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DISCUSSION: STRATEGY AND DIGITAL EDUCATION: PART 1

"The University of South Africa: Digital transformation in uncertain times. "

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- Professor Anne Boyer (Universite de Lorraine)
- Dénes Zarka (Budapest University of Technology and Economics)
- Fellow panellists
- Distinguished guests, ladies and gentlemen

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INTRODUCTION

Perhaps the most remarkable aspect of the digital revolution in the global South, is the perceived value of access via digitization/ICTs as a means of achieving social justice and human flourishing.

Social justice in South Africa, refers to the extension of principles enshrined in its Constitution (1996) of human dignity, equity, and freedom to participate in all of the political, socio-economic and cultural spheres of society. Bell (2016) asserts that social

justice is "…*both a goal and a process of the striving for full and equitable participation, of people from all social identity groups in a society that is mutually shaped to meet their needs, by means of a democratic and participatory process that is respectful of human diversity and group differences, and inclusive and affirming of human agency and capacity for working collaboratively with others to create change. Domination cannot be ended through coercive tactics that create domination in new forms.*"

The notion of *social justice* is a fundamental precept of UNISA's institutional strategy and planning and is aligned to our Higher education legislation, our National Development Plan and our Constitution. It is thus a national imperative and not a *nice-to-have*. As such it informs in a real way, the imperative for digital transformation.

Digital equity goes hand in glove with social justice and can be understood as follows: "*digital equity can be a state in which both the digital divide and the participation gap are bridged.*" (*Panel on Digital Equity in Developed and Developing Countries*. DEDDC 2015). Genuine digital transformation requires digital equity.

UNISA, while being strategically committed to digital transformation, must tackle such transformation cognizant of the context in which it operates. I will now share a little of this our strategy and context with you.

<mark>Slide 3 - Photo</mark>

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THE UNIVERSITY OF SOUTH AFRICA (UNISA)

Unisa is the oldest and foremost representative of ODeL in the developing world. UNISA has exerted a fundamental influence and impact on DE continentally and globally and continues to do so. The founding of the African Council for Distance Education (ACDE) at Egerton University in Njoro, Kenya in 2004, was conceived at the Standing Committee of Presidents and Vice-Chancellors (SCOP) at the International Council for Distance Education (ICDE) held at UNISA in October 2002, to further the aims of ODL provision in Africa, which at that time did not have its own association of distance education providers. UNISA's Principal and Vice Chancellor is currently also the President of the International Council for Distance education (ICDE).

UNISA offers both formal and vocational qualifications from diploma and undergraduate degree level to doctoral level, as well as a number of short learning programmes (SLPs) that comprise a very small percentage of its very substantial Programme and Qualifications Mix (PQM). UNISA is a key pillar of South Africa's higher education sector and is subsidized by the state at 50% of the face-to-face subsidy levels at undergrad level. At post grad levels UNISA receives the same funding as South Africa's face-to-face institutions. UNISA's offerings are quality assured, accredited and mainstreamed in South Africa's higher education system. UNISA is the largest higher education provider in South Africa, enrolling approximately 40% of South African university students (RSA, 2014a). While third stream income is a definite consideration, it is not core business. UNISA's education duties are set out in a Higher Education Act (1997), an Institutional Statute and various other related

policies and regulations, which are aligned to the country's National Development Plan (NPC, 2011).

To give you some idea of the impact that Unisa has on South African higher education, in 2016, Unisa hosted 116 graduation ceremonies, during which we awarded a total of 47 777 degrees, diplomas and certificates. This number included 243 Doctorates and 1011 Masters degrees. I expect us to exceed that total this year.

UNISA is quite unique when it comes to the contribution it makes to our country and continent. 20.9 percent of all South African Graduates come from Unisa – that is one-fifth of all South African graduates. Audited data for 2015 indicate that Unisa produces nearly 25% of all Business and Commerce degrees in South Africa. In fact, not only does Unisa produce the bulk of this country's CAs but they also rank amongst the pest performing graduates in the country. In 2015 Unisa produced 39.9% of all Education graduates and 20.1% of all Humanities graduates. We enrol more than one-third of all higher education students in South Africa, as well as the majority of African graduates from outside of Southern Africa. I think that gives you some idea of the strategic importance of this truly amazing university – and yes, I am a little biased!

