Shai Reshef: The Man Educating the World
by Alicia Buller

In his late 40s, Shai Reshef was lucky enough to enter into semi-retirement. After all, he was a man who thought he had achieved much of what he wanted to achieve.

But having been an educational entrepreneur all his life, there were nagging questions: "What if everyone could go to university? What if education was a human right?" Many people might have kicked their feet up and left it at that. Not Reshef.

The fearless entrepreneur set about bringing together volunteer tutors, low-tech open-source software and the internet to create the world's first tuition-free online, accredited university. But even he didn't realise just how much the whole world was behind him.

Today University of the People (UoPeople) has enrolled students from 160 countries, including Vietnam, Sudan, Indonesia, Nigeria, and Haiti, and features widespread support and volunteering from blue-chip institutions such as Yale University, Oxford University, New York University, The Gates Foundation and the Carnegie Corporation. UoPeople even has 1.2 million followers on Facebook, ranking it the second most followed university, just behind Harvard.

Reshef is now taking the first steps to bringing US-accredited degrees to the masses. The online model means that learning can now reach the remotest and most impoverished parts of the globe. What's more, the centuries-old institution of education has been turned on its head. So, how did he do it?

AB: What gave you the idea for University of the People?

SR: My former education company was a great success but I started to feel that something was missing. I was conscious that, for some people, getting a great education is nothing but wishful thinking. It's just too expensive. So I ended up selling my university and the rest of my business to go into semi-retirement in New York; but I soon realised this wasn't for me. I needed to continue doing things, but I just didn't want to continue doing the same thing.

After I sold the company I was conflicted because I was so aware of how education can change the world and people's lives. When you educate one person, you can change a life; when you educate many, you can change the world.

It always puzzled me: 'Why can't we educate everyone?' I looked around and I thought – 'how can I do it?' Then I met a group of entrepreneurs and they ran a company where hundreds of professors helped children with their homework online for free. And then I realised – this means we can create a university. So I said 'let's do it', and we did it!

How was the idea initially received?

I announced UoPeople at a conference in Berlin, Germany. The next day The New York Times wrote a story about us and I soon had hundreds of professors writing to me saying they wanted to help.

The price of education is going up and up in the US and elsewhere to the point that people cannot afford it. On the other side of the world, people lack the chance to go to university and there aren't enough seats. Take Africa, for example. In Nigeria, one million students can't get into university because there are no seats for them – it just doesn't make any sense.

This is a lost generation. Their future is affected and also that of their family. There wasn't a better reason for the invention of the internet than spreading the knowledge for free. I believe that education is a right; if everyone had an opportunity for education our world would be better. Education is a human right.

You currently have 2,500 students enrolled. How much do you plan to grow?

In 2025, 100 million people will be deprived of a higher education simply because there will not be enough seats available for them. We want to build a model to show the industry that they can educate every single person in the country. We are going to grow until all the people are served. Some people might replicate what we do and if they replicate what we do, then maybe there won't be a need for us. Our plan is to double our growth every single year. A year ago when we were accredited we had about 1,000 students – since then we have doubled our numbers and we will continue to do this until there is no need for us.

How many staff do you employ?

We have about 3,000 volunteers who came on board, that includes 500 instructors. We also have about 100 people that are actively involved with the university.

UoPeople works with prestigious volunteer academics and uses open-source software, but how do you fund the rest of your overheads?

We are not completely free. Students take the courses for free but we expect them to pay US $100 for each course exam. Students studying for a BA will pay $4,000 for the degree if they can afford it. If they don't have the money then they can apply for a scholarship; we have options with global companies, such as Microsoft and Hewlett-Packard. No student will be left behind.

It costs around $1 million a year to keep UoPeople sustainable. In 2017 we expect to be financially sustainable from the exam processing. Until then, we are relying on grants – we have received money from The Gates Foundation and many individuals.

Currently you offer Computer Sciences and Business Administration as degree subject choices. Why did you choose these and will you develop more?

We are working on a Masters of Business Administration course and a BA Health Science option.It is our intention to continue developing additional products too.Westartedwith the two programmes that are most in demand worldwide and will also help students find jobs.

These subjects are also very important in helping their communities to develop.

