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The politics of e-learning in South African higher education

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INTRODUCTION

The appearance of information and communication technologies (ICTs) at the intersection of competing perspectives on higher education transformation in South Africa suggests that the increasing use of ICTs is not an automatic 'good in itself' but needs to be problematised. This paper first describes the new ICT-related practices emerging in South African higher education institutions, and then identifies and compares four broad approaches informing the relation of these new practices to higher education change. The first three approaches conceive of this relationship in terms of the role of ICTs in effecting specific changes in higher education institutions, while the fourth approaches the relation discursively. The final section describes access patterns in 'dual-mode' institutions, and asks whether the emerging trends are redefining the meanings of access to higher education. In thinking about how to re-imagine current e-learning practices outside of the tight globalisation script, this paper supports a framework that both embraces the possibilities offered by online pedagogies, and problematises central aspects of the political economy and cultural politics of e-learning in higher education.

NEW INSTITUTIONAL PRACTICES: FROM E-LEARNING TO THE E-UNIVERSITY?

The notion of e-learning, commonly understood as 'learning facilitated online through network technologies' (Garrison & Anderson, 2003), has emerged across South African higher education institutions since the 1990s. As in other national contexts, e-learning practices appear together with an entirely new vocabulary, institutional policies and structures, and substantial institutional budgets. E-learning also appears as one of many ICT-enhanced practices in universities from the provision of e-mail, online journals, and networked libraries, to the development of creative software solutions for information management tasks in teaching, research and all sorts of institutional administrative systems for online registration, finance, human resources, student performance data, course evaluations and so on. The new practices have provoked a range of issues around online pedagogies, patterns of access and of exclusion, increasing ICT costs in the context of unequal resources and competing institutional priorities, and the relation of e-learning practices to other institutional interventions seeking to transform the colonial fabric and cultures of South African higher education institutions. It is therefore useful to view ICTs as 'one thread in a complex net of transformation, including historical redress, curriculum transformation, diversity, equity and so on' (Czerniewicz, Ravjee & Mlitwa, 2006: 43).

Organisationally, the emergence of full-scale 'digital universities', such as the African Virtual University (Juma, 2003), which involves more than 30 higher education institutions from 17 African countries, and the increasing use of online learning in contact universities, are seen to blur the traditional distinctions between distance-mode and contact-mode institutions (Butcher 2003: 13-19). Butcher suggests that these kinds of 'dual-mode' institutions are increasing in developing countries. The universities of Stellenbosch and Pretoria as two clear examples in South Africa, where the number of 'distance' students enrolled in traditionally 'contact' institutions increased by almost 500% between 1993 and 1999, particularly in the historically Afrikaans language universities (Jansen, 2004: 303).

The emergence of new kinds of global e-learning collaborations involving various combinations of public and for-profit partnerships has resulted in the creation of remote branch campuses for international students (e.g. Monash University, Australia, has branch campuses in South Africa); the formation of consortia, involving universities in several countries offering joint academic programmess, especially at postgraduate level, and the increasing involvement of industry in e-learning initiatives (Beebe, 2003: 72-73). Examples include Microsoft partnering with Blackboard, the establishment of spin-off companies for Internet service provision, and various outsourcing relationships for the online delivery of courses. A recent player in South Africa is eDegree, which operates internationally in the provision of online higher education through partnerships with universities in South Africa (University of the Free State, Stellenbosch, and UNISA), Kenya, Uganda, Tanzania, and the United Kingdom. [1]

These technology-inspired alliances and organisational forms have sparked intense international debates about the relationship of the new e-learning practices to alternative pedagogies and to the general nature and direction of change in higher education institutions. For example, how do these practices relate to other processes of change? What is the relation of the ICT interventions to interventions aimed at de-gendering and de-racialising different aspects of the academy, such as changing student and staff profiles, or decolonising research, curricula and institutional cultures? How do these practices relate to the tensions in the broader context of South Africa as a deeply divided society and an emerging democracy entering an unequal global economy composed of cores and peripheries?

