

# The evolving landscape of higher education

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## Introduction

Globally, the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic has ensured a mandatory shift away from traditional forms of education to online education platforms (Abelskamp & Santamarinam 2020). International consensus is that during the outbreak of Covid-19 pandemic, universities were particularly affected. Students experienced a great deal of stress due to being unsettled, especially owing to a breakdown of the structural environment. This included physical classes being moved online; semester exams, tests, and assignments being postponed; and examination times being adjusted. In addition, students in rural areas, poverty-stricken communities, and remote settings experienced difficulty with internet connectivity, poor internet coverage, and an intermittent electricity supply (Anifowoshe, Aborode, Ayodele, Iretiayo & David 2020; Owusu-Fordjour, Koomson & Hanson 2020).

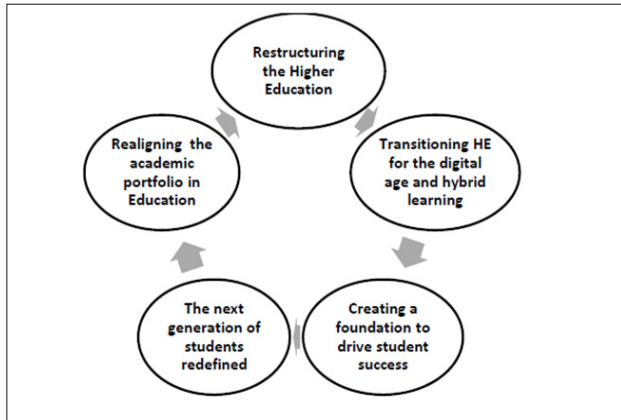
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These challenges, together with students being confronted with an unexpected shift to online teaching, prompted researchers to focus particularly on the emotional wellbeing of students. Many research questions were posed regarding students' wellbeing during the pandemic, when in fact, prior to Covid-19, South African universities had already begun to investigate the wellbeing of students, families, and broader communities through addressing societal inequality and overcoming the ravages of apartheid (Eloff & Graham 2020). While we continue to redress socio-economic disparities, globally we face an outbreak of the pandemic in which, according to Aristovnik, Keržič, Ravšelj, Tomaževič and Umek (2020), we need to closely collaborate and urgently pay attention to vulnerable student groups, whilst attempting to ameliorate the diverse and negative effects and consequences of prolonged Covid-19 measures around the world.

Having said this, there is an urgent need for in-depth exploration of ways to uplift our universities with their existing challenges, and to subsequently move towards an effective approach in which our students can flourish, and at the same time, meet global outcomes for creating alternative pathways to support

our students' progress with learning. The figure below outlines our discussion to support the initiative of reimagining the University of Pretoria (UP) in a more innovative world.

Figure 7. Reimagining the University of Pretoria



## 112 Restructuring higher education

According to Selingo (2013), two important aspects in higher education (HE) need to be addressed, the first being effective online delivery of learning content and the second, a more vocational focus that aims to facilitate training for a specific job or skill. In line with our department, our teaching module provides a strong theoretical foundation for teaching and learning. This is followed by a practical module where prospective teachers visit school sites as interns, and their theoretical knowledge is assessed in a real-life context. Post-Covid-19, our university can create an online tutorial centre where potential teachers can gain competence at a trained facility. This online tutorial service can be offered to schools across the country at nominal cost. Creating a digitised platform can generate greater demand, especially when teachers under close supervision provide such a service. Such teachers can then be hired on a permanent basis to support teachers in training in this way ensuring job security, as well as providing an incentive to choose this degree at UP.

When considering potential Masters Students drawn from the Department of Educational Psychology, training should focus on online psychometric assessments and tools, as most countries around the world have adopted these

online tools, which facilitate easy scoring. A centre within the Department of Educational Psychology can focus on competency-based courses that can support Masters Students and professional psychologists to gain knowledge and acquire competency skills on an annual basis. These processes can be facilitated at the university, rather than students having to pay for courses to acquire CPD points outside the institution. The Department has trained psychologists who can offer workshops to our students, but can also extend this service outside the University for a nominal charge. In-house training can also cater for the broader market. This type of support can enhance the student-for-life concept, in terms of which UP students continue to learn, develop, and remain up to date in their professional careers.

### **Transitioning higher education for the digital age and hybrid learning**

Sledge and Fishman (2020) reflect the consensus that HE can appropriately meet the demands of the current digital era and of today's tech-savvy students if it uses the cloud, social networks, mobile computing, and big data to create digital learning ecosystems that serve entrepreneurial learners, enabling them to design their own educational paths based on their personal learning goals. Similarly, the associate director of the Technology Enhanced Knowledge Research Institute, George Siemens, states, 'The way we learn should be our most personalized experience because no two people process information the same way.'

