

## Digital equity and social justice: Whose reality? Reflections from South Africa

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In this paper, the notion of social justice is premised on access to quality, affordable education and digital equity is understood as a leveller of society, a key stimulus for socio-economic growth and development, and a prerequisite for social justice. The ongoing global impetus towards increased digital access and the incremental uptake of ICTs into the traditional higher education space is not only reshaping our understanding of education globally, but it is also evidencing, through research and the benefits of time, a more sober and realistic portrayal of the affordances of digital access and technology in higher education. The emerging picture paints a cautionary tale, particularly in regard to the lived reality of digital equity and social justice in the developing world context. This paper takes the form of an exploratory study of limited scope, of the challenges around digital equity and social justice in distance education, from a developing world perspective. A counter narrative to the prevailing voices and hegemonies is offered to trouble some of the assumptions in dominant discourses, as motivation for a more realistic, contextualized and equitable appraisal of digital equity and social justice. The University of South Africa is used as a point of reference, given its status as the single dedicated comprehensive distance education institution in South and Southern Africa, the largest on the African Continent and one of the world's mega institutions.

Keywords: Policy, context, quality, social justice, digital equity, developing world

### Introduction

The digital revolution has been so enduring, far-reaching, pervasive and impactful, that it is increasingly referred to as the “4<sup>th</sup> Industrial Revolution” (Florindi, L, 2014). Information and communication technologies (ICTs) are the backbone of this revolution. Now, more than ever before, the future of countries, businesses, higher education institutions and individuals will depend on whether, and the extent to which, digital technologies are embraced and utilized effectively. Digital access and the ability to embrace technologies is thus a predictor of future flourishing.

The impact of the digital revolution on higher education has contributed to its internationalization and commodification to the extent that it has become a multinational export industry, meriting its own category in the General Agreement on Trade and Services (GATS). (WTO, 2001). Education is now as much a service that can be bought and sold, as it is a fundamental human right and a public good. Students are called “clients”, intellectual property is bought and sold, and those who cannot afford education or who do not have digital access remain largely excluded. The traditional notion of the university as a public good and the primacy of academic freedom and institutional autonomy are increasingly being challenged by the relentless demand for marketable knowledge and skills that will grow economies and make profits. In this view “public good” is being re-conceptualized to include a good return on investment and a profit. (Naidoo, 2003).

Perhaps the most remarkable aspect of the digital revolution is the perceived value of digital access and ICTs as a means of achieving social justice and human flourishing. Unfortunately, inasmuch as we acknowledge the value of digital access and technology adoption as a stimulus and driver of social justice, the majority of those who stand to benefit most from their affordances are not yet connected and this is deepening the digital divide, rather than diminishing it. Nevertheless, on the back of this perceived value and belief, as well as assertions of the universality of technological innovation, application and implementation (which has often put potential before pragmatism) significant pressure has been exerted on higher education institutions in the developing world, including South Africa, to use the economies of scale inherent in ODeL to provide access (and social justice) to the millions of students who are locked out of higher education by dint of personal circumstance.

The Policy for the Provision of Distance Education in South African Universities in the Context of an Integrated Post School System (2014) contextualizes DE in South Africa as follows:

In recent years, distance education has formed a vital part of the university sub-system, contributing approximately 40% of headcount students and approximately 30% of FTE students. It has provided extensive opportunity to those students who were unable, or wished not, to participate in campus-based and fixed time study, including provision of access for those who experience a range of barriers to learning. Furthermore, distance education has played an important role in providing discrete modules which have allowed students at contact institutions to complete their studies without needing to register for a whole semester or year of additional campus-based study. The further development of distance provision needs to be guided within the broad goals of policy - ongoing transformation of the university education, and increasing access and success, particularly for non-traditional students.

The policy demonstrates the acceptance of distance education as: a key part of South Africa's higher education sector; its seminal contribution to throughput, success and graduation rates in the country; and its critical function as a vehicle for access to higher education and for personal development, where this would not be possible otherwise.

However, despite the promise of technology to break the "Iron Triangle" of "Access, Cost and Quality" (Daniel, *J et al*: 2009) particularly through Open and Distance Education, it is becoming increasingly evident that the divide between the so-called "developed" and "developing" nations, has in fact deepened, largely as a result of a continuing lack of access to the internet in the developing world. (World Bank, 2016). This poses a number of challenges for ODeL in the developing world context, which will be discussed below.

