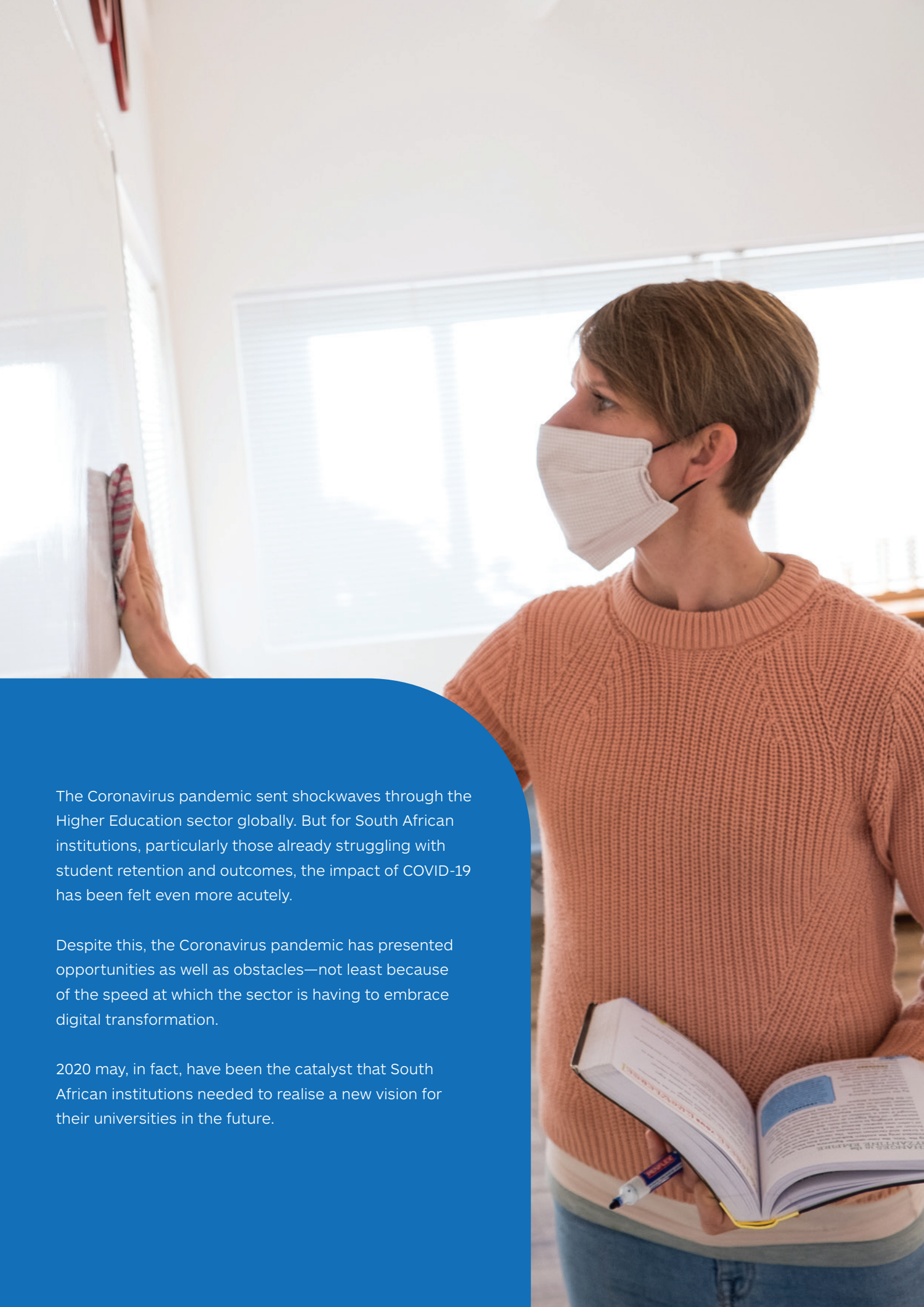


How digital transformation can improve higher education outcomes across South Africa



The Coronavirus pandemic sent shockwaves through the Higher Education sector globally. But for South African institutions, particularly those already struggling with student retention and outcomes, the impact of COVID-19 has been felt even more acutely.