COMPETING PERSPECTIVES ON THE RELATION OF ICTS AND HIGHER EDUCATION CHANGE

This section examines four broad frameworks informing the relation of e-learning practices to higher education change. Underlying each approach is a particular politics of e-learning and differing interpretations of higher education transformation. It begins with the dominant globalisation thesis in education, and then considers three alternative theorisations of this relationship – evident in studies of the digital divide, the commercialisation of higher education literature, and in research around the decolonisation of higher education – that problematise, to different degrees, the relationship of ICTs to higher education change. These alternative theorisations suggest that we adopt a cautious approach to the new e-learning practices, and not assume that they will unproblematically increase access to higher education or automatically enhance the quality of teaching and learning. They ask that we pay attention to the power dynamics of digital divides, the political economy of e-learning, and the cultural politics of higher education.

The Globalisation Thesis in Education

The first approach is evident in the globalisation literature, which presents technological change in terms of 'progress', often conceived as inevitable, and embraces an overly optimistic view of ICTs as the central tools for higher education change. It privileges 'knowledge' in the characterisation of contemporary society, takes global economic changes as its analytical starting point, and generally supports models of market-driven, technology-led higher education transformation. [2] This position sees the new information technologies and recent initiatives in e-government, e-business and civil society networks, as being able to unproblematically challenge traditional communication paradigms and offer new possibilities for democratising access to information and to various kinds of social services. The related literature typically emphasises the role of educational institutions in teaching the skills necessary to participate in knowledge societies and knowledge economies – ICT competencies, notions of re-skilling and lifelong

learning, working in small groups, etc. – and is often based on the questionable assumption that integration into the dominant global economy will automatically lead to various 'goods' (such as the elimination of poverty, the provision of basic services, job creation and increased wages).

The knowledge society argument is strongly evident in international agreements and initiatives: the numerous NEPAD initiatives, the WTO's General Agreement on Trade in Services (GATS), and in various World Bank and UNESCO reports. In South Africa, clear policy support for the role of ICTs in enhancing education and in contributing towards broad post-apartheid reconstruction is evident in the 1997 White Paper on Higher Education, the 2001 National Plan for Higher Education, the 2003 Draft White Paper on e-Education 2003, and the 2004 ICT Charter. [3] The intersections among the three levels of policies and related structures – international, nation state, higher education institution – suggests that the South African state and higher education institutions may be actively constructing globalisation as a discourse relevant to shaping the nature of broad post-apartheid change.

Digital Divides

The second approach appears in terms of a 'divide' metaphor that permeates the research on differential access to ICTs, and relates the new digital divides to existing intersecting socio-economic, political or cultural divides and multiple oppressions or privileges that any one individual (or group, institution, or nation state) can be caught up in. Digital divide studies generally assume a neutral view of technology, emphasise local contextual issues, and tend to support some form of state and institutional intervention to address these divides.

It is possible to place most of the digital divide literature on a continuum between an optimistic and cautious view of ICT-enhanced change in higher education. The overly optimistic view – which is mostly evident in the early digital divide literature – has been critiqued for underplaying existing power relations, and is evident in the focus on increasing access to ICTs without necessarily asking why, or without necessarily problematising the higher education space to which access is sought and which access to ICTs will presumably enhance. Critics of the overly optimistic view clearly acknowledge the democratic potential of the new technologies, but question the degree to which they are able to challenge existing asymmetrical relations in contemporary society. As Stromquist & Samoff (2000: 325-326) explain:

This [optimistic] perspective regards the shift from contemporary forms of knowledge production to a knowledge production economy as unproblematic and commonly does not address the existing and widening gap between those who have access to the Internet and those who do not and most likely never will. Others, however, for example Castells (1998), warn us that the increasing prominence of and reliance on information technologies is at present strongly intertwined with rising inequality and exclusion throughout the world.

Digital divide studies emphasise two kinds of issues. The first involves issues of resource distribution, which refer to differential access to hardware, software and Internet connectivity, including bandwidth issues, across nation states (with numerous north-south uneven patterns) and within nation states (regional, urban-rural, by category of difference such as class, race or gender, and across and within educational institutions, by faculty and department). The second type of issues emphasise, in addition to physical access, numerous individual, social, cultural, economic and institutional factors that influence the extent to which people will actually use the ICT resources to which they have physical access. While much of the early digital divide literature focuses on increased access to physical resources (computers, modems, connectivity) as the way to overcome the new divides, and adopt a neutral position about their role in effecting social

and educational change, recent studies (Burbules & Callister, 2000; Czerniewicz, 2001; Warschauer, 2002; Bridges.org, 2002; Beebe et al., 2003; Le Grange, 2004) argue that physical access alone is an insufficient condition for meaningful ICT access. [4]

