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Post-COVID policy shifts in higher education: A mixed-methods cross-sectional case study on rhetoric vs. Reality in digital transformation efforts.

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Abstract

Background

The COVID-19 pandemic accelerated digital transformation in higher education globally. In South Africa, universities swiftly adopted policies promoting inclusive, technology-driven teaching and learning. However, despite these policy shifts, a significant gap remains between institutional rhetoric and practical implementation. Digital inequality, insufficient staff training, and infrastructure limitations continue to hinder meaningful and sustainable transformation.

Methods

A mixed-methods cross-sectional case study was conducted across three South African universities. Quantitative data were collected through an online survey administered to 150 academic staff, with 132 valid responses analysed using descriptive statistics and cross-tabulations. Qualitative data were gathered through 12 in-depth interviews with policymakers, IT staff, and academic personnel. Thematic analysis was used to interpret qualitative findings and triangulate them with survey data.

Results

Survey data revealed that 82% of institutions had adopted digital transformation policies, yet only 46% of staff reported receiving sufficient training to implement them effectively. Additionally, 61% identified student internet access as a persistent barrier. Respondents were 58% female and 42% male, with most being academic staff (64%). Interview insights from 18 participants across seven public universities highlighted a disconnect between top-down narratives of smooth digital adaptation and ground-level experiences of uncoordinated rollouts, infrastructure deficits, and resistance to change. Temporary innovations, such as hybrid classrooms and data subsidies, were inconsistently applied and lacked long-term support.

Conclusion

Post-COVID digital policies in South African higher education remain ambitious but fragmented. Despite progress, implementation continues to be undermined by systemic and operational challenges. True digital transformation requires more than policy declarations—it demands cohesive leadership, cultural change, and sustainable resource allocation.

Recommendations

Universities should invest in long-term digital infrastructure, ongoing staff development, and equitable student support. Institutional accountability mechanisms must be embedded to monitor implementation. A multi-stakeholder, collaborative approach is essential to bridging the gap between policy and practice in the digital age.

Keywords*: Digital transformation; higher education policy; post-COVID education; implementation gap; online learning; infrastructure inequality; academic staff development; South Africa; mixed-methods study.*
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Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic catalysed a global transformation in higher education, forcing institutions to rapidly transition from traditional, face-to-face instruction to digitally mediated modes of delivery. In response to lockdowns and social distancing regulations, universities adopted emergency remote teaching strategies and accelerated their digital policy agendas. In the South African context, this shift was accompanied by an outpouring of institutional policies and national-level directives promoting digital transformation as a necessary evolution for educational sustainability and equity. However, the urgency of the pandemic response masked significant challenges in implementation, particularly in under-resourced institutions where digital access and pedagogical readiness were unevenly distributed. This study critically examines the gap between the rhetoric of digital policy commitments and the reality of their execution in post-COVID higher education institutions.

Background

Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, many South African universities had begun exploring blended learning and the integration of educational technologies. However, digital transformation was largely supplementary and had not yet become a central element of institutional teaching and learning frameworks. The pandemic significantly shifted this landscape, positioning digital engagement as an essential and urgent component of academic continuity. In response to this disruption, universities rapidly introduced policies aimed at formalizing online learning, improving digital competencies, and sustaining access to education. These policy frameworks often presented an ambitious vision, emphasizing seamless digital integration, inclusive access, and pedagogical innovation. However, the realities of implementation told a more complex and uneven story. Many academic staff lacked adequate training, support, and infrastructure to effectively transition to digital teaching practices. Simultaneously, students, particularly those from under-resourced and rural backgrounds, faced persistent difficulties related to internet access, device availability, and digital literacy.

Moreover, institutional systems such as IT infrastructure and administrative operations were frequently underprepared for the long-term demands of remote education. This disjunction between policy aspirations and on-the-ground experiences raises fundamental concerns about the effectiveness, sustainability, and inclusivity of post-pandemic digital strategies in higher education. Recent literature underscores these contradictions. Czerniewicz et al. (2020) illustrate how emergency remote teaching exacerbated existing educational inequalities and exposed systemic weaknesses. Kwet (2019) critiques the uncritical adoption of global digital models, cautioning against forms of "digital colonialism" that ignore local context. Similarly, van der Merwe (2021) contends that many institutions prioritized policy rhetoric and branding over substantive support. Collectively, these analyses highlight the need to examine not only policy content but also its practical enactment by those engaged in daily teaching and learning.

