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Authors: Jacques Avril du Toit[1]
Affiliations: University of South Africa[1]
Orcid ids: 0000-0001-9467-2833[1]
Contact e-mail: dtoitj@unisa.ac.za
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Digital Transformational Leadership in Open Distance Learning: Understanding Progressive Transparency

Jacques Avril du Toit
https://orcid.org/0000-0001-9467-2833
University of South Africa
dtoitj@unisa.ac.za

Abstract

During the global Covid-19 pandemic, the successes of institutional leadership became a key parameter in re-evaluating the impact of innovation and institutional stances amid the complex challenges and exchanges that occurred during the pandemic. In open and distance learning, the Covid-19 pandemic introduced many higher education leaders to the urgency of digital innovation and foresight and the exemplification of sustainability, with regard to digital transformation.

In 2020, the University of South Africa (Unisa) publicised its revised 2030 Strategy (2016–2030), advocating the importance of “impact, outcomes, outputs, activities and inputs” (Unisa 2020). This Strategy serves as a strategic document envisaging a solid premise in establishing Unisa as a leader in open distance e-learning in Africa. This drew the focus for key decision-makers again towards leadership, innovation, transformation and sustainability.

These foci warrant a strong transformational stance; not only with regard to practice, but also with regard to having a strong sense of leadership to facilitate change and to respond to staff and students who are eager to serve as change agents as new solutions and situations evolve. This paper views the triptych of digital transformational leadership as a form of transformational leadership, in which a triadic appreciative relationship exists between strategic leadership, business knowledge and digital knowledge (adapted from Antonopoulou et al. 2021, 3). In addition, these triadic positionings aim to “enhance a collaborative culture with productive relations between academic, colleagues, students and connections of educational environments with the wider community” (Antonopoulou 2021, 3; Howell and Hall-Merenda 1999).

During the Covid-19 pandemic, the importance of digitalisation and its associated transformational agenda justified a plausible need to facilitate progressive transparency in the e-teaching and e-learning realms. With innovation aiding one part of the collective institutional identity, a greater need existed for sanctioning organisational leadership to consider the user-centric considerations pertaining to inclusion, participation and progressive transparency. This was needed to managerially understand the integration
of immersive teaching and learning technologies in the ambit of higher education and post-schooling institutions.

The complexity of digital transformational leadership is often questioned as it not only provides an “exponential evolution in available technology and systems” (Ardi et al. 2020, 261), but also links current trends to extended technologies to decision-making processes, as a way of enhancing new knowledge while stimulating productive relations in institutional decision-making. In practice, digital transformational leadership in higher education encompasses an undeviating need for strategic, tactical and operational interaction to exploit online capabilities and digital managerial complexities.

To achieve the institutional ideals of open distance learning through extended digital technologies, progressive business knowledge and the importance of innovation should also enhance the direct demands of institutional offerings.

Progressive transparency in this study explores the conjecture about whether the digital transformational demands in Africa can provide suitable solutions to accommodate both sustainable and sustained change. During the height of the Covid-19 pandemic, online learning initiatives allowed at first discretionary decision-making powers by institutional leaders to implement e-learning as media to support institutional preferences.

In the aftermath of Covid-19, transparency in the e-learning and online support realm became continuously unsettling, as top-down decision-making powers neglected the concept of rational reflection; hindering the acquisition of customised ways to steer inclusion through a bottom-up and reflective approach. The latter caused challenges to be visible especially during the decision-making processes and the subsequent shift from crisis leadership to adaptive leadership styles. In addition, the challenges of access, function, support and resilience became difficult to assess, especially given the complexities of context in distance learning settings. These complexities included digital risks, security, e-readiness, equity and inclusion. However, even amid these complexities, digital transformation led to progressive engagement, to recognise gaps and institutional dissonance within operational implementation.

As a way of understanding the successes of progressive distance learning in leadership, it is important to understand that strategic direction cannot always be all-encompassing, evasive or linear. For this, the relevance of a participative leadership style should also not be underestimated as it can provide critical insight into learner and faculty needs to accommodate innovation and new methods, while fostering “innovation, increase growth, and profitability” (Matzler et al. 2012). On the e-learning spectrum, variables such as digital access costs, instructional modalities, and networks to accommodate the increased use of online portals and technologies can also become digital acculturated spaces in understanding reasonable accommodation. The latter, in particular, will then
cease to exclude poorer students and suboptimal experiences of faculty in digital transformational learning spaces.

In South Africa, research studies on digital transformational leadership in higher education are limited. In this study, I aim to conduct a critical review by using recent literature to explore the ways in which digital transformational leadership can cultivate agency in an open and distance learning higher education setting. This will allow for time and opportunity to provide an explorative space for leaders and staff to shift their current corporate thinking, to expand their critical institutional understandings with regard to digitalisation, and to collectively lead the transformative processes to change.

In this study, I will also demonstrate that in spaces in which digital transformational leadership are implemented and well maintained, institutional communication and digital change can further accelerate connection whereby the mutability of staff and institutional stakeholders can also be acknowledged and dealt with.

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