From Disruption to Innovation: The Digital Transformation of Teaching in South African Higher Education

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Abstract:

Digital innovation has emerged as a transformative force across various sectors, including higher education. In South Africa, this transformation has gained momentum, particularly in response to the disruptions caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. The crisis underscored deepseated inequalities, especially for students from low-income backgrounds, and highlighted the urgent need for scalable and inclusive digital solutions. This study explores the evolving landscape of digital innovation within South Africa's higher education sector, assessing the impact of the pandemic and examining how higher education institutions (HEIs) adapted to new modes of teaching, learning, and assessment. Central to the analysis is the transformation of university teaching, which underwent a significant shift from traditional face-to-face instruction to digitally mediated and hybrid models. The study reveals how academic staff had to rapidly develop digital competencies, redesign curricula for online delivery, and adopt innovative pedagogical approaches to maintain educational continuity. Employing a qualitative research design grounded in a narrative literature review and supported by content analysis, the study identifies key themes and subthemes related to digital transformation in HEIs. Findings reveal that although South African HEIs were gradually embracing digital transformation prior to the pandemic, progress was hindered by financial limitations, infrastructural deficits, and capacity constraints. The pandemic acted as a catalyst, accelerating the adoption of digital technologies and prompting a reimagining of teaching practices. Looking ahead, the study recommends a strategic embrace of digital innovation to enhance not only educational access, equity, and quality but also the future resilience and relevance of university teaching in South.

Keywords:

Digital innovation, digital transformation, higher education, university teaching, South Africa.