Will online universities pose a threat to bricks-and-mortar universities?

Not really. I think that online universities will change higher education but it will make a different world, not another world. I believe research universities will continue to be there, take Harvard and New York University, they will always be there.They will remain extremely high quality, with a lot of people willing to pay a lot of money in order to get there.

On the other side of the spectrum UoPeople will be there – extremely low-cost, quality education for the masses. In between, there will be specialised universities. Some other universities will offer hybrids between online and offline. Every university will have to think about what it offers to attract its target audience.

Most universities in the US cost a similar price. Why do we need to pay a high price for everything? I think we will make this flexible trend happen faster. I think online is a different option – for some, it's not the best option because they prefer sitting in front of a professor. When you're online, you don't have face-to-face contact – but, on the other hand, you're part of the global village. In the global village you learn about different cultures and communicate with them. In some ways, studying online is better than traditional learning. But I need to stress, in many cases, the students who come to us, come to us because they don't have any other opportunity. People come because they can't afford college or because they can't get seats. We are an amazing alternative for them because there is no other option.

Do you think a lot of your success can be put down to your US distance learning accreditation?

I think that it's a bit more than that. Our success came because of the support that we are getting. New York University is giving full scholarships. We have great support and when people see who is behind us they realise that we are serious. Obviously, since we were accredited people have realised that this is a stamp of quality.

Where is your biggest market?

The US right now is our biggest market because there is a huge demand – a lot of people cannot afford the local colleges. We got a lot of publicity in the US, so this is one reason why we are so popular there.

In Africa there is a great need for us – in every single country there is a problem of not enough seats and not enough universities. I think many Muslim countries where women are deprived of a higher education are also relevant to us.

You said the internet was important for transforming education. Which other human development areas have the potential to be changed by the web?

I think the internet can make a huge difference to the health sector. For example, you can type in your symptoms online and a doctor on the other side of the world can tell you what you have. I hope it will improve the lives of millions who right now can't get access to health services.

What's the biggest lesson you've had in business?

When I announced the university, I'd had 20 years experience in education so I knew that there was a demand. The thing I was not sure about was whether we would get enough support to make it happen. Thankfully, the day after it was announced we had hundreds of people coming on board saying "we want to help you make it happen". I was shocked – my biggest surprise was how much goodwill is out there.

People are willing to take from themselves and give to the world, give to students, give to us. I knew that there were good people out there – I just didn't know how many. This was my biggest lesson – if you have a great idea, you will find the people who are willing to make it happen.

When you give, you always get back more than you have given; when you give, you get all the power and all the support you need. When you start a business, you know some times are harder than you expected.

Do you enjoy your job?

I have never worked as many hours as I do now. From the minute I wake up until I go to sleep it's the only thing I do. But because I love what I do, it feels like I've never worked a day in my life. I'm fortunate that I came up with the idea; I'm fortunate that I've had so many people with me; and I'm fortunate that I've succeeded.

What's your leadership style?

I am marathon runner – I never give up. I'm the Energizer Bunny, I keep running and running and I never give up. I also think I am very demanding – of myself and those I work with. I'm running and I expect everyone to run with me. On the other hand, I think I am very grateful for the people that work with me. I wouldn't have been able to do it without them. I hope that I'm right when I say I always let them know how important they are.

You sound like a very busy man. What does the average day look like for you?

I'm constantly on the road. I work 16 hours a day and sleep eight hours a night. I spend most of my time in NewYork, but often I'll wake up early to fly somewhere far away. I fly a lot but I sleep well on planes so I can't complain

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UoPeople is the world's first non-profit, free-tuition, accredited online university dedicated to opening access to higher education globally. Using open-source technology, Open Educational Resources, and the assistance of academic volunteers, UoPeople is especially designed to provide access to university studies for qualified individuals, despite financial, geographic or societal constraints.

The university offers Associate and Bachelor degree programmes in Business Administration and Computer Science.

Founded in 2009, UoPeople has partnered with Yale ISP Law School for research; New York University to accept students; Microsoft for scholarships, access to its certificate programmes, mentoring, internships and employment opportunities; and Hewlett-Packard, for general support, scholarships for women and internships.