UNISA currently uses a blended model but plans to move increasingly online as the national socio-economic and political contexts allow.

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OUR STRATEGY

UNISA's strategy is underpinned by a commitment to social justice, which it aims to achieve by leveraging the affordances of technology. A number of key imperatives informed the ***Unisa Strategic Plan 2016-2030***. These include:
• *The African* university
• Trend-setting *comprehensive* university
• Cutting-edge *open distance e-learning* (ODeL) institution
• A *quality student experience*
• *University of choice*
• Contextually relevant, optimised *centres of learning facilitation*
• Transformed and diverse university attuned to *national development*
• Leader in *higher education management and good governance*
• Unequivocal commitment to *high performance and innovation*

Mission
The Unisa 2030 mission statement promises:
  I. Lifelong higher education for all and knowledge creation that is nationally responsive and globally relevant
  II. A leading student-centred ODeL comprehensive university producing quality graduates
  III. Provision of cutting-edge ICT applications and platforms.

Values

Unisa espouses the values of the Constitution of South Africa including the inalienable right to human dignity, and the recognition and respect of diversity for the attainment of equality. We also affirm our historical values of social justice and fairness as a constitutive element of dignity, emphasising freedom of conscience, belief, thought, opinion and expression, academic freedom and freedom of scientific research, freedom of artistic creativity, freedom to receive or impart information or ideas, and the inherent right to have dignity respected and protected. These empowering standards are inherent in all the rules and policies of Unisa. In aspiring to achieve its vision and be true to the commitments of its mission statement, Unisa unambiguously and unequivocally subscribes to the following values:

• Ethical and collective responsibility
• Integrity
• Innovation and excellence
• Responsive student-centredness
• Dignity in diversity

UNISA's strategy has three strategic foci, namely:

Strategic Focus Area 1: Towards becoming a leading ODeL, comprehensive university in teaching and learning, research, innovation and community engagement based on scholarship.

Strategic Focus Area 2: To craft and embed an agile, innovative, sustainable and efficient operational environment.

Strategic Focus Area 3: To harness ICTs to support the transformation of the core business, to enable high performance, service and quality to all its communities

UNISA is committed to digital transformation and there are currently a number of exciting successful innovative initiatives in digital education at UNISA. We have committed to a steady process of digital uptake in line with the realities of our operational environment However, several key barriers must be overcome to achieve the envisaged end state of being fully online, or, digitally transformed. These include: access to technology resources (including connectivity, hardware and software); concerns around quality; culturally relevant and responsive content (including its creation); and human ICT capacity and skills

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BARRIERS TO DIGITAL TRANSFORMATION

ACCESS TO UP-TO-DATE HARDWARE, SOFTWARE, AND CONNECTIVITY

Successful digital transformation is contingent upon available, affordable, reliable high speed internet connectivity. In many developing world contexts this is not available nor is it likely to be a reality any time soon. Even within countries such as South Africa, where 52% of people purportedly have access to the internet at home, this is likely to be via mobile phones connecting to cellular providers' masts and not via personal computers or other such devices connecting via Wi-Fi. Most homes in South Africa do not have Wi-Fi. Furthermore, connection and download speeds remain problematic. This is especially

challenging in regard to establishing an efficient and an effective transactional environment for students, not to mention a quality teaching and learning (and assessment) environment.

Stanlib (2015) asserts:

> The global average connection speed is 5Mbps while the global average peak connection speed is 29.1 Mbps. South Korea has the world's fastest average internet speed, at 25.3 Mbps, although Singapore has the fastest peak speed at 98.5 Mbps, followed by Hong Kong (92.6 Mbps), and South Korea (79.0 Mbps). **South Africa chugs along** with an average connection speed of only 3.4 Mbps, and a ranking of only the 90th fastest average connection speed in the world. South Africa's peak connection speed was measured at 16.8 Mbps in the first quarter of 2015, giving us a world ranking of 112th. So, in practice, while you load a YouTube video in South Africa, you can press the down arrow to play a game of Snake before the video loads.