## Clarification of Terms

In this paper Distance Education (DE) is used in the context of the definition provided by Keegan (1995.p5) who asserts that distance education and training result from the technological separation of teacher and learner which frees the student from the necessity of travelling to a "fixed place, at a fixed time, to meet a person in order to be trained." This supports the traditional generic notion of distance education, and is often, but not specifically, linked to the older correspondence mode of delivery. The Commonwealth of Learning (CoL) (2000.p1), defines Open Distance Learning (ODL) as "A way of providing learning opportunities that is characterized by the separation of teacher and learner in time or place, or both time and place; learning that is certified in some way by an institution or agency; the use of a variety of media including print and electronic; two-way communications that allow learners and tutors to interact; the possibility of occasional face-to-face meetings; and a specialized division of labour in the production and delivery of courses." Tony Bates (2008) defines e-Learning as "all computer and Internet-based activities that support teaching and learning – both on-campus and at a distance." These three definitions provide evidence of the historical progression of distance education provision, and in this paper the terms are interrelated, but not synonymous, and they have been used interchangeably, according to the context of the discussion.

Digital Equity in this paper is understood in terms of the following definitions:

Digital equity in education means ensuring that every student, regardless of socio-economic status, language, race, geography, physical restrictions, cultural background, gender, or other attribute historically associated with inequities, has equitable access to advanced technologies, communication and information resources, and the learning experiences they provide....Digital equity also means that all learners have opportunities to develop the means and capacity to be full participants in the digital age, including being designers and producers (not only users) of current and future technologies and communication and information resources. (Solomon, Allen, & Resta, 2003)

This definition is supported by the *Panel on Digital Equity in Developed and Developing Countries* who assert [that] "digital equity can be a state in which both the digital divide and the participation gap are bridged." (DEDDC 2015)

Social justice is understood in line with definitions of Bell (2016); SA Government (RSA, 2016); and Gerwitz and Gribbs (2002). Bell (2016, p3) asserts that social justice is "...both a goal and a process that strives for full and equitable participation, of people from all social identity groups in a society that is mutually shaped to meet their needs, by means of a democratic and participatory process that is respectful of human diversity and group differences, and inclusive and affirming of human agency and capacity for working collaboratively with others to create change. Domination cannot be ended through coercive tactics that create domination in new forms." *Social justice* in South Africa refers to the extension of principles enshrined in its Constitution (1996) of human dignity, equity, and freedom to participate in all of the political, socio-economic and cultural spheres of society. Gerwitz and Gribb's (2002) plural conception of social justice views social justice as possessing a variety of facets that entail the equal redistribution of socio-economic amenities, as well as the recognition and promotion of difference and cultural diversity (Gerwitz & Gribb, 2002 p499)

## Methodology

In preparing this paper a literature search was conducted of relevant literary sources, legislation and policy, reports, research reports and articles, journal and press articles, Internet and social media sources and other relevant information on issues relating to digital access, ICT uptake and social justice in Open, Distance e-Learning (ODeL) globally and in South Africa. Literary sources and articles relating to socio-economic development issues in South Africa and on the continent were also interrogated as these not only highlight additional challenges facing higher education and distance education provision, but they also provide the framework within which such challenges are occurring, particularly in terms of socio-economic, technological and communication dynamics, locally and globally.

Locke, Spirduso and Silverinan (1987) are of the opinion that the researcher's perceptions could make a positive, rather than a detrimental contribution to the research. *Standpoint Theory* similarly posits that that authority is rooted in an individual's knowledge and perspectives, which are shaped by his or her social and political experiences. Standpoints are multifaceted rather than essentialising and the consolidation of a person's many experienced dimensions form a point of view, or "standpoint" through which he or she sees and understands the world. Emphasis is placed on the use of the everyday experiential, concept of knowing as epistemology. This standpoint "shapes which concepts are intelligible, which claims are heard and understood by whom, which features of the world are perceptually salient, which reasons are understood to be relevant and forceful, and which conclusions credible". (Sprague-Jones, & Sprague, 2011)