Despite this, the Coronavirus pandemic has presented opportunities as well as obstacles—not least because of the speed at which the sector is having to embrace digital transformation.

2020 may, in fact, have been the catalyst that South African institutions needed to realise a new vision for their universities in the future.



A perfect storm—barriers to student success

The South African higher education sector has faced numerous challenges in recent years. The student protests and Fees Must Fall movement, plus closures and consolidation amongst institutions, have hindered attempts to improve student retention and outcomes.

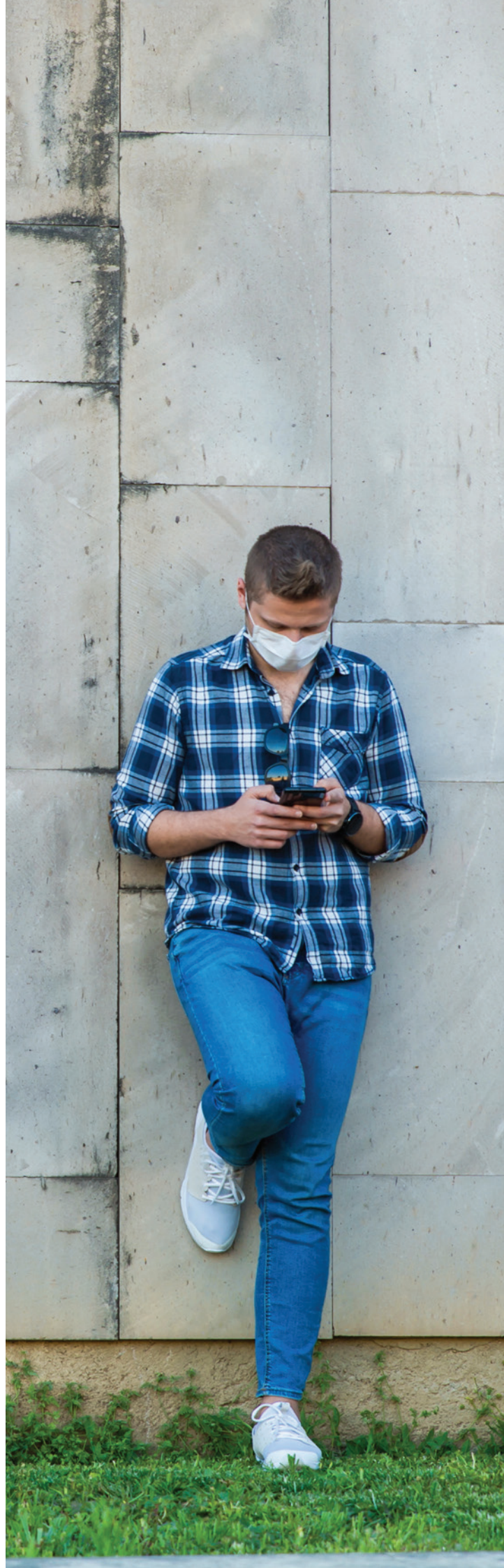
According to a 2015 study, more than half of the students that drop out of higher education institutions in South Africa do so during their first **year**—indicating a real problem with retention when undergraduates commence their studies. Previous reports have also revealed low rates of students completing their degree courses within three years. In 2010, for example, only 22% of the cohort graduated in that time frame and only 56% had graduated by the end of year **six**.

Improving retention rates is key for South African universities. It's costly for institutions to replace students that don't make it through to graduation, and engaging and supporting students that have already been recruited and enrolled is, by far, the most cost-effective way of improving graduation rates.

