

DigsConnect, the solution to student accommodation



By [Evan-Lee Courie](#)

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During her Honours year in Biology at UCT, Alexandria Procter effectively built and launched South Africa's first digital solution to student accommodation in South Africa, DigsConnect. The platform has grown into the Airbnb of student accommodation now listing over 50,000 beds in around 11 cities around South Africa. The platform aims to connect SA students with property owners looking to rent out beds, rooms or entire properties.



Alexandria Procter

Procter says that she's consistently referred back to one quote in the 18 months since the platform launched:

“ invention isn't disruptive, only customer adoption is disruptive. ”

She says that the response to the platform has been unbelievable and ultimately, data doesn't lie.

“If users keep coming back to your site, if your growth is phenomenal - chances are you're onto something that's adding value to people's lives. And that's what continues to drive us in the challenging start-up environment in which we're operating,” says Procter.

We chat to Procter to find out more about the relatively young startup...

Can you tell us a bit about DigsConnect?

DigsConnect is Africa's largest student accommodation marketplace. We currently list about 70,000 beds in 15 locations

nationwide, and growing daily. It's sort of like Airbnb, but for student accommodation!

■ ***When, how and why did you get started?***

During my undergrad at UCT I was elected on to the SRC, and my portfolio included off-campus housing for students. The universities only house a tiny percentage of students nationwide, and until DigsConnect there's been no place where students that aren't in housing can go to find student accommodation.

During my SRC term, I was dealing with students coming in, saying that they had no place to stay, or that they had been scammed by dodgy "landlords" and had arrived in the city for the first time with no one to turn to. And this was happening every year.

On the other hand, I also had landlords calling in, saying that they had vacancies. So I was manually matching up these students with these landlords, and I just thought that there had to be a better way to do this. So over a weekend I built a super basic website where you could add a digs, and you could find a digs. And it just worked.

Students at UCT were flocking to it, and then Stellies students, then Joburg and Grahamstown and it just got a life of its own! So, I ended up dropping out of my honours year, registering the company, and now we list about 70,000 beds in 15 locations nationwide. We also have an app, which was trending at number 11 in South Africa the day we launched it.

DigsConnect was officially launched in January 2018.

■ ***What is the core function of DigsConnect?***

DigsConnect is a platform where landlords list their student accommodation, and students go to find a place to stay. Students can also find roommates, and we also provide a solution to universities and colleges that need to house their students with our "Virtual Res" technology.

■ ***What are some of the obstacles you've had to overcome since starting out?***

Momentum plays a big role in building a company. Once the ball is rolling, it's easier to keep pushing it, makes things bigger and bigger. The initial push is quite hard because you literally have nothing (that being said it's also quite liberating - you can pivot the startup in a second).

When I first started DigsConnect, I was doing it alone. Building a startup alone, especially your first one, is... well it's just insane.

I knew I had to get co-founders, and I had to get co-founders that were brilliant. Brilliant people have options - they're often getting great salaries at great companies and convincing them to give that up to join an idea with no pay and the high chance of failure (most startups fail) is a daunting task.

I spent ages meeting as many people as I could, trying to find the perfect team, and trying to convince them to join me, all while still building the platform myself, marketing it, and getting users. I never settled though, and never compromised, and when Greg and Brendan joined - that was the watershed moment when I knew we could make it.

Deciding who your partners will be when you start a business is the most important decision you can make - possibly in your life, if you're completely dedicated to your work. The three of us spend more time together than we spend with anyone else. We trust each other completely, depend on each other, support each other. That bond is what ties together an early stage start-up.

▣ ***What advice would you give to other aspiring entrepreneurs?***

Don't ever, ever, ever, ever, ever give up. Just don't. Keep trying, always. It is literally impossible to fail unless you stop trying. Keep at it, pivot a thousand times if you must, make the necessary sacrifices, prepare to be exhausted, have no social life, no balance, be stressed out, but also know you will have the most rewarding and meaningful life.