In this view it can be stated that my personal experiences and understanding of this topic have been informed, deepened and moulded by my employment at the University of South Africa. Furthermore, as a Director in the Office of the Principal, my research responsibilities have, over the years, provided me with broad and in-depth exposure to a variety of higher education policy, trends and dynamics at global, continental and national levels. Secondly, my involvement in a number of institutional strategy and planning activities, as well as other executive management activities, have exposed me to a level of institutional knowledge and understanding that would be difficult to acquire elsewhere in the institution, or externally. I have access to primary institutional resources, as well as the views of experts at the university and in the sector. Thirdly, I am a UNISA graduate at both undergraduate and postgraduate levels, and as such I have first-hand experience and knowledge of ODL from the student's perspective. This means that I have brought to the study knowledge, sensitivity and an awareness of the many challenges faced by higher education, higher education institutions and students, especially ODL students in the current policy environment, both globally and nationally, particularly in regard to issues of digital equity and social justice.

I am aware that my acquired knowledge and experience has brought to this paper certain assumptions and biases. Although every effort has been made to ensure objectivity, these biases may have shaped the way in which I viewed, understood and interpreted the resources consulted. However, I feel that my knowledge and experience may also provide a depth to the analyses which may otherwise have been absent and in line with Standpoint Theory, they reflect my understanding of the world. This paper was therefore approached from the perspective that the current emphasis on digital equity through access to and the uptake of ICTs in higher education delivery, especially in ODL as a prerequisite for social justice, largely reflects dominant "western" or "developed world" views and assumes a universality of application and experience that does not necessarily reflect the lived reality, or possible viable alternatives and narratives of the developing world, in this case, as represented by UNISA.

## The Relevance of Context

While the 21<sup>st</sup> Century higher education institution is undoubtedly reorienting itself to new ways of thinking and doing, it will need to do so cognizant of its national and global contexts.

### The Policy Context

At a global level the UNESCO *Position Paper on Education Post-2015* raises and addresses higher education dynamics that have emerged and been added to the remit of higher education responsibilities in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century. These include primarily, a growing social and sustainability transformative dimension that focuses on the wellbeing of people and their right to an improved quality of life through quality education, as well as the notion of “responsible citizenship”. (UNESCO 2015b:3). A number of guiding principles are proposed to guide the future education agenda, including: education as a fundamental human right<sup>5</sup> which contributes significantly to the realization of other rights; education as a public good requiring the participation of all stakeholders for quality education; education as a foundation for human fulfilment, peace, sustainable development, economic growth, decent work, gender equality and responsible global citizenship; and education as a key contributor to the reduction of inequalities and poverty by bequeathing the conditions and generating the opportunities for better, sustainable societies.” (UNESCO 2015c, 3:13) The Position paper further states: “The use of technology for online and distance learning will become a critical component in the provision of quality education (UNESCO 2015d, 5:17).

One discerns in these guiding principles a clear commitment to social justice through access to education, as well as a focus on responsible global citizenship and stakeholder and community participation. There is a strong emphasis on the reduction of inequalities and poverty towards more sustainable societies. This speaks at a fundamental level, to social justice through access to education. The primary means of ensuring such access is undoubtedly deemed to digital access and technology. It is suggested that access to quality education and access to digital capacity and technologies have over time become mutually dependent. Globally ODeL is seen as a primary means of accommodating both of these imperatives.

At national levels higher education institutions function within disparate policy and regulatory environments which are aligned to national needs, while being cognizant of global policy imperatives. This is also true of ODeL, which is manifestly different in terms of its understanding, conceptualization and delivery model from one country to the next.

An example of such a policy and regulatory influence can be seen in the Protection of Personal Information Act, 2013 (RSA, 2013) newly promulgated in South Africa, and the Patriot Act 2001, (USA, 2001) recently amended, in America. Both have very significant implications for higher education institutions and for ODeL in particular, in an increasingly digitized environment, specifically as it pertains to the vast data banks of personal information of hundreds of thousands of students. At the university of South Africa enrolments in 2015 stood at 354 802 students, which represents a large amount of data that is very valuable in terms of data mining and analytics, but which is subject to very strict privacy and protection regulation.

