis. Not only is the programme achieving its intended goal of boosting literacy, numeracy and pedagogy, but it is also 'breaking ground' with regard to relevant professional development for a post-pandemic South Africa. The successes and gains already noted in the fields of social and emotional support and digital literacy skill development are commendable. I recommend that these endeavours be carried forward into 2021 (and beyond).

Challenges of the teacher development programme:

- There was immense disappointment at not being able to attend AMESA (locally, provincially and nationally) this year as those who attended last year evidenced such enjoyment and growth, both personal and professional.
- The Google Meet platform used to conduct online sessions were often interrupted by load-shedding, poor internet connections, and failure of their mobile phone devices to cope with the presentations. The Outreach staff has assisted in every way to overcome such obstacles by, for example, supplying ad hoc troubleshooting and training, as well as data.

C. Evaluation of the Digital Literacy Programme

Previous evaluation reports have identified the need for Digital Literacy interventions and 4IR skills. Currently 27 leaders and teachers from nine schools are attending this programme, which continued online when lockdown began. The purpose of the Digital Literacy Programme is for teachers to obtain a confident handle on the use of technology in schools, to improve productivity, creativity and accuracy in daily work undertakings using hardware and software.

Positive effects:

- Mr Nyambi is immensely grateful for the Digital literacy programme, which improved teacher effectiveness and empowered them to undertake distance teaching and professional development learning.
- Using distance teaching techniques, including media such as WhatsApp and Google Meet, has allowed the educators to complete the curriculum and plan for revision in the weeks ahead, while other schools are scrambling to complete the syllabus.
- Collaboration with other teachers in their school has meant that the positive effect of digital literacy has extended beyond the active participants in the programme.
- The skills learnt in this programme have impacted positively on the ability of School Leaders to complete their portfolios required for the ADE qualification (as part of the School Leadership Programme). Previously, they struggled to present their work professionally as they lacked the ability to use many features of the computer software.

- The participants are so grateful to be empowered in this way. They can now perform functions essential in their schools, such as creating Excel worksheets to record, total and average marks.
- They have used data bundles provided by Uplands Outreach as an essential resource during lockdown to attend online programme contact sessions, as well as to enliven lessons with maps, pictures, and videos.
- An essential component of using digital communication is to do so with safety, and the information provided during the lessons has been eagerly absorbed and applied not only to themselves, but also to family members and their students.
- Overall, it is my observation that the Digital Literacy Programme is achieving (and even exceeding) its envisioned purpose and outcomes, in spite of the challenges faced during the pandemic. It is testament to the quality of this programme that it has transitioned and thrived online at a time when it most needed to do so. Now, more than ever before, the need for digital literacy and skills are paramount to the success of educators and the children in their care.

Challenges:

- Poor internet connection does impede interaction during online lessons.
- Many of the participants use a cell phone to join the Google Meet lessons, and struggle to manage the applications. As challenges are identified, they are unpacked and resolved as best possible on the smaller screen of a mobile device.

D. Evaluation of Uplands Outreach as a whole

Positive effects of Uplands Outreach

- Uplands Outreach operates with every one of its staff members dedicated not only to the upliftment of the academic and professional skills of the educators and management in the Insikazi Circuit but also to their psychological health. Each session starts with something personal, such as “How is it going with you and your school”, which results in the participants sharing the burdens that they carry.
- They guide, lead, praise, give constructive criticism, empathise and support in every contact session, and follow this up with regular phone calls. This has led to the participants regarding themselves as a family, and they extend this attitude towards other schools in the Circuit who are not at present involved in any of the programmes.
- Participants have been encouraged to believe in themselves, and they are confident enough to engage their professors, the various specialists who present, and each staff member on a regular basis. This results in their going back to their schools and encouraging others to follow their example, which means that far more educators are positively influenced by Uplands Outreach. This was evident when I interviewed one member of the Intermediate Phase Mathematics group: he started distance learning with his students, and soon three other teachers in his school followed suit.
- Being asked to analyse their responses to the challenges of Covid-19, resulted in deep critical thinking which the participants shared with their colleagues. This enables the teachers to extend this proficiency to their learners, as they are aware of the importance of this cognitive skill.
- At the onset of Lockdown Level 5, the Uplands team rapidly re-allocated budget items to assist the participants to attend online courses. Data was provided, and later when schools opened, masks and sanitiser were offered.

Challenges

- Both the staff of Uplands Outreach and the programme participants find it difficult to refrain from their usual modus operandi, which involve physical contact and expression of emotion.
- The Uplands Outreach staff members are greatly concerned about CSI funding disruptions in 2021 as an effect of the pandemic.

