



UNIVERSITY OF LEEDS

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Cape Town and Leeds to study role of technology in the future of higher education

A new transcontinental research project is looking at the way technology is affecting 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 rocked 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.”

The research is funded by the [Economic and Social Research Council](#) and [the National Research Foundation](#) and is one of [five collaborative research projects](#) about higher education in South Africa. It will take place over 26 months. The amount of funding granted is £494K by the ESRC in the UK, plus R2 158 000 by the National Research Foundation in South Africa.

More information can be found [here](#). Link: <http://unbundleduni.com/>

Notes to editors

1. The University of Leeds is one of the largest higher education institutions in the UK, with more than 31,000 students from 147 different countries, and a member of the Russell Group research-intensive universities.

We are a top 10 university for research and impact power in the UK, according to the 2014 Research Excellence Framework, and positioned as one of the top 100 best universities in the world in the 2015 QS World University Rankings. We are The Times and The Sunday Times University of the Year 2017. www.leeds.ac.uk

2. The University of Cape Town is the top-ranked university in Africa and amongst the top in the world, with 28,000 students from more than 100 countries. UCT's reputation for excellence is underpinned by its distinctive research: many of our faculty are world leaders in their field. We belong to the International Alliance of Research Universities, comprising 11 leading research institutions around the globe. We are also a founding member of the African Research Universities Alliance, which is working to create a platform for growth in research capacity across the continent. www.uct.ac.za

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