### UNISA as representative of the developing world context

The University of South Africa has a rich and illustrious history as an exemplar and representative of ODeL in the developing world. UNISA has exerted a fundamental influence and impact on DE continentally and globally and continues to do so. The Founding of the African Council for Distance Education (ACDE) at Egerton University in Njoro, Kenya in 2004, was conceived at the Standing Committee of Presidents and Vice-Chancellors (SCOP) at the International Council for Distance Education (ICDE) held at UNISA in October 2002, to further the aims of ODL provision in Africa, which at that time did not have its own association of distance education providers. UNISA’s Principal and Vice Chancellor is also the President of the International Council for Distance education (ICDE). UNISA’s long history

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<sup>5</sup> Article 26, Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948), and the UNESCO Convention against Discrimination in Education (1960).

UNISA is the only dedicated comprehensive distance education in the country and the largest on the Continent. UNISA offers both formal and vocational qualifications from diploma and undergraduate degree level to doctoral level, as well as a number of short learning programmes (SLPs) that comprise a very small percentage of its very substantial Programme and Qualifications Mix (PQM). UNISA is a key pillar of South Africa's higher education sector and is subsidized by the state at 50% of the face-to-face subsidy levels at undergrad level. At post grad levels UNISA receives the same funding as South Africa's face-to-face institutions. UNISA's offerings are quality assured, accredited and mainstreamed in South Africa's higher education system. UNISA is the largest higher education provider in South Africa, enrolling approximately 40% of South African university students (RSA,,2014a). While third stream income is a definite consideration, it is not core business. UNISA's education duties are set out in a Higher Education Act (1997), an Institutional Statute and various other related policies and regulations, which are aligned to the country's National Development Plan (NPC, 2011).

In 2015 UNISA graduated 40 046 students. This number comprises undergraduate degrees, diplomas and certificates, honours, masters and doctoral degrees and other post graduate qualifications (RSA 2014b). The majority of UNISA's peers from across the globe cannot make the same claim. Very few, if any, produce the volume of quality assured, accredited graduates that UNISA does, and few can equal UNISA's almost one-and-a-half centuries of existence and experience. UNISA's traditional benchmark peer, the Open University of the United Kingdom (OUUK) recently changed its business model and is in the process of adjusting to the effects of its implementation. (Havergal, 2016) The OUUK can no longer be used as a benchmark.

UNISA's strategy is underpinned by a commitment to social justice, which it aims to achieve by leveraging the affordances of technology. UNISA currently uses a blended model but plans to move increasingly online as the national socio-economic context allows. However, several key challenges must however be overcome if this is to be achieved. These challenges can be identified as: access to technology resources (including connectivity, hardware and software); concerns around quality; culturally relevant and responsive content (including its creation); and human ICT capacity and skills

## **Barriers to Social Justice**

### **Access to Up-to-Date Hardware, Software, and Connectivity**

There is a yawning gulf globally and nationally, between those who have access to the internet and those who do not and even where there is access, between its speed, reliability, cost and affordability. Successful quality ODeL is contingent upon available, affordable, reliable high speed internet connectivity. In most developing world contexts this is not available nor is it likely to be a reality any time soon.

Even within countries such as South Africa, where 52% of people purportedly have access to the internet at home, this is likely to be via mobile phones connecting to cellular providers' masts and not via personal computers or other such devices connecting via Wi-Fi. Most homes in South Africa do not have Wi-Fi. Furthermore, connection and download speed remain hugely problematic. This is especially challenging in regard to establishing an efficient and an effective transactional environment for students, not to mention a quality teaching and learning (and assessment environment. Stanlib (2015) asserts:

The global average connection speed is 5Mbps while the global average peak connection speed is 29.1 Mbps. South Korea has the world's fastest average internet speed, at 25.3 Mbps, although Singapore has the fastest peak speed at 98.5 Mbps, followed by Hong Kong (92.6 Mbps), and South Korea (79.0 Mbps). South Africa chugs along with an average connection speed of only 3.4 Mbps, and a ranking of only the 90th fastest average connection speed in the world. South Africa's peak connection speed was measured at 16.8 Mbps in the first quarter of 2015, giving us a world ranking of 112th. So, in practice, while you load a YouTube video in South Africa, you can press the down arrow to play a game of Snake before the video loads.

