

UJ's Enactus project uses co-op system to empower women in the textile sector

The University of Johannesburg (UJ) recently presented its African Stitch Secondary Co-operative Enactus project at the Enactus South Africa National Competition, which was held at the Sandton Convention Centre in Johannesburg. The project is aimed at addressing the challenges women face in the textile sector.



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Enactus UJ promotes entrepreneurship and has already contributed 58,750 volunteer hours to empowering women in textile manufacturing by introducing an entrepreneurial mindset at schools, organising the informal business, and promoting social cohesion for refugees through business skills.

Faculty advisors business management lecturer Joyce Sibeko and communication design lecturer Christa van Zyl indicated that the initiative is the first-of-its-kind and placed them in the fifth position in the Enactus SA Competition 2018.

Fashion as a lucrative business in Africa

In 2017, the African Development Bank stated that African fashion is one of the top business opportunities for the continent. Designers are increasing the feasibility of African fashion on the world stage and are leveraging the continent's rich cultures, history, and fabrics to make bold fashion statements.

The African Development Bank indicated that Africa's fashion industry could be worth \$15.5bn over the next five years. However, this is still only a small share of the global fashion industry's value of \$1.3tn. Despite its current challenges, Africa's fashion industry has the talent to create millions of jobs and significantly boost the economic growth on the continent.

Enactus UJ established the African Stitch Secondary Co-operative, an international brand that promotes quality African products and services and educates the world about African cultures. Stitch products are inspired by all histories, cultures, and religions in South Africa and beyond. It also set up an online shop and an app for purchasing Stitch products.

The establishment of African Stitch Social Enterprise will enable the women to ride on this wave of business opportunity. Stitch brings together older and younger women in the fashion industry to take advantage of this opportunity. The participating women will manufacture apparel, accessories, homeware, rituals-related products, church apparel, and even introduce certain herbs, preserved or dry foods that are part of the African culture. After the initial project launches in Gauteng, it will be franchised to the other eight provinces through universities.

The team's victory was realised when they presented the interventions the team implemented to fast-track the success of the women. After developing business plans for 16 cooperatives, they approached international charitable organisation Oxfam for funding, which included a proposal that articulated all the activities they needed Stitch to become a reality. The budget was R339,000 and was allocated for the following - 37% training and development of the women and their co-ops, 13% research, 6% initial stock, 29 % initial location rental, and 15% marketing promotion.



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Encouraging young designers

To accelerate the introduction of African Stitch to the market the team injected R20,000 capital to the youth fashion expo. They assisted Lindiwe Molefe, the young designer and PR for Stitch, to launch her label Lilymo in the market.

In August 2018, Enactus UJ will be assisting cooperative designer labels to produce five pieces under the theme stitching an Afropolital brand.

This project will be creating employment for both the students and the women in the near future from all collaborating disciplines.

The African Stitch Secondary Cooperative has more than 160 members and is still recruiting more members from all provinces. To become a member you may buy shares for R500 each; a minimum of 10 shares is required to become a member or as a primary cooperative. A monthly subscription of R100 per person is also paid. These funds enable the women to take orders at any time as they can access capital from stitch at all times.

"As an incubator of future-fit leaders, the values espoused in entrepreneurial practice is a cornerstone of UJ's educational approach. Our students' performance was exceptional, as the level of competition was incredibly high. Our team competed against teams representing top South African universities," says Sibeko.

Sibeko concludes: "I'm grateful that the entrepreneurial actions of the university have been recognised. It would not have been possible if it was not for the exceptional lecturing staff at UJ and all the support received from the entire university."

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