I think the meaning of life may even be the act of creating - as a human being; to build something yourself, to add value to the world, it's an extraordinary feeling. It's worth it. The future is nothing more than our collective action, and being active about shaping the future by building a company is completely worth the blood, sweat, tears and stress. Keep trying, forever.

▣ ***What has been your proudest achievement thus far?***

Sho, so many things. Every day I'm proud of what our team is achieving. Every day is a little celebration for us. Obviously there are milestones - reaching 70,000 beds, raising R12,000,000 in a seed round (one of the largest in South Africa to date), partnering with some incredible universities and schools, launching in new locations - all that is amazing, but every day, every step we take is important. Every new student sign up, every returning landlord, every line of code and app download. We celebrate all of it.

▣ ***What does the future of entrepreneurship look like to you?***

People stepping up to the plate and realising that they are in control of the future of humanity. Realising that if you don't like something, you don't need to wait for someone else to fix it, or someone else to give you approval. Everyone helping everyone around them to succeed, and us all celebrating the success of hard work and determination.

One of the best definitions of leadership I've ever heard is "leaders make other leaders", so I'd like to see entrepreneurs inspiring other young South Africans to step up, take the reins in their society, and change the world for the better by providing products and services that improve the way we live.

At its core, I think entrepreneurship doesn't change. It's about seeing something you think could be better, and then working on a solution for that thing, and then getting other people excited enough about your solution that they're willing to pay for it. We just need more people boldly creating solutions.

▣ ***What do you think is the importance of start-up accelerator/incubator programmes?***

Most entrepreneurs don't have formal business training, or B.Com degrees. There's a lot of run-of-the-mill businessy stuff that you just need to know, and these programmes can help up-skill you. You need to know how to create a pitch deck. How to iterate for user feedback. How to do a discounted cashflow. How to manage effectively. How to measure success for your startup. Basic coding. Basic photoshop.

▣ ***What would you like to see changed in the South African start-up landscape?***

We need way more government support. There is nothing more important in South Africa right now than job creation, and the government needs to make it as easy as possible for entrepreneurs to succeed. Cut all the red tape, all of it. Registering

a company should take 5 minutes. Cut all tax for startups younger than four years, or provide tax incentives.

Incentivise ordinary South Africans to invest in startups with tax breaks. Create mentorship programmes. Subsidise things like office rentals and wifi for startups. I could go on for hours. If Tito Mboweni is reading this - call me, we need to chat :)

▣ ***What do you believe are the traits an entrepreneur needs in order to succeed?***

Resilience first and foremost. Energy. Creativity. Obsession. Meticulousness. Ambition. Willingness to learn. Willingness to fail and be unpopular. Lack of skaam (shame). A sense of humour. Thick skin. The good news is that whatever you lack, others have, so find co-founders that make up for your deficiencies.

For example, I tend to be a bit unfocused and go after big picture stuff, and Greg is the exact opposite in that he's extremely organised. Brendan rounds out our team in that he has the tech skills we lacked.

▣ ***Why would you encourage someone to become an entrepreneur?***

The world needs you. The world needs problem solvers. The world needs people that think for themselves. The world needs employers. The world needs innovators. And all the stuff I said earlier about the meaning of life being about creating stuff!

▣ ***Where would you like to see DigsConnect in the next five years?***

So this is an interesting question because it addresses something I struggle with daily. On the one hand, I love looking forward, dreaming up marvellous futures for the world and the company and how we're going to get there.

For DigsConnect, we've discussed all kinds of things, mostly around being a universal student ecosystem. But on the other hand, I think that it's crucial to have laser focus and think of nothing else than the task at hand.

Right now, we need to match up landlords and students. We need to have a conversion rate of as close to 100% as physically possible. And until we get that perfect, until we've created the most incredible experience you can have when finding student accommodation, we shouldn't allow ourselves the luxury of thinking about anything else.

At any one time there is one task that is the most important task for you to do. Do that one thing really, really well, and become the best at it. Even if it's as simple as just having the perfect sign-up experience for a student. After that, move on to the next task. I want to enshrine competence at every level.

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