

SECTION 7: CONCLUSION

This paper has reviewed the current state of play in regards to the conceptualization and utilization of ICTs in South African higher education. It has been noted that, in all senses, this is a new and developing field. There is, as yet, no unanimity in the conceptualization, visualization or utilization of ICTs at institutional level. There has been a great deal of growth in the take-up of ICTs – but it has been uneven growth, largely dependent on individual energy, expertise and on conflicting visions. This diversity was illustrated by the metaphors used by ICT practitioners who were interviewed for this project. They have a variety of titles, work in a variety of organizational structures and forms, report through a variety of institutional channels, and use a set of metaphors to describe ICTs that are, to some extent mutually exclusive. ICTs – are they neutral, or value-laden tools? Are they stand-alone implements, or parts of larger, complex systems? There is currently no consensus on these fundamental issues in South African higher education.

This lack of consensus could be seen as an opportunity – or as a threat. An optimistic view might be that ICT use is growing organically, where and as required. And in a field where, internationally, the hardware and software are literally changing on an hourly basis, it would be dangerous to try to impose frameworks and understandings on those individuals who have been with this field, at the different institutions, since its inception. From this point of view, the lack of a well-defined national educational technology policy – or indeed, of any substantive national policy at all – could be seen as enabling. On the other hand, the lack of coordination among policy makers leads to contradictory and conflicting decisions being taken, and unintended consequences on the ground. The lack of consensus amongst practitioners could also be leading to situations where national resources are being lost in institutionally-based enterprises that duplicate each other, or that find scarce funding to go off on the intellectual equivalents of wild goose chases. It also leaves some institutions carrying greater burdens to fall farther and farther behind in a race, which is, by definition, dependent on resource allocation.

What was noted too, is that research into ICTs in South African higher education also reflects the relative youth of this growing field. There are many crucial aspects still to be defined, and many important details still to be filled in.

With regard to the relationship of ICTs to higher education transformation, three different notions of change – as improvement, as innovation and as transformation – were observed in the data, with the overarching globalization discourse cutting across these meanings. This discourse forms part of others playing out in different forms internationally. Also, a strong view of ICTs across these three meanings is in terms of its function or role in higher education. It is possible to identify other discourses on higher education change, which ask different kinds of questions, and which do not examine ICTs in terms of their function. For example, the decolonization and democratization projects in higher education may be seen as examples of alternative discourses on change that are being submerged or displaced by the hegemonic globalization discourse (Ravjee, 2004). These debates did not appear in the data assembled. Grasping the relation between ICT and higher education transformation in South Africa is complicated by numerous interpretations of transformation in the literature. Given that there is also little consensus in the literature about the relation between ICTs and higher education transformation, it is hardly surprising that the intersection of these debates is fraught with contradictions, ambiguities, and contentious issues.

At the same time, it is also possible to identify various intersections and overlaps in meanings as discourses interact and co-exist in contradictory practices claiming to support efficiency and improvement on the one hand, and equity and redress, on the other. These tensions are most clearly evident in the policy tensions on higher education change in South Africa. For example, recent work in alternative pedagogies draws from both critiques of the commercialization of higher education literature, and the debates around power and knowledge, and the recognition of difference in decolonization discourses.

It is important to problematize technology, which should not be viewed as an automatic advantage that will unproblematically enhance teaching and learning in higher education, or change historical patterns of access to higher education. Contextual factors play a crucial role in determining the democratic potential of ICTs in contributing to higher education transformation. South Africa is finding its way to understanding how best this can be done. What is certain, however, is that the intersection of ICTs and teaching and learning in South African higher education has put down roots – some shallow, and some deep.