

Education and technology are not two separate things

 By [Shan Raddiffe](#)

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As part of our #LockdownLessons series, Bizcommunity is reaching out to South Africa's top industry players to share their experience of the current Covid-19 crisis, how their organisations are navigating these unusual times, where the challenges and opportunities lie, and their industry outlook for the near future.



Rebecca Pretorius

We chatted to Rebecca Pretorius, Country Manager at Crimson Education, to get her take.

■ ***What was your initial response to the crisis/lockdown and has your experience of it been different to what you expected?***

As an EduTech company, we already support our students digitally, so in terms of everyday engagement that didn't change and for our Crimson students it was business as usual. What did change was our information sessions that we run regularly. These have been face-to-face workshops and seminars in the past, but we have since delivered live webinars instead. This has been really successful with large numbers of South African and international students, families and Counsellors (Life Orientation/Guidance teachers) joining these. What this has enabled us to do is have information evenings with top admissions experts, former admissions officers etc. from all over the world, who have been able to give their expertise and experience to our local students and families.

■ ***Comment on the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on your company or economy as a whole...***

We've seen an interesting uptake in students taking online tutoring for their IEB/NSC subjects. We've also seen growth internationally in Crimson Global Academic (Crimson's online high school), which will be launching in South Africa in September.

We've still seen many students and families over this time wanting to study abroad. But this might change as overall the number of students going abroad is expected to drop globally. Certainly, among our 2019/2020 admits, there is a lot of uncertainty and even anxiety about the impact of the pandemic on their plans. These students would normally be jetting off to their universities in a few months.

Universities have responded differently to the crisis with some cancelling classes for the rest of this year. Cambridge has, in fact, cancelled in-person classes for the year from September, with all classes being held online. In addition, for some current students in application year or even applying in 2021/2022, there is some anxiety around cancellations and delays in testing.

On the economic front, we have seen the impact on some of our families with whom we're making alternative payment arrangements, where they've been personally impacted by job losses or loss of income.

▣ ***How is your company responding to the crisis?***

For any new interested students and families looking for information on pathways abroad, we hold webinars every Wednesday covering topics including: 'How To Keep Your Education On Track: Digital Learning and Covid-19'. We've also held webinars covering all aspects of admissions including:

- **Navigating UK University Admissions** with Crimson Strategist George Baxter
- **Insights into US Admissions: Who Gets In?** A Q&A with Stanford's Former Admissions Officer
- **Deep Dive Into Perfecting Your Personal Statement For Your UK University Application**
- **Building An Extracurricular Profile & Leadership: How Important Is It?** With MIT's David Buisson
- **Successful essays for admission to Harvard, Princeton, Stanford, Yale and more...**
- **UK & US Milestones: Your University Application Checklist**
- **How to Discover Your True Passion: Getting to Social Entrepreneurship & Leadership Projects**

We have many more coming up in June, so students and families can look out for these! For our current students, they're in the fortunate position of having an Admission's Strategist to keep them updated about what's happening in the world of testing, university plans and so on.

▣ ***Comment on the challenges and opportunities...***

The challenges for students and families are definitely financial. International fees are already substantial and for some students, they are becoming less affordable. For Crimson, we are seeing more interest in European university admissions, as Europe is seen as being more affordable than the US and UK. We support students applying to universities across the US and UK, France, Germany, Switzerland, Spain, Austria, Italy, Belgium, and the Netherlands. We also assist students in applying to institutions in Denmark, Finland, and Sweden, as well as China.

At the end of June, we'll be hosting a webinar all about European admissions. So, there is opportunity in the challenges too. For students who can self-fund, there may be some advantage in the 2020/2021 round too as universities may be looking

for fee-paying students. For students, themselves, this is a great opportunity to show how they respond to a crisis instead of just talking about it in their application. Also, while other students are doing less, playing more video games, watching more TV etc, this is a good time for motivated students to show evidence of what they can bring to a campus and their future careers. Also, while students have more time, without commuting and with extra-murals, it's a good opportunity for them to extend themselves by taking additional courses and subjects!

