Special Issue: International Teaching and Learning Conference 2024: Charting New Frontiers in Open Distance and E-Learning

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The inaugural International Teaching and Learning Conference (ITLC2024), organised by the Department of Tuition Support and Facilitation of Learning (DTSFL) in the Portfolio of Teaching, Learning, Community Engagement and Student Support at the University of South Africa, took place under the theme "Charting New Frontiers and New Perspectives: Advancing Teaching, Learning and Student Support in Open Distance and eLearning (ODeL)". This theme was reflective of the open distance and e-learning (ODeL) innovative and transformative nature in the Global South, and particularly in African higher education. With higher education continuing to experience swift and profound technological and social shifts, it has become imperative to rethink and redefine long-established paradigms of teaching, learning and student support. ODeL has particularly offered unique opportunities to re-imagine access, inclusivity and the student experience in higher education coupled with challenges regarding pedagogy, assessment, quality assurance and institutional responsiveness.

The Conference aimed at fostering an enabling environment to facilitate dialogue, debates and critical reflective thought, which will contribute to higher levels of theoretical, empirical and practical understanding of ODeL and its implementation within the African context. Key to these discussions were themes such as pedagogical innovation, assessment transformation, digital integration, student support, and the ethical use of artificial intelligence in teaching and learning. Through keynote addresses, workshops and paper presentations, the participants interrogated how technology-mediated education could foster equity, excellence and innovation across diverse learning contexts.

By bringing together global and regional perspectives, the ITLC2024 conference served not merely as a platform for knowledge exchange but also as a catalyst for transformation in the higher education sector. It inspired meaningful conversations on

how universities can leverage ODeL to bridge educational divides, promote lifelong learning and prepare students for an increasingly digital and interconnected world. The conference marked an important milestone in redefining how teaching, learning and student support are conceptualised and practised in open and distance education.

Following the conclusion of the conference, eight articles were selected for publication in this special issue of Progressio. Each submission was subject to a double-blind peer review process, leading to the acceptance of eight articles (two from Unisa authors and six from other authors). In aggregate, the articles capture the conference's intellectual energy, as they all provide disparate perspectives on improving ODeL practice and research.

Reena Pandarum, in her article "Assessing Students' Aptitude in Analysing 3D Scanned Women's Body Shapes to Improve Curriculum Design", explored how fashion students demonstrated skill in assessing women's body shapes. She recommended using 3D printed models and interactive 360° video views to strengthen cognitive skills and digital competence in curriculum design.

In their article titled, "Remote Learning Access, Readiness and Support in South African Higher Education Institutions," Tinayeshe Shumba, Tunika Munkuli and Fanny Saruchera argue that limited connectivity to the internet, unreliable electricity supply and limited access to ICT devices, which they term "digital inequality", continue to inhibit engagement and participation in remote learning in the South African context.

In "Antecedents that Are Likely to Restrain or Drive Women's Activeness in Climate Change Mitigation – A Baseline Case Study", Rajendran Perumal Pillay, Refiloe Ntoi and Indrani Govender examined the role of universities in blending critical knowledge and action for climate change mitigation. They argued for greater recognition of women's participation and empowerment in environmental sustainability efforts.

Rekai Zenda and Alton Dewa, in "Artificial Intelligence for Enhanced Teaching and Learning in South African Open Distance Learning: A Systematic Review", analysed existing research on AI applications in ODeL, identifying its potential to personalise learning, provide intelligent support, automate routine tasks and improve student engagement within the South African context.

Hennades Tabe contributed two articles: "Transformative Practices in Open Distance and eLearning: Advancing Teaching and Learning Frontiers in Higher Education" and "Navigating Teaching Strategies in Open Distance and eLearning: Challenges, Innovations, and Best Practices." Together, these articles explored how technology-mediated learning environments foster transformation, innovation and reflective teaching practices within ODeL contexts.

Debbie Sanders and Shirley Mukhari, in their article "Exploring Student Perceptions of Blended Learning in a Higher Education Institution in South Africa", underscored the importance of reliable technological infrastructure and robust support systems to enable equitable participation in blended learning environments.

Finally, Barbara Tsverukayi and Samuel Takavarasha examined the impact of digitalisation in their article "Evaluating Technology-Enhanced Teaching and Learning in Zimbabwe's Public Universities". They focused on how technology integration reshapes pedagogical practice and institutional development in Zimbabwean higher education settings.

Collectively, these contributions advance the discourse on how ODeL can serve as a transformative mechanism for widening access, fostering inclusivity and promoting sustainable innovation in higher education. They reflect the central message of ITLC2024: charting new frontiers in teaching, learning and student support requires not only technological adaptation but also a renewed commitment to equity, collaboration and academic excellence in the digital age.