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Stanford University has embraced reimagining higher education of students by partnering with the online learning platform Khan Academy. This initiative piloted a blended learning 'flipped classroom' biochemistry course, allowing students to watch video lectures online and then spent class time solving problems, maximising the time that students were able to spend with lecturers. This partnership was extended to the medical school, enabling Stanford medical students to watch core curriculum videos online, and freeing up class time for students to engage with the curriculum together with their peers and professors, and to explore areas of interest which had been identified earlier in childhood (Ferenstein 2012; Straumsheim 2013). A similar concept can be adopted by our department to support our students to learn in an innovative way. They can learn within a global network which is easily accessible.

### **Creating a foundation to drive student success**

According to Sledge and Fishman (2020), to successfully adapt to the forces impacting on HE, colleges and universities should make the following strategic choices to enhance their effectiveness (see Table 1 below).

<b>Who do we want to serve?</b>	
<b>Customer segment(s)</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Department of Education</li> <li>• Potential educators</li> <li>• Trained educators</li> <li>• Special needs educators</li> <li>• Educational psychologists</li> <li>• Counsellors with specific competencies in place, allowing them to provide support</li> </ul>
<b>What products and services do we provide to students?</b>	
<b>Product(s) or service(s)</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Specific degrees</li> <li>• Different modules taught</li> <li>• Digital competency</li> <li>• Developing other competencies</li> </ul> <p>By clearly defining products and services provided to students, UP can better articulate their unique value as competition across the higher education industry continues to increase.</p>
<b>How do we provide products and services to students?</b>	
<b>Channel(s)</b>	UP can tailor their products and services to provide customised learning models, integrating components of just-right education for the targeted student segment. Education can be delivered in person, online, or as a hybrid of both.
<b>Who do we need to partner with to deliver products and services to students?</b>	
<b>Partnership(s)</b>	With defined products and services, UP can seek partnerships to support student success. These partnerships could be with employers, educational tech companies, or even with alternative education providers.

**Table 1.** Strategic choices to enhance effectiveness

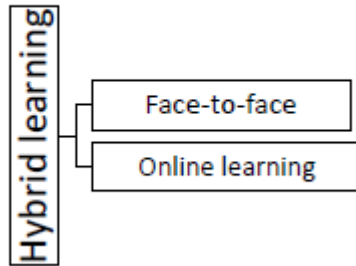
## The next generation of students redefined

The 2021 Senate meeting of the University of Pretoria spoke to the next generation of students who will think, teach, learn, and create knowledge in meaningful ways to become effective leaders. Developing competencies is one way to fast-track students for the professional world. Developing competency-based learning, which can be aligned to a specific degree, will enable students to gain practical skills within their professions. The Department of Educational Psychology has launched the Badges4EDU initiative, involving competency-based activities which allow students to complete a particular task and gain competency in digitisation, evidence-based content to enable competencies within their field of study, and lastly improve their emotional well-being. We would like students to be awarded these competencies, based on hours of learning, as well as based on skills level. These competency-based skills can show-case their talent, and provide an advantage when these students apply for prospective employment.

These competency-based courses or learning skills can be introduced as a separate course within the Department, enabling students with different levels of knowledge to learn in innovative ways, to progress at a variable pace. According to Deloitte University Press (2017), instead of using the number of hours completed as a yardstick for success, competency-based degree programmes can focus on whether students actually master the materials. This idea derives from the work of Jeffrey Selingo (2013), who explains that degrees should be based on how much students know, not on how much time they spend in lecture halls. Competency-based learning can reward prior experience and measure learning through demonstrated proficiency, once skills have been demonstrated. Such courses can cater for diverse students from different backgrounds who face financial challenges. Such students may not be able to afford to study for a full degree, but they can progress through individual courses at their own pace, reducing or expanding the time period required to complete their degree. The number of institutions offering competency-based degrees has expanded in recent years to include large public universities, including the University of Wisconsin, Purdue University, the University of Texas, the University of Michigan, and Northern Arizona University.

## Realigning the academic portfolio in education

A recent study of excellence in higher education (Selingo, Clark, Noone & Wittmayer 2021) highlighted the following post-Covid-19 strategies for creating a hybrid educational institution, which would enable a lifetime of learning and success:



Hybrid learning	Online learning	Face-to-face
Academic programmes can be provided as individual courses	Experiential learning	Theoretical aspects in module
Rethink the academic calendar to cycle students beyond traditional semester schedules.		
Build virtual communities		
Develop flexible academic programmes		
Create alliances with other universities to share courses in low-enrolment, critical areas		
Mobilise human talent in hard-to-reach communities		
Create professional developmental programmes		
Employ external training opportunities for faculty members		

**Table 2.** Post-Covid-19 strategies for creating a hybrid educational institution.

Source: Inspired by the work of Selingo et al. (2021).

## Conclusion

Looking ahead, HE is evolving, and as an institution we need to welcome new methods of instruction, and award new certifications of competencies in line with high standards of teaching and learning. Covid-19 has taught us to step out

of our comfort zones and adapt to change, seize opportunities, and embrace the continuous and extraordinary innovations taking place. Establishing a standard of excellence in this new era will take work, but we have already made significant progress by delving into hybrid learning and teaching. Next we need to reinvent and create a strong foundation to conceptualise how the landscape for HE can continue to evolve in the years ahead.

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