The cost of data in South Africa also remains an intractable problem that continues to have a deleterious impact on social justice through to the equitable delivery of ODeL. The majority of students are only able to access the internet via their mobile phone or via computers at their places of work, study centres, or internet cafes. Furthermore, expecting students to use their phones for study does little to promote social justice as the costs for downloading or uploading materials, and communicating with the institution gets transferred to the students who are simply not able to purchase large volumes of "airtime". Unisa students are very savvy politically and understand the need for digital education: however they have demands and expectations, for example, for free devices and free internet access, etc., which cannot be met from the coffers of the institutions and progress has therefore been a lot slower than one would have liked.

Stanlib (2015) further asserts [that]

> Data released in a survey done by the SA Institute of Race Relations indicates the average monthly cost of broadband South Africa is more than 10 times higher than in the UK. In comparison, it found that the UK enjoys a broadband speed that is five times higher than South Africa's. Another instance, South Africa's broadband speed is about a fifth of that of the US but its average monthly broadband cost is over five times as high as that of the US. The average cost of broadband for a South African internet user is around R337 a month. For the average user in the UK, the cost is about R36 a month. Not only are the UK and US's services cheaper, they are also faster and have a higher amount of users.

The implications of these structural, socio-economic and political realities in South Africa has meant that UNISA has had to align its business model with the realities of the context in which it functions, and this is impacting the pace of digital transformation.

Some five years ago Unisa's Council approved the business model and implementation plan to go fully online. However after a very fractious meeting with students who cited a lack of access to devices and the internet, and unpreparedness for online education, to name but a few, the process had to be put on hold. Today there is a verbal acceptance of the need to go fully online, but this is always with the *caveat* of levels of support which include blanket internet access (remember that Unisa serves even the remoted areas), airtime, proper devices, study facilities and other levels of support and service which we are not in a position to offer just yet.

In South Africa the monopoly of internet provision, lies with the State, and the roll-out of broadband to the entire country has proceeded at a far slower pace than we would have wished. This is a matter that has now been prioritized by the state and one hope to see a drastic improvement in internet infrastructure in the very near future. There is of course internet access on all of our campuses, regions and hubs, although the quality of connectivity in some of the more far flung regions is still not satisfactory.

I am hopeful that this "issue" will no longer be an "issue" in the near future, but until such time, our progress on our strategic intention to go fully online, is shaped by this infrastructural lack which is beyond our control.

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CONCERNS AROUND QUALITY AND CONTEXT

An incontestable correlation between poor quality education and low learning levels and learning deficits or inequalities, keeps quality education provision in the global spotlight.

Globally, trends to greater expressions of conservatism and nationalism have impacted on attempts in higher education to cohere around seminal aspects such as internationalization and quality. At the same time, the growing influx of private and for-profit education practitioners and businesses is shaping perceptions of quality and education *per se,* and disconcertingly, understandings of ODeL.

There appears to be insufficient appreciation, especially amongst developing nations and for-profit and private providers, of the distinction between quality-assured and accredited ODL and other forms of open higher education provision (including MOOCs and OER). Instead, what one has noted over the past three years or so, is the gradual decline in status and a blurring of the lines between formal and non- formal DE providers to the extent that the quality of the formal qualifications provided by the more traditional and experienced ODL providers is being called into question. Our inability to find some global resolution to this fundamental aspect quality in education provision has undoubtedly contributed to this conundrum. In some circles, in the current environment, ODL is increasingly associated with inferior quality as a result of the newcomers whose credibility is often questionable. This poses a very serious risk for institutions such as UNISA: in terms of our brand, our reputation, our standing in the global community and most importantly, our attractiveness to future students.

Colleagues, we are witnessing a global rise of student movements, perhaps the greatest we have witnessed since the 1960s. Such movements have a tendency to gather momentum and to contribute to substantial societal change.

The *latest* uprising in South Africa has already been echoed across Europe and North America and even in China – although perhaps our students may take a leaf from *that* book and note that after days of resolute mass protest, Chinese students cleaned up the litter and left the streets immaculate - and they did so in good spirits! The point to be made, is that there is a momentum towards multi-level transformation in higher education, and not just digital transformation, which we ignore at our peril.

