

The role of technology in the future of higher education

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Credit: University of Leeds

A new transcontinental research project is looking at the way technology affects traditional campus-based degrees.

As [digital technology](#) continues to influence and "disrupt" how students learn and are taught, the research by the Universities of Leeds and Cape Town (UCT) will examine its effect on staff, students and employers.

The Unbundled University: Researching emerging models in an unequal landscape will look at the "unbundling" of [higher education](#) and ask if the traditional university – offering a single package for many aspects of the student experience including teaching, content and assessment – is still relevant.

It comes at a time when the UK sector is moving towards increased marketisation as a result of Government initiatives.

In South Africa, meanwhile, universities are seeking ways to level the field for students who come from highly diverse economic and social backgrounds, with a great deal of disparity in experience of using technology.

The success of Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs) has shown that there is increasing interest in more flexible models of higher education, especially those evolving into accredited courses.

The Programs MOOCs at Leeds, for example, offer credit that can be used towards a degree to be taken at any university that will accept it, or used to build a portfolio of awards from a range of universities and other accrediting bodies, in lieu of a degree.

Last year, UCT was ranked as the second-best institution creating MOOCs, according to a report published by MOOC aggregator website Class Central.

The higher education sector in South Africa has been affected by a second year of student protests, broadly aligned under the call for free decolonised education.

These terms are hotly contested – what does "decolonised" mean in practice, and what are the implications of "free"? Who pays for a degree

in a country where only 22 per cent of the population pays personal income tax? Should higher education be free for all, or just free for those who can't pay?

Professor Neil Morris, Director of Digital Learning at the University of Leeds, is the research project's joint principal investigator. He said: "As well as looking at how digital technology is disrupting higher education, this research will explore how the involvement of alternative providers and external partners is changing the way higher education is offered.

"It is an exciting example of international collaboration between two research-intensive universities operating in very different contexts, but facing overlapping challenges."

Associate Professor Laura Czerniewicz, joint principal investigator and Director of the Centre for Innovation in Learning and Teaching at UCT, said: "While there are clearly opportunities offered by new models of provision, there are concerns that 'unbundled' higher education can lead to fragmentation of the curriculum, increase inequalities amongst the student body, create a disconnect with the holistic benefits offered by a university experience, and create concerns about quality if a wide range of providers are involved.

"We want to look at these risks and at whose interests this unbundling is serving. Outputs from the project will be shared with higher education decision makers and Government policy makers to help them to make informed decisions about future initiatives in this area.

"The universities of Leeds and Cape Town are similar types of institutions addressing similar issues in different contexts in ways that can only enrich the study."

More information: Monetization over Massiveness: A Review of

MOOC Stats and Trends in 2016. www.class-central.com/report/moocs-and-trends-2016/

Provided by University of Leeds

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