The emergence of new digital divides around existing socio-economic and other divides is seen as a barrier to participation, and often to even exclude participation, in ICT contexts across and within nation states, institutions and groups (e.g. genders). [5] These studies emphasise thicker notions of access to ICT that identify a broad range of additional social and educational issues around individual and institutional capacities, pedagogical environments, online content, language, ensuring accessibility for students with physical disabilities, and so on. [6] For example, an increasingly common observation in the e-learning literature is that good quality online education is resource-intensive, requires strong administrative support structures, relies on large numbers of enrolments for costs to decline, and is crucially dependent on the inclusion of frequent opportunities for face-to-face communication (Schiller, 1996; Lax, 2001; Noble, 2002; Johnson, 2003; le Grange, 2004). [7]

As Beebe et al. (2003) argue, the early focus at the level of infrastructural patterns of exclusion leaves no space to problematise other broader social issues relating to how the digital divide works, including the dimensions of knowledge, the ways in which scarce resources affect the use and diffusion of new technologies, and issues of cost and content. At the policy level, the poor infrastructure development and Internet access in African countries have been ascribed to constraining factors imposed by state policies and telecommunications regulatory frameworks, and the lack of specialists in telecommunications (Beebe et al., 2003: 3). It also involves the different political and economic interests of higher education institutions, software and hardware companies, telecommunications companies, and state regulatory authorities. In other words, the recent digital divide studies generally accept that ICTs can play a role in increasing access to education, or in enhancing teaching and learning, but emphasise the challenges presented by local contextual issues and particular histories that influence the role of online pedagogies in enhancing learning or increasing access to higher education. The argument is that technology can make a difference to the quality of the academic experience, but only in combination with other variables in the context.

To summarise, while the overly optimistic view unproblematically sees a straightforward causal relationship between the use of ICTs and the enhancement of teaching and learning, the more cautious approach insists on taking into account, in addition to technology, other variables in the context. These other contextual variables may include a consideration of the colonial histories, the division of universities by race, the inherited inequalities and academic cultures, the ideologies of the administrative elites, student and staff protests, etc. But an alternative critical approach exists, and it accepts that the use of technology may sometimes improve pedagogical practices; at other times it may function to stigmatise and exclude people. This alternative method asks that we problematise technology (its assumptions, role, effects and meanings), because ICTs always operate within broader socio-economic, political and cultural contexts, and within specific educational contexts, which determine not only the rules governing how and where they will be used and towards what end, but also who will use them. [8] This view accepts what Lelliot, Pendlebury & Enslin (2000) refer to as both the 'peril and promise' of ICTs in education – the double-edged sword of technology – that has the democratic potential to enhance anything, but is constrained by its very groundedness in the broader context. This alternative critical method intersects with the third and fourth broad approaches discussed in the next two sections.

Twin Forces of Change: ICTs and the Market

A third approach views information technologies and the market as 'twin forces' (Stromquist & Samoff, 2000) permeating educational spheres across national contexts, and appears in critiques of market-led change in education. This perspective questions both the efficiency paradigm that dominates the globalisation literature and the universal acceptance of online education as inevitable (Clegg et al., 2003; Noble, 2002; Zeleza, 2002). This critical thread in the literature suggests that ICTs do not operate outside of dominant socio-economic, ideological and educational contexts, which determine the rules governing how they will be used, and by whom, and argues that ICTs cannot effect change independently of the broader context of its application, which today is largely defined by a dominant neoliberal economic order.