Study Objectives

This study aims to explore the alignment between digital transformation policies and their implementation in South African higher education following the COVID-19 pandemic. The study specifically seeks to:
Assess the extent of digital transformation policy adoption across selected universities.
Evaluate academic staff experiences with implementing digital teaching strategies, including training and infrastructure support.
Identify institutional barriers that hinder the effective execution of digital policies, particularly from the perspectives of staff and administrators.
Compare the rhetoric of post-COVID digital policy frameworks with the lived experiences of frontline educators.
Provide recommendations for closing the gap between digital policy and practice to support inclusive, sustainable, and effective transformation.

Methodology

Study Design

This study employed a mixed-methods cross-sectional case study design, integrating both quantitative and qualitative approaches to gain a comprehensive understanding of the gap between digital transformation policies and their practical implementation in South

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African higher education institutions. The quantitative component measured institutional trends and staff perceptions, while the qualitative component explored deeper contextual experiences and institutional narratives.

Study Setting

The study was conducted at three public universities in South Africa, selected to reflect diverse institutional contexts in terms of digital readiness, resource availability, and student demographics. These included:
University of the Western Cape (UWC) – Cape Town, Western Cape
Mangosuthu University of Technology (MUT) – Durban, KwaZulu-Natal
University of Limpopo (UL) – Polokwane, Limpopo
Data collection was conducted between February and April 2023, following the formal adoption of post-COVID digital transformation policies across these institutions.

Participants

Quantitative Phase

A total of 150 academic staff members participated, selected through stratified purposive sampling to ensure representation across faculties, academic ranks, and teaching responsibilities.

Inclusion Criteria:

• Full-time employment at one of the selected universities
• Active involvement in undergraduate or postgraduate teaching during or after the COVID-19 pandemic
• Willingness to participate and complete the online survey

Exclusion Criteria:

• Part-time or contract academic staff
• Administrative staff with no teaching responsibilities
• Staff on sabbatical or leave during the data collection period

Qualitative Phase

A total of 12 participants were selected for in-depth interviews:

• Academic staff (n=6)
• Policymakers (n=3)
• IT or digital learning support staff (n=3)

Inclusion Criteria:

• Involvement in digital transformation policy development or implementation
• Direct role in academic delivery or ICT support during/after the pandemic
• Willingness to participate in a recorded interview

Exclusion Criteria:

• Staff with no involvement in digital policy or implementation
• Individuals unavailable during the interview period
• Those unwilling to provide informed consent
All participants were invited via institutional email and provided written informed consent before participating.

Bias

To minimize potential bias:
Data collection tools were piloted and refined for clarity and neutrality.
The interview guide avoided leading questions and encouraged open-ended responses.
Interviews were conducted by an independent, trained research assistant not affiliated with the participating universities.
Triangulation was employed by comparing survey and interview findings to validate emerging patterns.
Member checking was performed with selected interview participants to verify the accuracy of thematic interpretations.

Study Size

The quantitative component included 150 participants, considered adequate to identify trends across the three institutions. The qualitative component reached thematic saturation after 12 interviews, as no new themes emerged

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in the final transcripts. This mixed sample size allowed for both depth and generalizability within the study's scope and timeline.

Statistical Analysis

Quantitative data were analysed using descriptive statistics (percentages, frequencies, and cross-tabulations) to explore trends in policy awareness, digital access, training adequacy, and institutional support. Data were processed using SPSS version 26 and Microsoft Excel. Minimal missing data (<5%) were handled via listwise deletion.

For qualitative data, Braun and Clarke's six-phase thematic analysis framework was used:
Familiarization with the data
Generation of initial codes
Searching for themes
Reviewing themes
Defining and naming themes
Producing the report
Manual coding was used, and patterns were compared across roles (academics, policymakers, IT staff) to identify areas of convergence and divergence.

Ethical Consideration

Ethical approval was granted by the Mangosuthu University of Technology Research Ethics Committee.
Date of Approval: 11 February 2022
All participants were informed of their right to withdraw at any stage. Anonymity and confidentiality were strictly upheld. Data were stored on encrypted, password-protected servers accessible only to the research team.