There are numerous socio-economic factors that hinder educational equity in South Africa. In combination, they create an almost perfect storm within which some students fail to achieve the expected level of success:

1. **Diversity:** The student population in South Africa is extremely diverse, encompassing race, gender, class and location—all of which carry associated challenges. The same report quoted [above](#), for example, suggests that ‘for African students registered for a three-year degree in 2011, 22% of them dropped out in the first year compared to 15% of white students’.
2. **Varying readiness-levels of undergraduates:** The starting point for students when they begin higher education can be wildly different. First-generation college students, for instance, are often defined as learners whose parents did not enrol in post-secondary education institutions, and are most at risk of not completing their studies. They are also more likely to be older and have dependants than their non-first-generation peers, and are often unprepared for university life.
3. **Financial support:** Many students in South Africa start university without the financial support they need, to cover accommodation and living expenses, for example. This can take its toll over time, meaning some students either have to work to support themselves throughout their studies, or have no alternative but to leave. It’s a challenge that can be met head on with the introduction of online courses—as long as students have internet access, they don’t need to be on campus.
4. **Infrastructure challenges:** For students living in remote, rural locations outside of term time, there are multiple challenges - from having the right laptop, to accessing the internet or dealing with regular power outages. The need to improve infrastructures for rural students has only been exacerbated during the Coronavirus pandemic.

These challenges, added to issues such as a lack of parental involvement, non-traditional family structures, insufficient academic preparation and limited knowledge about life at university, all impact student retention and success rates.





Driving change within South African Higher Education

The COVID-19 pandemic has undoubtedly accelerated change and a willingness to examine how technology can help to build more personalised learner journeys for all students. Pedagogical and cultural practices within South African universities have historically been slow to react to the demands of modern students and employers. This has been a big bone of contention for students who have been dissatisfied with existing teaching methodologies. But many within the sector now have a clearer perspective on how digital transformation can improve student engagement and outcomes.

Universities are also re-evaluating what constitutes success for students, and the impact this has on retention. A successful university experience doesn't necessarily begin and end with achieving a degree. For many students, success is determined by the added value gained while at university—acquiring vocational, personal or digital skills for example, or better ties with industry to improve employability.

Investing in these elements of student success can be a key differentiator for universities — persuading prospective undergraduates to pick one institution over another. Establishing processes that enable success ultimately shows students — prospective and current — that they're valued and will be encouraged to learn the skills they need to succeed in future careers.

This is crucial at a time when graduates are in such high demand from South African employers. A greater focus on the individual's needs also strengthens the chance of retention from enrolment through to graduation, by demonstrating a commitment to every learner.

There are a number of strategies that institutions can adopt to show their commitment to student success, improving retention rates and retaining students from all backgrounds. These include creating a student success plan, supporting students with success initiatives—and making better decisions based on the data that's available.



The impact of data on student success

Educators can only create a clear strategy for retention if they have a good understanding of their students. By measuring the right metrics and training staff to analyse the data that's available to them, universities can develop programs to improve retention.

Data is changing education, helping lecturers and institutions to improve the learning process. When it comes to fostering student success, the most important element is how they act on the data they collect.

Data can help universities to predict a student's potential success and identify why some students may leave. Information such as grades and attendance records, behaviours in the classroom, or how regularly students participate in group discussions, for example, can all be identified through an institution's learning management system (LMS). The resulting insight can help universities to predict a student's potential success and identify why some students may leave.

This enables staff to take remedial action quickly. It can also help to inform institutional policy, and shape recruitment strategies.

COVID-19 has seen a rapid shift towards online learning, and has forced educators to re-think how they manage student engagement using the new wealth of data they have acquired. There are numerous data points that can be gleaned from online learning, but can't be captured offline in the classroom, enabling lecturers to build stronger relationships with their students, even if they aren't physically in the same place.

When a student uses a **learning environment**, for instance, **they leave lots of footprints behind**, such as log-in data, the pages they're clicking on, how many times they clicked, how long they spend on a page and when they leave a page.



HOW D2L'S BRIGHTSPACE PLATFORM CAN HELP YOU TO CREATE EQUITY IN LEARNING AND IMPROVE STUDENT SUCCESS

No student is the same, so why should their learning be?

