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## **South African universities must adopt new digital teaching approaches to be globally competitive - UCT study**

New online and open access ways of teaching and learning are gaining momentum in South Africa, but the advances still apply only to a handful of institutions. This is according to a two-year study led by the University of Cape Town's Centre for Innovation in Learning and Teaching (CILT).

The study, conducted by CILT in collaboration with the University of Leeds in the United Kingdom, examined the emergence of online learning at institutions of higher learning in South Africa. Sukaina Walji, online education project manager at CILT, said the team's research focused on the changes currently underway in the higher education sector, which will ultimately lead to the unbundling of education provision at universities nationally.

These new forms of education provision involve digital approaches, to keep pace with the demands of an evolving digital world. Walji believes the importance of digital technology is around increased flexibility, scale and access.

She said more historically advantaged and "high-ranked" universities are adopting online, open-access and digital learning, and adapting to these global trends. But historically disadvantaged institutions continue to lag behind.

Some academics interviewed as part of the research said they remained sceptical about adopting digital ways of teaching and learning at tertiary level. "It's difficult to do for a whole range of reasons," one academic commented.

However, some were reacting positively to this innovative, modern technology. "It's wonderful actually, because you've even got the quiet ones engaging, so their voices are being brought out," said another.

According to Walji, a range of factors shape the ways in which teaching is delivered and learning is received. These, she said, include austerity processes at some institutions and the need to cut back due to tough economic times globally. "Worldwide, universities are under pressure to cut costs and digital technologies like the internet and web tools offer new opportunities for teaching and learning."

These new opportunities are not without their difficulties though – for students and educators. The need to level the playing field for students by providing unlimited access to the internet, laptops and/or other devices is critical, she explained. Similarly, for academics, altered roles and new teaching teams are just two of the challenges with which they need to become familiar.

“Although it’s unequally distributed, more people are interacting digitally for all sorts of things – communication, shopping and banking, particularly using cellphones. Higher education has changed as a result of digital technology. And all of this is impacting on a range of possibilities for classroom teaching,” she concluded.

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**Issued by: UCT Communication and Marketing Department**

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