E. Assessment of Uplands Outreach using essential elements of high performing non-profits

In terms of assessing Uplands Outreach against essential elements of successful non-profit organisations (Meehan and Jonker, 2020), I am able to comment positively on the following criteria:

① **Mission:** Uplands Outreach is clear and unequivocal in its mission: “Raising Achievement for All”. This is evident in the courses offered, the feedback from participants, and their results – all of which are highlighted in regular communication via their newsletters and reports.

② **Strategy:** The mission underpins their strategic decisions to offer development opportunities and resources to the Circuit Manager, School Leaders and Educators, as well as assisting with learners when special interventions are required. Strategically focusing on one school circuit with 34 schools using system alignment (as their Theory of Change) has allowed them to track inputs, outputs and outcomes over time.

③ **Impact Evaluation:** The Outreach team produce annual reports with specific metrics that provide objective evidence of the success of their programmes. In addition, this report provides further verification of the positive effects of the programmes that are sometimes unmeasurable by data. I am impressed with their careful and diligent monitoring and evaluation efforts.

④ **Insight and Courage:** The challenges of Covid-19 and the National State of Disaster Lockdown were met by the Uplands Outreach team with insight and courage. They quickly changed to online presentation for all of the programmes, and ascertained which budget items needed to be reallocated, in order to make distance teaching and learning a reality. Mental health measures were quickly put in place for participants.

⑤ **Organisation and Talent:** Over the years, Uplands Outreach has determined its staffing needs, and attracted, retained and further developed its team members to deliver the programmes determined by their mission and strategy. A noteworthy example of developing talent is the promotion of Ms Beauty Mashego, the Programme Administrator and presenter of the Digital Literacy programme. Their long-serving staff members are committed and dedicated.

⑥ **Funding:** Due to the professional approach adopted by Uplands Outreach, they have been able to attract funding to support the organisation and its programmes. Budgeting is very carefully undertaken, and strict adherence to transparent procedures results in the sponsors having faith that their donations are well accounted for.

⑦ **Board Governance:** The Uplands Outreach team is blessed to have a Board comprising members who are passionately committed to “Raising Achievement for All” in the Insikazi Circuit. Each member is superbly qualified and committed to fulfilling his or her portfolio ensuring that best practice in Governance prevails.

F. Conclusion and Recommendations

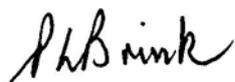
Education in South Africa is in urgent need of transformation to meet the demands of the world that has proved that it cannot operate without digital means of communication. School leadership development, teacher development, and digital literacy training are therefore imperative in today's world.

In my professional opinion, there is no doubt that Uplands Outreach is highly effective and making a tremendous impact in the Insikazi Circuit. They are unquestionably achieving their vision, mission and stated objectives; donors can rest assured that their funds are in excellent hands. Uplands Outreach can be commended as a national leader in this field.

In conclusion, I have four major recommendations:

1. Funding in a post-pandemic world should be continued; indeed, **funding should be increased**, not only for the dire need but also for the efficacy of Uplands Outreach's programmes.
2. Major programmes should be expanded in order to widen positive influence in the circuit and beyond, to adjacent school circuits.
3. Additional support should be given to the Circuit Manager and his school leaders in 2021, as they face extraordinary stresses and pressures from dealing with disruptions, learning losses, truancy and dropouts.
4. The learnings and thought leadership from Uplands Outreach should be documented and used as a national model for independent school outreach programmes.

Please feel free to contact me should you wish to discuss the findings in this independent report.



Signed: P.L. Brink

Date: 1 September 2020

Credentials of External Evaluator

Having taught in a range of schools in South Africa and Zimbabwe for 32 years, Pat Brink's career culminated in the position of headmistress of Kingsmead College and Junior School in Melrose, Johannesburg. Mrs Brink was employed for eight years by the Independent Quality Assurance Agency which contracts to the Independent Schools Association of Southern Africa (ISASA) to quality assure their schools every six years. She carried out her duties in schools between Swaziland and Giyani, Limpopo for eight years, so has experience at a range of schools. In addition, she completed a [research paper](#) for the Centre for Development and Enterprise in July 2015 focusing on quality assurance and viability of low fee independent schools. Her present role as Regional Director for ISASA involves consultation to member schools in Mpumalanga, eSwatini and Mozambique as well as maintaining relationships between the Department of Basic Education and independent schools.