Results and Findings

Participant Flow

The following describes the flow of participants through each stage of the study:

Quantitative Phase

Potentially eligible academic staff across 3 universities: 220 Invited to participate via institutional email: 200
Accessed the survey link: 165
Completed eligibility screening questions: 155
Confirmed eligible (met all inclusion criteria): 150
Completed the survey: 132
Included in final quantitative analysis: 132
Excluded due to incomplete or ineligible responses: 18
Reasons: incomplete responses (n = 12), ineligible due to lack of current teaching role (n = 6)

Qualitative Phase

Total individuals identified as key informants: 20
Contacted and invited: 15
Agreed to participate: 12
Completed interviews: 12
Included in final qualitative analysis: 12
Non-participation: 3 declined due to scheduling conflicts

Descriptive Data

The following table summarizes key demographic, professional, and institutional characteristics of study participants:

Table 1: Characteristics of Survey Participants (n = 132)

Characteristic	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
Gender		
Female	77	58%
Male	55	42%
Age Group		
25–34 years	29	22%
35–44 years	50	38%
45–54 years	40	30%
55+ years	13	10%
Role/Position		
Academic Staff	85	64%
Administrative Staff	32	24%

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IT/Support Staff	15	12%
Years in Higher Education		
1–5 years	38	29%
6–15 years	59	45%
16+ years	35	26%
University		
University of the Western Cape (UWC)	44	33%
Mangosuthu University of Technology (MUT)	46	35%
University of Limpopo (UL)	42	32%

Figure 1 highlights a significant disparity between institutional digital policy adoption and actual implementation support as perceived by academic staff. While a high proportion of institutions (82%) have formally adopted digital transformation policies, only 46% of academic staff reported receiving adequate training to effectively implement these strategies. This gap suggests that although institutions responded to the COVID-19 crisis with ambitious digital agendas, the operational groundwork, such as professional development and resource allocation, has been insufficient. Furthermore, 61% of staff identified poor internet access among students as a major barrier to successful online teaching. This statistic reinforces the digital divide that persists in many South African higher education institutions, where students from disadvantaged backgrounds are disproportionately affected. These findings echo previous research (Czerniewicz et al., 2020), which found that policy ambitions often fail to account for the lived realities of staff and students, thereby limiting the effectiveness of digital transformation efforts.

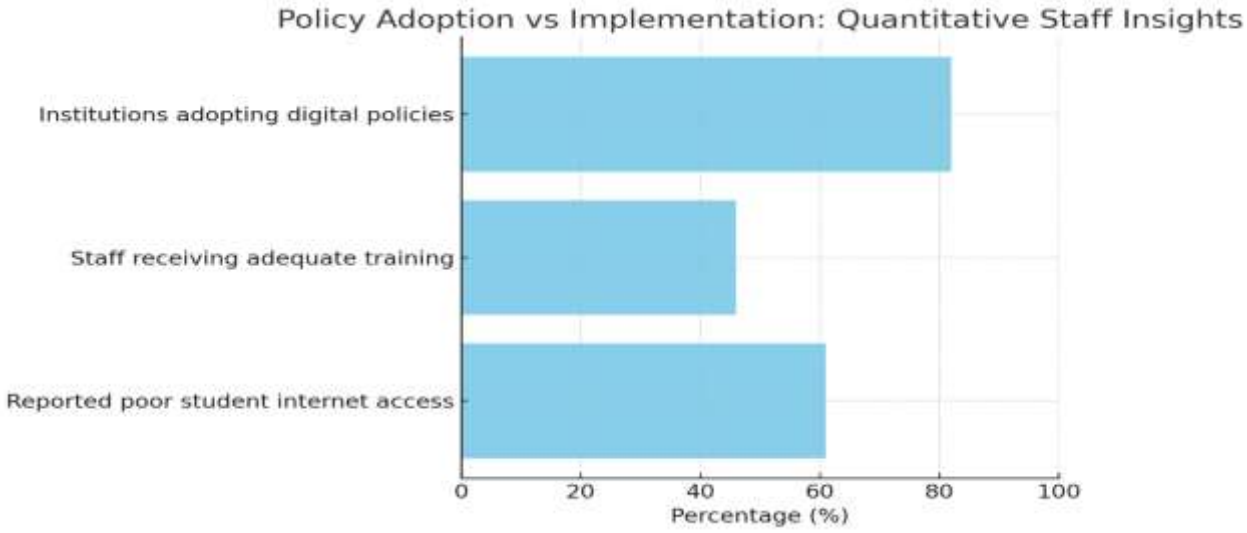

Figure 1: The graph highlights the gap between institutional policy commitments and the actual support received by academic staff.

Figure 2 presents the frequency of key themes that emerged from qualitative interviews, reflecting the experiential realities of staff involved in digital teaching during and after the pandemic. The most prominent theme, reported by 10 out of 12 interviewees, was the disconnect between institutional digital rhetoric and the practical implementation of those policies. This was closely followed by reports of uncoordinated implementation (8 mentions) and limited infrastructure (7 mentions), which further underscore the institutional unpreparedness for sustained digital delivery. Other notable concerns included resistance to technological change and the short-lived nature of interventions such as mobile-data subsidies or ad hoc platform rollouts. These qualitative insights add depth to the quantitative data by revealing not only that support was lacking, but also why implementation was inconsistent. Together, these themes highlight a systemic misalignment between policy

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formulation at senior levels and the support required on the ground, reinforcing the call for inclusive, consultative, and resource-conscious digital transformation planning.