The cost of data in South Africa also remains an intractable problem that continues to have a deleterious impact on digital social justice through to the equitable delivery of ODeL. The majority of students are only able to access the internet via their mobile phone or via computers at their places of work, study centres, or internet cafes. Furthermore, expecting students to use their phones for study does little to promote social justice as the costs for downloading or uploading materials, and communicating with the institutions gets transferred to the students who are simply not able to purchase large volumes of “airtime”. Stanlib (2015) further asserts [that]

Data released in a survey done by the SA Institute of Race Relations indicates the average monthly cost of broadband South Africa is more than 10 times higher than in the UK. In comparison, it found that the UK enjoys a broadband speed that is five times higher than South Africa’s. Another instance, South Africa’s broadband speed is about a fifth of that of the US but its average monthly broadband cost is over five times as high as that of the US. The average cost of broadband for a South African internet user is around R337 a month. For the average user in the UK, the cost is about R36 a month. Not only are the UK and US’s services cheaper, they are also faster and have a higher amount of users.

The implication of these structural, socio-economic and political realities in South Africa has meant that UNISA has had to align its business model with the realities of the context in which it functions, and this is impeding its commitment to digital equity and social justice.

### **Concerns Around Quality**

An incontestable correlation between poor quality education and low learning levels and learning deficits or inequalities, has ensured that the provision of quality education remains at the forefront of the global education agenda. This concern has been bolstered by an increasingly fragmented global higher education environment and various new conceptualizations of “education” stemming from the affordances of technology, globalization and marketization, as well as an appreciation of the fact that equitable access to quality education is an indisputable prerequisite for social justice.

21<sup>st</sup> Century graduates are generally perceived to be under-prepared for the world-of-work, especially in developing nations. Dibba-Wadda (2016) states: “...employers are still complaining that universities have failed to produce graduates with the right skills, leaving many graduates unemployable.”

Further exacerbating the problem, attempts to achieve some kind of consonance between existing quality assurance (QA) frameworks are hindered by legal and administrative restrictions, including, for example, national legislation and higher education policy; qualifications authorities and policy; customs; visas; telecommunication laws; and intellectual property rights. (Van Damme, 2001: pp 420 – 430.) In addition, the level of institutional commitment to internationalization, the involvement of academic authorities, the extent of quality metrics in national policies, levels of funding and the role of strategic leadership at an institution, especially in regard to the acceptance, adoption and implementation of corporate governance and citizenship principles, all contribute to impeding or facilitating shared quality principles. The majority of these challenges have become more complex with the increasing uptake of ICTs.

Not surprisingly, there is growing recognition and agreement that the development of generic quality values and principles that are universally practicable, currently presents the most viable and feasible option for a shared global quality framework. The subsequent adaptation and formalization of these generic principles and values into individualized quality assurance frameworks and guidelines for higher education institutions, for use in curriculum and pedagogical reform, will ensure a measure of global conformity and consonance in regard to Quality in higher education, which currently does not exist.

This need prompted the Council for Higher Education Accreditation International Quality Group (CHEA/CIQG) “to draft “seven (7) guiding principles ...intended to serve as a framework for international deliberation about quality in higher education. Their aim is to seek common ground and establish a foundation for understanding quality” (CHEA/CIQG: 2015)

Establishing appropriate, relevant synergies between policy/context and quality will require not only a fundamental re-envisioning of understandings and practice of higher education quality in an environment of quite dramatic growth and transformation, but also of the nature of the education provided, be it formal credentialized, informal or social for-profit, or completely free. At the moment there are no truly satisfactory answers. There is talk of badges, credits, certificates, of OER, virtual and online universities, of joint degrees, of sharing courseware and institutional capacities, of having the student pay for assessment via the institution that will confer a formal qualification, and so on; but so far we have not been able to provide the kind of quality assurance that will give these modes of provision the gravitas and status that would ensure mass buy-in and uptake.

### **Culturally Relevant and Responsive Models and Content (Including Its Creation)**

Over time the Western World has offered some excellent models of ODeL (Moore and Kearsley 2005: 23-24; Taylor; 2001) setting out “phases” or “generations” of distance education which are aligned to technological development in their countries. Yet, as comprehensive as these are, they do not provide a suitable fit for many of the DE institutions in developing nations, which are premised on a world views, cultures, contexts and needs that are inherently different. How, in such models, does one factor in the realities of a yawning digital divide within the same institution and nationally; national socio-economic and cultural disparities and backlogs; political whimsy; excruciating and disparate levels of poverty; and little or no access to the internet? These are the realities of the developing world and it should be acknowledged that ODeL models need to be context-bound conceptually, and not externally imposed or assumed to be universal in line with technological developments.