■ *How has the lockdown affected your staff? / What temporary HR policies have you put in place regarding remote working, health & safety, etc.?*

Crimson is prioritising the safety and wellness of our employees with every choice we make and has – at a leadership level - consulted multiple experts and epidemiologists in creating recommendations. Our goal is to provide resources and support both inside and outside of Crimson to support our teams.

As a global company, policies vary regionally depending on local government guidelines. Sixty percent of our global workforce is already on work-from-home policies and offices have been closed in most regions until now, with some regions slowly opening up in line with local guidelines.

In South Africa, we closed our physical office by 20 March so that everyone could work safely from home. We have the tech infrastructure to support this. Beyond the work requirements though, we understand that there's an emotional, mental toll in a crisis. We have established a Covid-19 Response Team made up of Crimson's Executive team and each region has someone available to answer questions and provide support quickly and directly. All staff have access to a Crimson Counsellor for support.

■ *How are you navigating 'physical distancing' while keeping your team close-knit and aligned and your clients happy?*

We have the tech infrastructure and teams of strategists, tutors, mentors, education coordinators and local offices who are engaged with our students and families all the time, so on the academic and admissions front, it's business as usual. We work additionally with students to shape extracurriculars in response to the crisis and the challenges they're facing in this area. From a team point of view, we have daily check-ins and we're always in touch with our South African team and our global teams via Slack at all times.

■ *Has this global crisis changed your view of the future of the industry in any way?*

I think that now more than ever the education industry is poised for change but that this change is likely to happen faster than it may have happened previously. Students and families have seen the value of a flexible education approach with students able to work at their own pace; cover additional work, courses, interests that they may not have had the time to do; have the time and flexibility to focus more on their interests and passions. Schools, businesses, and institutions then that can support this approach will be well positioned for the future.

■ *Any trends you've seen emerge as a result of the crisis?*

We've seen an emerging trend of uninterrupted learning. Students, in well-resourced environments, covering a lot of ground, often at their own pace; accessing vast amounts of information and using new-found time to learn new skills not previously covered in class. Interestingly, driven by students and not schools. We've also seen a shift in the approach to testing and numerical evaluation of students where testing hasn't been possible in the same way. It will be interesting to see whether this results in bigger changes around standardised testing going forward. Finally, an acceleration of the trend towards online, remote learning.

■ *Do you believe the Covid-19 pandemic has caused a fundamental shift in the education industry that will outlast the lockdown, or do you see teaching returning to its BC (before coronavirus) norm once all is over and done?*

There's a fundamental shift to online learning with teachers and institutions having to access and harness technology tools and platforms. Technology has stepped in to fill a gap left by teachers and students not being able to be in the same

physical space and technology will continue to play a key role going forward even when the need for full-time, distance learning is passed.

For this generation, Generation Z, education and technology are not two separate things, and teachers and institutions will have to respond even more to this than they have in the past. Social media is also completely embedded in their lives as a way of both communicating, accessing, and putting out information.

With Generation Z, we also see a collaborative approach to solving problems and playing games, and a collaborative learning environment is just an extension of this. While students are physically isolated, even from older, or at risk, family members, they are, in fact, very connected to their peers and people they don't know around the world through social media, gaming, following popular YouTubers and so on. Add to this, the view that the world is currently an even smaller place with everyone facing the same distinct problem, and teachers and schools will need to consider this globalisation and interconnectedness in the classroom more and more going forward.

Overall, I see this as a fundamental shift in the role of the teacher, the skills that teachers need, how teachers communicate and engage students, and a revision of the kinds of skills that students need to navigate a crisis like this one and prepare for a world that, even before the pandemic, looked vastly different for the next generations.

▣ ***Your key message to those in the education sector?***

Despite how challenging the situation is now, this is also an opportunity to use this time to relook at the way we do things; to determine the good things we want to keep and the things that aren't working that we should stop doing.

▣ ***What do you predict the next 6 months will be like?***

As schools start to slowly open with some students staying at home, we'll continue to see new forms of blended education. As students use distant learning tools, we'll see students, teachers and parents or carers learn new skills and communicate and collaborate differently. As the economic impact unfolds, we may see students and families look for different, more affordable options for education - online learning will play a big role in this.

ABOUT SHAN RADCLIFFE

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