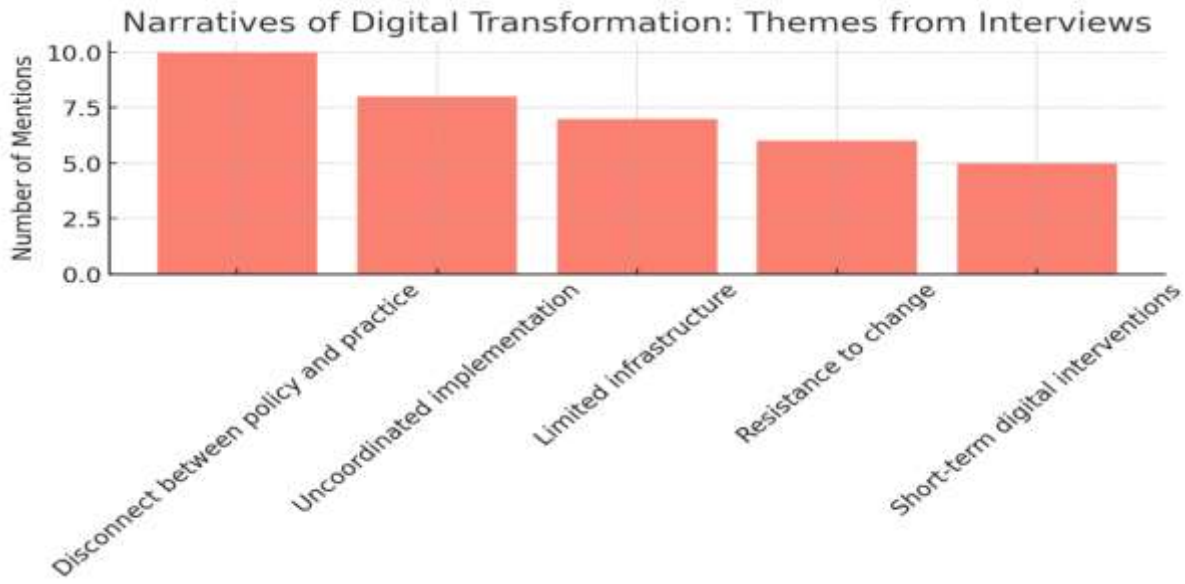

Figure 2: Reflects the recurring concerns raised during interviews regarding the realities of digital transformation.

Discussion

The findings from both the quantitative and qualitative components of this study reveal a persistent disconnect between post-COVID digital transformation policies and their practical implementation in South African higher education institutions. The first graph, titled "Policy Adoption vs Implementation: Quantitative Staff Insights," clearly illustrates this gap. Although 82% of institutions have adopted formal digital transformation policies, only 46% of academic staff report receiving adequate training to implement these policies effectively. This disparity underscores what van der Merwe (2021) terms the "implementation vacuum," where strategic ambitions fail to translate into operational readiness. Furthermore, 61% of staff identified poor internet access among students as a significant obstacle, reinforcing the findings of Czerniewicz et al. (2020), who emphasized that digital inequality remains a major barrier to online learning success in South Africa. The quantitative results confirm that while institutions may present a narrative of progressive digital reform, staff and students are often left unsupported. This supports Marginson's (2018) critique of "policy spectacle," where governments and institutions adopt high-level digital reforms more for public image than for practical impact. The data from this study suggest that policy frameworks have largely overlooked the infrastructural and training realities on the ground, thereby creating a false sense of digital readiness.