The phenomenal rise in ICT-enhanced for-profit institutions, the selling of Internet courses, the use of proprietary 'learning management' software, and ICT-related intellectual property issues are clear examples of the increasing market influence in higher education internationally. The growth of online cross-border provision of higher education has contributed to what is now being referred to as a form of international trade in educational services, especially since the 1990's. [9] These developments are supported by the WTO's General Agreement on Trade in Services (GATS) which views higher education as a commodity to be traded, and supports the deregulation and liberalisation of national higher education systems to favour 'foreign providers'. [10] The effect is that developing countries face the possibility of unequal benefits when strong states use protectionist policies. While reduced state funding for the provision of social services is an international trend not limited to education (healthcare is another obvious example), a reliance on corporate models may mean that profit motives will increasingly guide educational decisions about what will taught, how it will be taught, to and by whom. [11]

Noble's (2002) thought-provoking study of the effects of these kinds of techno-commercial twinning relationships on higher education practices in the US context is relevant to this discussion. In Noble's view, the commodification of teaching is evident in the organisation of virtual universities and in their reliance on packaged courses, which results in the loss of lecturers' autonomy, the loss of jobs and the erosion of quality teaching. He suggests that the movement towards the commodification of teaching occurs in a series of steps involving first, a shift in focus from the educational experience towards content and the production of course materials (syllabi, lectures, exams); second, the arrangement of the course materials into independent stand-alone courses resulting in the alienation of this content from its original context (from the process, from the teachers); and finally, the exchange or selling of these original courses or 'instructional commodities' for 'a profit on the market, which determines their value, by their "owners", who may or may not have any relationship to the original creators and participants in the educational process' (Noble, 2002: 3).

As academics are drawn into the production process of these courses, the resulting labour issues include a restructuring of teaching activities, a reduction in faculty autonomy and control over their work, more administrative monitoring of lecturers, an increase in teaching time to all hours (for chat rooms, discussion groups, e-mail, virtual office hours), and an increase in contract workers (for, once lecturers convert their courses to courseware they become redundant as their course becomes automated). Drawing a parallel between the uses of these new technologies in education and in the automation of industries, Noble (2002: 33) suggests that 'the new technology of education … robs faculty of their knowledge and skills, their control over their working lives, the product of their labor, and, ultimately, their means of livelihood'.

Finally, intellectual property issues emerge most strongly in debates about the choices institutions make on whether to use proprietary software (e.g. WebCT, Blackboard) or open source software

(e.g. KEWL, Sakai) for teaching and for institutional management functions. The commercial packages have been critiqued for often being US-centric, costly, and creating a relationship of dependency on the software industry when creative open source and open content options can be developed for the common good in universities. The issues here relate to costs, profit, ownership, outsourcing of IT functions and capacity building in the local development of technology, and raise questions about the dominant ideological interests in the broader contexts that allow educational software developed and tested at public institutions with public funds to be turned into the private property of a single company.

The Cultural Politics of e-Learning

It is possible to understand the above three approaches in terms of the functional logic of the globalisation discourse on higher education change. If we understand these three perspectives as examining ICT in terms of its functionality – as positive in the globalisation literature; as generally neutral in the digital divide literature, which emphasises differential access; or negative as in the commercialisation of higher education literature – then a fourth perspective makes itself visible, which asks different questions, and which does not examine ICT solely in terms of its function to some end. It asks that we question the functionality of technology, and that we revisit the meaning of higher education transformation. [12]

In this section I argue that the first three approaches have set the parameters of the debates about e-learning. Together, they present a certain understanding of this relationship that hides, under causal relations, the political meanings of the various perspectives. The fourth perspective approaches the relation discursively – it does not look at causality, but at meanings – and deconstructs the above three approaches, showing how they are particular constructions of technology and social change presented as inevitable.

The emphasis on the displacement of subaltern discourses as an effect of the dominant discourse on higher education transformation – evident in the language of efficiency and innovation and in dominant ideas on the functionality of technology – would constitute a fourth approach to the relation between ICTs and higher education transformation. The decolonisation and democratisation projects around knowledge, for example, may be viewed as cases of alternative discourses that are at risk of being submerged or reshaped under the hegemony of the globalisation discourse. A now common critique of post-1994 South African higher education debates and management practices – as evidenced in the recent changes towards corporate management structures, institutional mergers, outsourcing of teaching, increases in contract staff, increasing public-private partnerships, and an emphasis on technological innovation, accountability and efficiency (sometimes at the expense of what it is that is being done efficiently) – is their privileging of global economic trends over the politics of curriculum and the inherited institutional and disciplinary cultures.

