

Studies target execs

Duke Corporate Education (Duke CE) is a newcomer to SA, but not to the world of customised business education solutions. It has offices in the US, UK and India and, in February last year opened an office in Bryanston, Johannesburg.

“Great executive education is needed everywhere and I am thrilled that we have been able to bring it to SA and Africa,” said Sharmila Chetty, MD of the Johannesburg office.

“Our company's parent, Duke University, is famous for its outrageous ambitions, and we have embraced that spirit here, aspiring to influence leaders to shape their organisations, our continent ... and the world.”

The largest clients in Duke CE's South African branch are in the mining and financial services industries and non-profit organisations such as the Black Management Forum.

Though the local office opened only last year Duke CE has been delivering a set of leadership development programmes to a large South African financial institution for the past three years. Wayne Allen, director of operations and projects, says this project provided a kick-start for Duke CE's foray into SA.

Executives benefit

“Working in SA gave us the opportunity to learn from emerging markets and adapt from a global to a local approach, thus ensuring relevance.”

He says the intervention gave Duke an opportunity to work with two South African partners. To date, more than 900 executives have benefited from leadership development interventions.

Since its establishment in July 2000, Duke CE has operated in 62 countries.

Earlier this month it took top honours for the seventh year running in the Financial Times rankings for customised executive education. The FT rankings are based on the responses of executives in client organisations, and Duke CE earned first place in eight of 16 categories: programme design; new skills and learning; aims achieved; preparation; teaching methods and materials; faculty; future use and international participants.

It has also been ranked number one three times in a row by BusinessWeek in its biennial survey on customised executive education.

Owned by Duke University of Durham, North Carolina, Duke CE was created by carving out the executive education practice of the Fuqua School of Business. It is staffed by 125 academics and business practitioners.

CEO Kim Taylor-Thompson says the ability to listen, collaborate, and customise solutions unique to each business and cultural context is a key element of their approach.

“We develop individuals in the context of building their organisation's capabilities, focusing education on what a company's people need to know, do and believe to address real world challenges and attain business objectives.”

A responsibility

Chetty says: “We have a responsibility to build the capabilities of the continent, particularly in health, social and education areas in the public sector.”

She says they are ideally positioned to bring cutting-edge innovation to skills development and building capacity in Africa.

“Although locally based, we work with the best teams around the world, not just in the design but also in the implementation programmes,” says Chetty.”

Taylor-Thompson says that education can be used to formulate a solution to many kinds of business problems or opportunities.

“Education builds lasting internal capabilities to address similar challenges in the future.

“Our vision is to bring clients deep practical knowledge, diverse voices and critical perspectives that have real impact and that change mindsets.”

Duke CE's principal client base is in North America and Europe, but it is expanding to developing countries.

“While most of our clients tend to be global organisations, we are able to deliver small or large-scale programmes, many iterations in several languages covering a few to thousands of participants, with complex logistical requirements, anywhere the world.”

Chetty says, “Given the global economic downturn organisations require a new mindset to reinvent themselves and to look ways of optimising the use of their resources and re-evaluate their people investment strategies.”

She says there is a strong need for customised corporate education and that is important to recognise that one size does fit all. “We need to ensure we have our finger on the pulse and, through our customised offering craft behaviours that can steer organisations through this financial crisis.”

Chetty says corporate education should be regarded as a process rather than a product.

“We don't just create programmes, we confront individual companies with immediate and relevant business challenges, changing their behaviour rather than just dispensing information.”

She says Duke aims to create change by aligning learning to a company's organisational strategy so that it is in sync with the broad agenda of the organisation and local communities.

Karen Roux, Duke CE project director, heads a project at a mining house targeting employees at supervisory level.

She says the project demands flexibility to accommodate the needs of various sites.

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