

Explore Data Science Academy launches in Cape Town



By Ilse van den Berg

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The burgeoning demand for data analytics in the digital economy far exceeds current supply. The Explore Data Science Academy, which recently launched in Cape Town, aims to meet this demand.

Through the academy, BCX will sponsor 300 interns over the next three years, as well as future-proofing executives in this scarce skill, through the provision of additional courses. The academy is believed to be the first institution in the country focused on data science.



Founders of the newly launched Explore Data Science Academy (LTR): Shaun Dippnall, Aidan Helmbold, and Dave Strugnell.

We chat to one of the founders, Aidan Helmbold, to find out more...

■ **What is the Explore Data Science Academy and why is there a need for something like this in South Africa?**

The Explore Data Science Academy aims to be South Africa's leading educational institution focussed on training world-class data scientists. Our interns will graduate from us prepared to launch themselves into the growing, and in-demand, field of data science. Our promise is to produce high-quality interns who will be able to create meaningful change within corporate South Africa.

Data science, at its core, is about solving real-world problems. We will teach our interns how to solve these by applying the latest techniques - from prediction models and artificial intelligence - to the growing amount of data available in businesses.

Our design principle is to build an agile, digital, peer-to-peer, modern education programme that is Seta-accredited and teaches students new economy skills that current platforms do not offer. We are also extremely gratified to have the support of BCX as a founding sponsor of 100 interns annually over the next three years.



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The acceleration of the digital economy means that every industry will need data science skills. There is currently an estimated global shortfall of around 2.9-million data scientists with many 1,000's required across corporate South Africa. We believe that this demand for data scientists will only continue to grow. This is why there is such a need for an academy such as ours to produce job-ready, appropriately skilled candidates for the corporate sector.

We see the academy playing a vital role in youth development and are privileged to be involved in this initiative that allows us to apply an entrepreneurial mindset to the challenges faced by today's youth.

■ ***Tell us a bit more about the founders***

The Explore Data Science Academy was founded by me, Shaun Dippnall, and Dave Strugnell. We are all highly qualified data scientists with actuarial qualifications and experience in lecturing, research and consulting.

Strugnell was the former head of UCT's Division of Actuarial Science. Dippnall was previously an actuarial lecturer at UKZN, but more recently served as both a chief actuary and chief data scientist at some of the largest corporates in South Africa. Both myself and Strugnell have also held executive positions in our roles as actuaries and data scientists.

■ ***Can you explain to the average person on the street what data analytics is and why we need to train up more people with this skillset – especially in South Africa?***

Data science is the application of three core technical skills: statistics, programming, and problem-solving. The perfect technical solution, however, may not be enough to inspire sustainable change in the real world. We have therefore designed our academy to be a unique blend of the theory and practice – with course content based on the most cutting-edge research and techniques and presented in team-based projects to solve problems.

Ours is a unique, one-of-a-kind course in that it is free, practical, has real-world relevance and provides work experience. We also like the fact that it is open to anyone with aptitude.



By comparison, equivalent university programmes, such as a masters in data science, come at a significant cost to a student, which prevent many people from applying. They also tend to focus on theory rather than practical application.

The support from BCX allows our interns crucial access to real-world challenges. What's more, the spectrum of programmes we offer, simulate the teamwork required when working with data in a corporate environment.

▣ ***What courses or programmes will the training academy offer and what make it unique?***

Successful candidates will spend the year between the classroom, on-the-job training and team-based project work.

We designed a course that closely mirrors the demands of the workplace. Included in the curriculum are tools such as Python, Tableau, SQL and Scikit-learn, which are routinely required when building data science applications. We have also added job immersion and self-paced project work, which both involve team dynamics and interaction.

Our design principle is to build an agile, digital, peer-to-peer, modern education programme that is Seta-accredited and teaches students new economy skills that current platforms do not offer.

▣ ***How will the internship programme work and how can someone apply?***

Anyone from any background with an aptitude for mathematics, statistics, problem-solving and analytics may qualify for our course by taking an online aptitude test. This is available on our [website](#).

While prior education and exposure to mathematics and computing will be an advantage, applicants will be selected primarily on their ability to complete an online aptitude test. The course will start in January 2018. Delegates can apply now at www.explore-datascience.net.

ABOUT ILSE VAN DEN BERG

Ilse is a freelance journalist and editor with a passion for people & their stories (check out Passing Stories). She is also the editor of Go & Travel, a platform connecting all the stakeholders in the travel & tourism industry. You can check out her work [here](#) and [here](#). Contact Ilse through her website [here](#).

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