When it comes to digital equity and social justice, the question thus arises as to how students who have varying levels of access and opportunity may nevertheless be afforded the opportunity of a quality education. While higher education institutions are unambiguously tasked by global sentiment, policy and commitment to be [the] “foundation for human fulfilment, peace, sustainable development, economic growth, decent work, gender equality and responsible global citizenship” and “a key contributor to the reduction of inequalities and poverty by bequeathing the conditions and generating the opportunities for better, sustainable societies” (UNESCO, 2015f: 13, 3). This presents a number of complex challenges. Infrastructural lacks, entrenched and persistent poverty, a lack of political will and political whimsy, cultural diversity and a host of well documented socio-economic and political factors continue to exclude a majority of potential higher education students in the developing world.

Anecdotal evidence as captured in the e-mail below, received from a University of South Africa student encapsulates the dilemma faced on a daily basis, ODeL providers and students in developing nations, where access to the internet and the affordances of technology, which are the bases for digital equity and social justice, are regularly juxtaposed and in conflict with the lived realities of infrastructural and socio-economic lacks and lags, as well as cultural practices and demands that regularly militate against their attainment. In this instance the student had clearly done the work. Her dilemma is self-explanatory. She explains as follows:

I received my assignment which was mailed back to me. I had a letter which says, that my assignment was not marked because I did not submit it online. My question to you guyz is. I had to attend a funeral in Rural Eastern Cape and I had no internet connection therefore I submitted my assignment via post. How can we move forward about this? Please. Please find attached documentation<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> The CHEA International Quality Group (CIQG) is a rewarding and important forum for colleges, universities, accrediting and quality assurance organizations and others worldwide to address issues and challenges focused on quality and quality assurance in an international setting.  
Accessed: <http://www.cheainternational.org/>

<sup>7</sup> The Student name and number have been withheld in compliance with South Africa POPI Act 2013

The dilemma facing the university with in excess of 350 000 students is that the system for this course was set up in such a way that the work had to be submitted online. Failing direct intervention this student would have been denied access to her final examination, and social justice.

This simple missive encapsulates the polemic around the notion of digital equity and social justice and the extent to which this is bounded by geographical location, contextual realities and most importantly inherited and sustained structural and systemic business models, and processes that are western in conceptualization and application and that are increasingly dissonant with growing assertions of “otherness” as it pertains to culture and identity. This is the reality of ODeL in a developing nation especially with their very diverse student profiles, and the question arises as to how under these circumstance, genuine and general digital equity and social justice can be achieved, on scale (if at all). In this view, digital equity and social justice remain an intractable striving.

UNISA’s transformation trajectory has brought with it the realization that traditional DE delivery pedagogies and epistemologies conceptualized predominantly in the so-called “West” are becoming increasingly dissonant with, and a barrier to, the articulation of African identity and culture and the concomitant development of African epistemologies. The current violent *#fees-and-coloniality-must-fall* movement<sup>8</sup> that is paralyzing so much of the higher education sector in South Africa is symptomatic at a very deep level of centuries of accumulated rage, disappointment and frustration with an education environment that has been shaped and imposed by “others,” and with epistemologies that have continued to assert so-called “colonial” discourses and canon at the expense of the development of African ones.

The dominance of the western narrative and world view is in fact so deeply entrenched that context is routinely universalized with the assumption that is the lived experience of the *world* [my emphasis]. For example, Harvard University has recently been in the news as it celebrates one of the longest studies on human happiness. The Harvard Grant Study claims to be an incredibly in-depth study spanning 75 years, studied human happiness. It also claims to be one of the largest and comprehensive studies in history, even though the population (which was identified in 1938) comprised 268 Harvard undergraduate men from all walks of life, who were followed for 75 years, and measured on aspects such as intelligence levels, alcohol intake, relationships and income. In 2012 their “astonishing” findings were published in a book titled *Triumphs of experience: The men of the Harvard Grant Study*. Vaillant, G. E. (2012). Vaillant describes the study as being the only one of its kind not just because it happened over such a long period of time, but because the 268 men allowed researchers to present their lives in a three-dimensional way, resulting in a book is a combination of statistics and anecdotes about the *human* experience [my emphasis].