Brightspace enables you to create learning experiences that are as unique as your learners. Its personalisation and data capabilities enable universities to foster educational equity, which impacts student success and retention.

Its easy-to-use data analytics creates transparency, so that instructors can track meaningful insights. For example:

- Students are never limited to one kind of learning; assignment submissions can be documents, images, videos, and more.
- Set up customisable learning paths, so each student can work at their own pace.
- Automated, personalised emails prevent at-risk learners from slipping through the cracks before it's too late.
- Set rules to release new course materials based on your own criteria for each student.
- Accessible and engaging video feedback options allow authentic communication, even when learners and instructors are in different places.
- Course announcements help reduce potential learner anxiety and improve social connections.
- Grant extension and accommodate individual needs from with the Brightspace LMS.
- Badges and certificates can be used to provide encouragement and reinforce positive results.



Building Student Success Plans to improve outcomes

Universities in the US and across Europe have implemented Student Success Plans to improve retention rates and outcomes. Student Success Plans are a collaborative process that begins pre-admission. To be effective, the plan should be built around key pillars that touch on the multiple aspects of a student's life inside and outside of university. This can cover academic advice, career development and life skills, such as financial wellness, as well as maintaining the student's overall wellbeing — physical, motional and social.

The plans begin with an initial discovery phase where information is gathered that can be used to support prospective students. This phase could simply involve filling out a worksheet or perhaps engaging in an intake session with an advisor at student services. The intention should always be to identify a student's strengths and weaknesses, as well as any family and economic concerns that might impact their ability

to participate fully in university life. This could be a particularly effective way of catering to the diverse needs of South African students. The information collected during a student advisement session can also be used to set academic and career goals, and further refine degree planning.

The focus, as much as possible, should be for students to lead their own success plan, but long-term planning should include regular counselling and advisory sessions to ensure learners are on track to meet their graduation goals. That's where technology becomes even more valuable. **A learning environment**, or other student management or information system, can help students manage their own plan, maintain a schedule of related appointments, and create **early intervention systems** that are designed to address potential academic and wellness issues.



Supporting students with success initiatives

Where Student Success Plans focus on the individual, success initiatives should be tied to larger institutional objectives and strategies around boosting student support overall.

There are three key components when launching a student success initiative:

1. Take an inventory of your current student support services and review the effectiveness of those offerings.
2. Analyse student data—such as grades, Grade Point Averages (GPAs) and test scores—to make data-driven decisions around the elements of student success you want to focus on and the specific goals you want to achieve.
3. Use the information gathered to determine how you will achieve the goals you've set.

Learn about how you can use D2L Analytics Essentials to boost student success

Initiatives and goal-setting can include anything from offering more robust tutoring services, to creating programs that help first year students thrive as they transition from secondary school to university—this is particularly important for those undergraduates moving from remote, rural locations or students facing any of the other pressures identified above.

The key is to ensure that goals are clearly defined and can be measured—introducing project-based learning or community learning programmes for those first year undergraduates, for example. These projects promote active engagement and require students to spend considerable time on specific tasks, as well as involving collaboration, in and out of the classroom. Students are encouraged to take responsibility for their learning, while faculty members can assume more of a coaching and mentoring role.



Technology is clearing a path to the university of the future

A commitment to educational equity can help South African institutions enhance student-centred learning, and homogenise the college experience—regardless of background and circumstances—while creating a personalised pathway for all students, preparing them for successful and fulfilling futures.

Technology is playing an active role in paving the way toward student success. Data analysis and analytics is being used to understand patterns of behavior and identify at-risk students. Similarly, the deployment of more interactive content in the classroom is enabling the delivery of truly personalised learning. To better understand and address the challenges facing South African students today, educators are turning to technology to help boost engagement, retention, and proactively position their students for success.

If any positives are to be drawn from the COVID-19 experience, it's that technology has brought institutions and their students even closer together, giving universities a wealth of insight into how, when and where their students want to learn, and ensuring every learner reaches their potential.

If you would like to learn more about supporting student success at your institution

[Get in Touch with us](#)

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