In parallel, the second graph, titled "Narratives of Digital Transformation: Themes from Interviews," provides deeper insight into the lived experiences of academic staff and institutional actors. The most frequently cited issue, mentioned in 10 of 12 interviews, was the disconnect between policy and practice, a finding that echoes Kwet's (2019) argument that digital transformation efforts in African universities are often shaped by Western-centric models with limited local adaptability. Other dominant themes, including uncoordinated implementation (8 mentions) and limited infrastructure (7 mentions), reflect a lack of cohesive planning and sustainable investment. These qualitative results affirm the work of Brown and Green (2021), who found that digital initiatives introduced during COVID-19 lacked continuity,

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scalability, and integration into long-term institutional strategy. Concerns, such as resistance to change and short-term digital interventions, further illustrate that institutional responses have been reactive rather than strategic. Participants noted that measures like mobile-data subsidies, while helpful, were temporary and inconsistently applied. This mirrors findings by Jansen et al. (2021), who emphasize that without long-term planning and stakeholder engagement, such interventions fail to produce systemic change. Taken together, the two graphs demonstrate not only a quantitative shortfall in support and infrastructure but also a qualitative mismatch between institutional narratives and operational realities. The convergence of these data sources reinforces the conclusion that meaningful digital transformation requires more than policy rhetoric; it demands inclusive planning, sustainable investment, and ongoing capacity building for both staff and students.

Generalizability

Due to its case study design and context-specific focus, the findings are not statistically generalizable to all higher education institutions in South Africa or beyond. However, the thematic issues uncovered, such as policy-practice gaps and infrastructural constraints, are likely to be relevant to similar institutions in the Global South undergoing post-COVID digital reforms. As such, the results may offer analytical generalizability, providing valuable insights and guiding principles for comparable educational settings.

Conclusion

This study highlights a substantial disconnect between the policy rhetoric surrounding digital transformation in South African higher education and the realities of its implementation. The quantitative data (Figure 1) showed that although many institutions formally adopted digital policies, less than half of the academic staff felt adequately trained to execute them. Meanwhile, the qualitative insights (Figure 2) revealed recurring themes of fragmented implementation, limited infrastructure, and resistance to change, further confirming that digital transformation remains inconsistent and unevenly supported. These findings affirm that post-pandemic reforms, while ambitious in design, often fall short in practice due to institutional unpreparedness and systemic digital inequities.

Limitations

This study was limited by its sample size, comprising 150 survey respondents and 12 interviewees from three universities, which may not capture the full range of experiences across diverse institutional contexts. Moreover, the cross-sectional design provides only a snapshot in time, limiting the ability to assess long-term changes or outcomes. The reliance on self-reported data also introduces the possibility of bias, such as socially desirable responses or selective recall.

Recommendations

To address these gaps, universities should prioritize long-term digital infrastructure development, including stable internet access and hardware provisioning for both staff and students. Leadership must institutionalize ongoing professional development programs tailored to digital pedagogy, ensuring that academic staff are equipped to deliver quality online and hybrid instruction. Additionally, policy frameworks should be accompanied by monitoring and accountability mechanisms to assess impact on teaching and learning. A collaborative, multi-stakeholder approach, engaging educators, students, IT professionals, and administrators, is essential for building resilient and equitable digital ecosystems in higher education.

List of Abbreviations

Abbreviation	Full Term
COVID-19	Coronavirus Disease 2019
ICT	Information and Communication Technology
HEI	Higher Education Institution
SPSS	Statistical Package for the Social Sciences
UWC	University of the Western Cape
MUT	Mangosuthu University of Technology
UL	University of Limpopo
REC	Research Ethics Committee

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LMS	Learning Management System
IT	Information Technology
n	Sample Size (number of participants)
%	Percentage

Biography

Dr. Sibonelo Thanda Mbanjwa is a dedicated lecturer in the Department of Nature Conservation at Mangosuthu University of Technology (MUT), South Africa. He holds a Ph.D. in Environmental Science and specializes in biodiversity conservation, sustainable development, and environmental education. Dr. Mbanjwa is deeply committed to community engagement, student mentorship, and the integration of indigenous knowledge systems into conservation practices. His work bridges academia and practical application, empowering students and communities through innovative teaching, research, and outreach initiatives.

Conflict of Interest Statement

The author declares that there is no personal or financial conflict of interest that could have influenced the outcome or reporting of this study. However, it is acknowledged that the author is academically affiliated with one of the participating institutions (Mangosuthu University of Technology) where data collection took place. To address any potential bias associated with this dual role:

Data collection and interviews were conducted by a neutral, trained research assistant unaffiliated with the institution.

Participant confidentiality was rigorously maintained, and data were anonymized prior to analysis.

Triangulation of data sources (survey, interviews, and institutional documents) and member checking helped ensure accuracy and credibility of interpretations.

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Competing Interests

The authors have no relevant financial or non-financial interests to disclose.

Author Contributions

I, the author, contributed to the study conception and design. Material preparation, data collection, and research were performed by Mbanjwa S.T. The first draft was written by Mbanjwa S.T.

Data Availability

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the author, but restrictions apply to the availability of these data, which were used under license from various research publications for the current study and are therefore not publicly available.

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