A sole focus on higher education in terms of its functionality, to whatever end, underscores the extent to which educational institutions are contradictory spaces; simultaneously sites for reproducing hegemonic practices and ways of thinking and sites of struggle, contestation and resistance. [13] Remembering what Mkhatshwa (1996: 2) [14] calls our 'dangerous memories … those manifestations of suffering that constitute a historical memory as well as immediate conditions of poverty, moral decay and human exploitation', is central to critical educational approaches, which see this kind of individual and institutional remembrance as central to transforming apartheid educational institutions into vibrant democratic intellectual spaces. One could argue that by taking global economic trends as an analytical starting point to theorise higher education change, current models of technology-led change may be too narrow to adequately conceptualise or address many of these issues. Consider the example of collaborative frameworks. Regional

institutional collaboration (around ICTs, academic programmes, libraries, etc.) is seen as a way to share institutional resources, break apartheid identities, and deracialise the system (National Plan, 2001: 7), yet the South African debates are silent about whether the frameworks currently informing regional collaborative projects are adequate to facilitate the equal participation of individuals (and institutions) – as equals – in collaborative interventions. [15] Many questions require further empirical exploration: Do the current frameworks for institutional collaboration challenge historical relationships? Through which specific ongoing practices do colonial, patriarchal and elitist ideas and mindsets prevent authentically collaborative models for the transformation of curricula, institutional cultures, research paradigms, historical patterns of access and retention, the quality of the academic experience, pedagogical styles and relationships, and so on?

The differing educational implications of adopting different analytical starting points – global trends in industry, or historical and contemporary social struggles – are a stark reminder that educational choices about pedagogy, software, research topics, curriculum content, language of instruction, collaborative frameworks, etc. are not neutral activities. Similarly, technologies and technological spaces are not neutral, but are the 'products of real historical social relations … already inscribed with gendered [and other] assumptions and the accumulation strategies of their purveyors' (Clegg et al., 2003). Recent critical theories of race, gender and technology can shed light on the 'already inscribed' part of the above quotation, and on the historical exclusions from ICT fields. Both issues can be understood in relation to the social construction of the scientific subject (as western, white and male) and the simultaneous construction of various 'others' (women, colonised people) as non-scientific outsiders to scientific and technological social spaces.

Significant strands in the broad literature on apartheid education as a dominating practice have analysed universities as mirroring larger social systems, describing apartheid higher education as a reflection of apartheid society. For example, the historical exclusion of indigenous sciences, technologies and languages from educational curricula and research was central to the organisation of the colonial education system. In 2006, these omissions are still evident in the construction of most higher education curricula around models from Europe, in the institutional cultures and language of instruction, in the demographic profiles of students and staff, and in the institutions' contradictory relationships to surrounding communities. In what ways do these issues, closely related to differing meanings of access to higher education, influence the quality of students' experiences, and ultimately their academic success or failure? The next section examines recent enrolment patterns at 'dual-mode' institutions to explore the ways in which e-learning may be redefining access to higher education.

ARE ICTS RESHAPING ACCESS TO HIGHER EDUCATION?

A clear possibility offered by ICTs is the potential to increase access to higher education, to be, in Coombs' (2003: 90-91) words, the 'great equalizer'. Recent studies suggest that ICTs are reshaping (Dutton & Loader, 2002: 7) access to higher education in various ways across national contexts. Sometimes this may occur in problematic ways. For example, the increasingly corporate models of access to higher education raise questions about whether public funds should be used for corporate skills training, or whether the educational aims of for-profit institutions are always in conflict with a need for profits. [16] As Noble (2002: xii) asks in the US context, will these new institutional forms and traditional campus-based and distance education institutions offer online options to extend higher education access to working class students, while middle class students attend campus-based programmes, so effectively excluding students from working class communities (through restricting access to online options) from campus-based programmes?

This cautious approach is evident in South African higher education policies, which support the recent growth in 'dual-mode' institutions as a way to increase access to higher education (National Plan: Section 3.1.2), but question the role of technology-led approaches in re-shaping access to higher education in several ways: the continuing low participation rates of African (apartheid classification definition) students, which leads to further differential access to professional jobs; the narrow focus on delivery at the expense of critical thinking, curriculum transformation and academic development; and the appearance of a pattern of enrolment of black students in online or mixed-mode programmes, rather than in contact programmes.

The ways in which ICTs may be re-shaping access to South African higher education strongly suggests that we problematise both their role and their effects. The following student enrolment figures for historically white 'contact' institutions during 2002 provide a good entry into some of the issues surrounding 'dual-mode' or 'mixed-mode' institutions, in which various technology-market twinning relationships – public-private partnerships; choice of software; shifting costs to students; regulatory frameworks – play a central role.