This writer will not venture into a criticism of the research methodology and selection of the population which amongst others, excluded females and other ethnic groups. These have been dealt with by many commentators and are not the focus of my critique. Of concern is the assumption that the population of men can provide evidence of what determine *human* happiness and *human* experience and not merely happiness in the context of predominantly white male America. The universality of the findings is assumed in all of the commentary that the study has elicited. What constitutes happiness is as diverse as humankind itself, but the assumption of universality suggests a narrow world view that is not sensitive to the contexts and cultures of the rest of the world.

The foregoing discussion speaks to the counter narrative of developing world educationists and researchers that must surely be accorded space and respect as it addresses digital equity and social justice from multiple platforms of redress and asserts its voice as a peer, and not as a voice from the sidelines of global higher education.

At the same time it must be acknowledged that the development of African ODeL models and epistemologies and the assertion of the African voice into the global higher education narrative can only happen where there are sufficient numbers of appropriately skilled and capacitated academics and support staff, and this critical issue is addressed below.

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<sup>8</sup> The *#FeesMustFall* campaign began on 10 March 2015 a group of University of Cape Town students flung human faeces on the statue of Cecil John Rhodes calling for the monument to be taken down and asserting their disgust and protest at this ever-present reminder of continued white supremacy and colonial oppression at the university. This *#RhodesMustFall* movement found its echoes in campuses across the country, generating a momentum that contributed to the *#FeesMustFall* movement, which soon engulfed many higher education institutions. What started as resistance to fee increases for 2016 subsequently morphed into a campaign against any form of university fee payment and this was swiftly followed by the *#OutsourcingMustFall* campaign which demanded that general workers employed by external companies and “outsourced” to universities, be absorbed into the staff complements of universities, along with significantly increased salaries and conditions of service. The “Decoloniality” demand issue has emerged together with the fees issues as the second critical demand.



## Human ICT Capacity and Skills

Contrary to popular opinion, quality ODeL is not cheap, despite the perceived potential of large scale delivery. Course design and development for quality online education is a specialised field requiring trained developers, and getting the supporting systems in place is an extremely costly exercise. It takes time - a long time - to create anew or convert (and quality assure) existing courses into online format, especially where there is a quality assurance regime in place. There are significant logistical considerations in terms of timelines, staff training (professional development for faculty), student support and implementation, assessment models, monitoring and evaluation. There are also leadership, cultural and governance dynamics that have to be addressed, including for example, fears around job losses or redundancy, staff (and some student) resistance to the uptake and learning of new technologies, as well as a multitude of unanticipated technological and political challenges, which can be extremely onerous and costly to resolve. How, in this type of context, will we quality assure ODeL on scale, towards the social justice that seems to remain so elusive? Digital equity will, one suspects, not come from access and scale, but rather from political will and higher education and institutional analytics, and equally importantly, capacity development, which will improve the learning experience and enhance student support.

## Conclusion

While higher education institutions are unambiguously tasked to be promoters of digital equity and social justice, this presents a number of complex challenges. Infrastructural lacks, entrenched and persistent poverty, a lack of political will and a host of well documented socio-economic, political and contextual realities continue to exclude a majority of potential higher education students in the developing world. Furthermore, the ongoing hegemony of the “West” in terms of the production and dissemination of technologies, digital access, knowledge content and cultural capital (which are entrenched via assumptions of their universality) is subduing the counter narrative of developing world contexts and lived realities, continuing its marginalization and domination and hampering the genuine striving for social justice. This is the current reality of ODL (or any form of online education) in a developing nation especially with a very diverse student profile, and the question arises as to how under these circumstance, genuine and general digital equity and social justice can be achieved, on scale (if at all). In this view, digital equity and social justice remain an intractable striving.

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**Please cite as:** Botha, J. (2016). Digital equity and social justice: Whose reality? In S. Barker, S. Dawson, A. Pardo, & C. Colvin (Eds.), *Show Me The Learning. Proceedings ASCILITE 2016 Adelaide* (pp. 76-85). <https://doi.org/10.14742/apubs.2016.822>

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