Globally, students also appear to be shunning the traditional structures and hierarchies that characterize traditional universities in favour of more direct and immediate forms of engagement – such as demanding to engage directly with the CEO. In South Africa, we find students wanting direct access to the VC – at will. With this we note demands for immediate gratification and resolution of issues, which in the real world, is simply not possible. In South Africa, the student movement comprises a number of different groupings and individuals, most of whom have vested interests which do not necessarily correspond. This adds another layer of complexity to an already complex situation.

There is both a personal and public dimension to this conduct that speaks of a new generation that has cut its teeth in the social media, where freedom of expression is exercised readily and uninhibitedly and where instant gratification can be achieved through instant hero status and an instant following. Of course there is a downside - careers and reputations can also be ruined instantly.

We need also to remember that instant access to the internet gives staff, students and the entire world access to our websites, the quality of our teaching materials and our pedagogy. Our weaknesses and shortcomings are there for the world to see, and poorly managed or not mitigated, they pose a serious reputational and sustainability risk.

Digital transformation is a double edged sword in a politically-charged context such as ours, and adds a new and interesting strategic dimension to planning, leadership and management.

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CULTURAL RELEVANCE AND RESPONSIVENESS

While higher education institutions are tasked to be [the] "foundation for human fulfilment, peace, sustainable development, economic growth, decent work, gender equality and responsible global citizenship" and "a key contributor to the reduction of inequalities and poverty by bequeathing the conditions and generating the opportunities for better, sustainable societies" (UNESCO, 2015: 13, 3), this presents a number of complex challenges. Infrastructural lacks, entrenched and persistent poverty, a lack of political will and political whimsy, cultural diversity and a host of well documented socio-economic and political factors continue to exclude a majority of potential higher education students in the developing world.

When it comes to the global South, the notion of digital transformation and equity and social justice are circumscribed by geographical location, contextual realities and most importantly, inherited and sustained structural and systemic business models and processes that are western in conceptualization and application. These are increasingly dissonant with growing assertions of "otherness" as it pertains to culture, identity and pedagogy. In South Africa this can be noted in the #must fall and decoloniality movements, which are currently rendering genuine equitable digital transformation difficult.

Slide 12 – Photo Black lives matter

Slide 13 – All Rhodes lead to …

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HUMAN ICT CAPACITY AND SKILLS

Contrary to popular opinion, quality ODeL, and by extension, digital transformation, is not cheap despite the perceived potential of large scale delivery. Course design and development for quality online education is a specialized field requiring trained developers, and getting the supporting systems in place is an extremely costly exercise. It takes time - a long time - to create anew or convert (and quality assure) existing courses into online format, especially where there is a quality assurance regime in place. There are significant logistical considerations in terms of timelines, staff training (professional development for faculty), student support and implementation, assessment models, monitoring and evaluation. There are also leadership, cultural and governance dynamics that have to be addressed, including for example, fears around job losses or redundancy, staff (and some student) resistance to the uptake and learning of new technologies, as well as a multitude of unanticipated technological and political challenges, which can be extremely onerous and costly to resolve. Digital transformation and equity will, one suspects, not come from access and scale, but rather from political will and higher education and institutional analytics, and equally importantly, capacity development, which will improve the learning experience and enhance student support.

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CONCLUSION

While higher education institutions are unambiguously tasked to be promoters of digital transformation, equity and social justice, this presents a number of complex challenges. Infrastructural lacks, entrenched and persistent poverty, a lack of political will and a host of well documented socio-economic, political and contextual realities continue to exclude a majority of potential higher education students in the developing world. Furthermore, the ongoing hegemony of the "West" in terms of the production and dissemination of technologies, digital access, knowledge content and cultural capital (which are entrenched via assumptions of their universality) is subduing the counter narrative of developing world contexts and lived realities, continuing its marginalization and domination and hampering the genuine striving for social justice. This is the current reality of ODeL (or any form of

online education) in a developing nation, making comprehensive digital transformation an ongoing striving.

<mark>Slide 16 – Photo – we're not done yet.</mark>

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