Table 1 does not consider the historically black institutions or the traditional 'distance providers' (note that 400 'contact students' were registered at UNISA, traditionally a distance education institution, during 2002). Statistics from the Department of Education (2004: 32) show that in 2002 there were no 'distance students' enrolled at the seven historically black technikons, and only three out of the ten historically black universities had enrolled distance students: Fort Hare (2,120), North West (950) and Vista (9,744), and these students were enrolled predominantly in the humanities, which is also surprisingly the pattern reflected in all the institutions represented in Table 1.

Table 1: *Comparison of 'contact' & 'distance' student enrolments at selected institutions*

University/Technikon	**Headcount Enrolments in 2002**			**Black students as % of enrolments***	
	Contact	**Distance**	**Total**	**Contact**	**Distance**
Universities					
Cape Town	19 560	0	19 560	48	n/a
Free State	15 819	1 632	17 451	59	24
Natal	20 472	8 556	29 028	75	92
Port Elizabeth	6 756	14 579	21 335	56	99
Potchefstroom	15 308	10 134	25 442	38	93
Pretoria	32 780	7 993	40 773	32	96
Rand Afrikaans Univ.	17 506	4 628	22 134	35	96
Rhodes	6 397	1 028	7 425	49	98
Stellenbosch	19 408	1 987	21 395	22	92
Wits Univ	22 181	0	21 181	63	n/a
Technikons					
Cape Technikon	14 032	31	14 063	62	100
Free State Technikon	7 473	313	7 786	72	79
Port Elizabeth Tech.	9 452	41	9 493	72	83
Pretoria Technikon	28 900	8 586	37 486	74	98
Vaal Triangle Tech.	15 340	0	15 340	91	n/a
Wits Technikon	13 717	0	13 717	88	n/a

Source: Department of Education (2004: 32)

* Black students in the above table include the apartheid categories of African, Coloured and Indian.

The above snapshot shows a clear difference in student enrolment patterns according to historical institutional type. Eight out of ten historically white universities (HWU) and four out of six historically white technikons (HWT) enrolled distance students during 2002. At the University of Port Elizabeth distance students made up the majority of enrolments, while at five other institutions they constituted a significant proportion of the total students enrolled in 2002: 40% at University of Potchefstroom, 29% at University of Natal, 23% at Pretoria Technikon, 21% at Rand Afrikaans University and 20% at University of Pretoria. Many of these traditionally contact institutions are able to deliver their distance programmes through various combinations of public-private partnerships for administrative support, technical support, student registration and so on; and by using a variety of web-based or telematic programmes (Jansen, 2004: 306).

With the exception of the University of the Free State (24%), Free State Technikon (79%) and Port Elizabeth Technikon (83%), black students represented between 92% and 100% of all distance students in the above institutions. In contrast, with the exception of the University of the Witwatersrand (63%), the University of Natal (75%) and the technikons, black students constituted between 22% and 59% of contact students in these institutions. There is a clear continuity in the physical university space in 2002 as a predominantly white academic space, particularly if we compare these figures to the percentage of black instructional and research staff at the above universities – under 10% (Free State, Potchefstroom, Stellenbosch), between 10% and 15% (UCT, PE, Pretoria, RAU, Rhodes) and above 15% (Wits – 24%, and Natal - 39%) (DoE, 2004: 43).

Table 2: *'distance' & 'contact' student enrolments in dual-mode universities in 2002*

Institution	Apartheid classification				Total	Gender	
	African	Coloured	Indian	White		Female	Male
Distance Students							
Free State	234	59	104	1,235	1,632	496	1,136
Natal	6,613	331	899	713	8,556	5,803	2,753
PE	14,252	153	60	114	14,579	9,669	4,910
Potch	7,849	162	34	753	10,234	6,517	3,617
Pretoria U	7,443	77	116	357	7,993	6,204	1,789
RAU	4,335	40	47	296	4,628	3,187	1,441
Rhodes	941	69	1	17	1,028	701	327
Stellenbosch	1,719	107	12	149	1,987	1,589	398
Contact Students							
Free State	8,352	683	243	6,541	15,819	8,999	6,842
Natal	7,297	583	7,548	5,039	20,472	10,437	10,035
PE	2,770	794	224	2,968	6,756	3,798	2,958
Potch	4,682	613	222	9,516	15,308	9,216	6,092
Pretoria U	8,636	482	1,450	22,212	32,780	17,070	15,710
RAU	4,189	620	1,305	11,392	17,506	9,543	7,963
Rhodes	2,391	272	467	3,267	6,397	3,694	2,703
Stellenbosch	1,558	2,217	421	15,212	19,408	9,736	9,669

Source: Department of Education (2004: 35)

Table 2 breaks down the categories 'black' and 'gender' across distance and contact enrolments in the eight 'dual-mode' universities shown in Table 1. The figures show that the historical gender ratios at most institutions were reversed in 2002; the majority of students were women in both contact and distance programmes at all institutions except Free State University, University of Cape Town and University of the Witwatersrand. [17] This was not the case for enrolment by race for contact students. The enrolment figures below show that white students remained in the majority in contact programmes, and African students constituted the majority of distance students. The exceptions were Free State University, where the majority of distance students were white and male and the majority of contact students were African and female, and the University of Natal, where the majority of distance students were African and female while the majority of contact students were Indian and female.

In the absence of recent statistics it is unclear whether these enrolment patterns, and the corresponding campus spaces, have changed since 2002, especially since the success rates of undergraduate distance students were lower in 2002 than for undergraduate contact students (DoE, 2004: 41). While this trend, of the lower success rates of distance students, is not unique to South Africa, it demands a serious investigation of the access patterns, success rates, campus spaces and quality of the academic experience of distance and contact students.

The following three quotations from the National Plan for Higher Education (Department of Education, 2001) capture some of the policy dilemmas of equity and redress associated with narrowly constructed ICT approaches that may be functioning to re-shape access to higher education in some of the above ways.

Some institutions see information technology-related approaches as the central solution to the problems experienced by disadvantaged students. While the innovative use of technology is to be welcomed, there is a strong risk that approaches which focus only on improving delivery through information and communication technology, and which leave traditional curricular structures unchanged, will not provide a comprehensive solution. (National Plan: Section 2.3.2)

As the White Paper states, 'equity of access must be complemented by a concern for equity of outcomes. Increased access must not lead to a "revolving door" syndrome for students with high failure and drop-out rates' (White Paper: 2.29). Neither must the increased access of black students through distance education programmes and satellite campuses – students who are 'neither seen nor heard', be allowed to parade as a commitment to equity of access. (National Plan: Section 3.2)

However, it is important to guard against the uncritical introduction and adoption of distance education as a panacea for the challenges that confront higher education in South Africa. Nor must we be blinded by the suggestions that in the context of globalisation and the development of virtual universities, especially by multinational telecommunications companies, distance education is the beginning and end of higher education. The notion of the virtual university and the role of distance education must be interrogated to assess both its promise and peril for higher education in South Africa and the Continent as a whole. (National Plan: Section 4.4)

CONCLUSION

The model of technology-driven change implied in the dominant globalisation discourse is inadequate to speak to redressing past and existing inequalities in deeply divided societies because it pays insufficient attention to the ways in which the power dynamics of technology-led change may function to uphold existing structural inequalities and colonial relationships. It is possible to argue that the new kinds of digitally-enhanced institutions display an ambiguous

relationship to redress initiatives designed to tackle existing inequalities, but a strong relationship to the dominant global economic order, with its in-built inequities. For example, is it possible that the increasing use of ICTs is introducing a new discourse on higher education change – through various policies, structures, practices, dominant ideas and language – that may be actively constructing universities into new types of 'digital' institutions to fit into the dominant economic order, and in the process, creating new structures as 'power agencies' having authority over staff and students, and empowering administrators? Are these new institutions ('digitised' to different degrees) influencing, and possibly changing, the meanings of access, quality, and higher education transformation? How do the meanings of technology-enhanced change relate to other meanings of change?

An alternative model of change is required, one that is able to more adequately address both the current unequal material distribution (the source of digital divides) and the recognition of difference beyond its liberal application in mainstream multiculturalist approaches, which see as unproblematic the higher education space into which access is sought. Finally, the contribution of ICTs to transforming higher education, and the nature of that transformation, will depend on the extent to which current ICT practices actively support, undermine or ignore several competing perspectives on higher education change, namely, the dominant globalisation project with its focus on skills training and affirmative academic practices, or alternative projects such as the decolonisation and democratisation projects that emphasise critical thinking and transformative academic practices.

Endnotes

[1] eDegree is a South African owned e-learning company whose shareholders include Johnnic Ltd., as the majority shareholder, and Pricewaterhouse Coopers. See http://www.edegree.co.za

[2] For a critique of the 'knowledge society' argument, see Fuller (1995), who suggests that this narrow characterisation inadequately captures the complexities of contemporary society as it assumes first, that knowledge was not a salient feature of previous societies, and second, it isolates one dimension – knowledge – at the expense of other salient features (e.g. persisting material inequalities).

[3] This is evident in the prioritisation of the telecommunications sector, and in the creation of new structures such as the Presidential National Commission on Information Society and Development and the Presidential International Task Force on Information Society and Development, initiated to advise the South African government on digital divide issues and development. The PIAC identifies three areas that would benefit from the innovative use of ICTs: education, health and SMMEs.

[4] Burbules & Callister (2000) further distinguish between 'conditions of access' and 'criteria of access'. (For example, how right-handedness as a criterion of access can restrict access to people with dominant left hands.)

[5] See, for example, Lundell & Howell (2000), Bridges.org (2002), Ravjee (2002), Beebe et al. (2003), Butcher (2003), Adam (2003), Czerniewicz (2004) and Le Grange (2004).

[6] Fraser's (1995) discussion of critical recognition as a framework for redressing race and gender imbalances (and requiring both redistribution and recognition as solutions) is relevant to this discussion.

[7] Many ICT innovations have failed because of costs. An illustrative example is the recent plan to dismantle the UK's e-university project, which was marketed internationally from 2000 to provide UK degrees online, but succeeded in recruiting only 900 students internationally after an initial investment of 35 million pounds. See *Times Higher Education Supplement*, 30 April 2004, cited in *Industry and Higher Education*, June 2004: 142.

[8] See Ravjee (2004).

[9] Man-Sheng & Chun-meng (2003: 43) cite a 1999 report of the Australian Commission of University Presidents showing that '35 Australian universities set up 750 overseas programs, mainly sited in Singapore, Malaysia, China and Hong-Kong, with enrolments of 31 850. UK statistics report that 75% of British universities have set up at least one legal overseas course, with a total enrolment of between 135 000 to 140 000 students'.

[10] Many countries, including the United States, Kenya, Norway and New Zealand, have made requests through the WTO for South Africa to provide unlimited access to international providers seeking to offer educational programmes in South Africa. See Pillay, Maasen & Cloete (2003) for a further discussion of GATS and higher education in the SADC region.

[11] See Stanley Aronowitz (2000) *The Knowledge Factory: Dismantling the Corporate University and Creating Higher Learning*. Also see Sheila Slaughter and Larry L. Leslie (1997) *Academic Capitalism: Politics, Policies and the Entrepreneurial University*.

[12] The international literature is dominated by empirical studies (often donor funded) based in the United States, Europe and Australia. Interestingly, most of the South African research in this area also has a local empirical focus, and few studies directly address the relation of ICTs to higher education change. Many of these studies are located firmly in the globalisation literature, or at the boundaries of the globalisation and digital divide literatures, and largely underscore the power dynamics surrounding the use of technology in higher education. There has also been a growth in the research on ICTs in African higher education (Beebe et al. 2003; Adam, 2003; Butcher, 2003), and on the role of higher education institutions, through their engagement with ICTs, in the national development of African states and economies (Adesida, 1998; Ballantyne, 2002; Johnson , 2002; Nwuke, 2003).

[13] See for instance Paulo Freire (1985) *The Politics of Education: Culture, Education and Power*. Granby, Mass.: Bergin and Garvey.

[14] Cited in Birgit Brock-Utne (2000).

[15] I draw here from a recent study of the INFOLIT programme of the Cape Higher Education Consortium (Ravjee, Koen & Reagon, 2002).

[16] A case study of eDegree may untangle some of these issues in the South African context.

[17] The figures for the University of Cape Town and the University of the Witwatersrand do not appear in Table 2. Both universities did not enrol distance students in 2002.

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