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South African Universities in a Time Of Increasing Disruption

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The Fourth Industrial Revolution (4IR) and the Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID-19) have disrupted the higher education environment in unprecedented ways. This presentation is based on research conducted by the Faculty of Economic and Management Sciences at the University of the Free State that identifies the impact of increasing disruption driven by the 4IR and COVID-19 on the content and curriculum design of degree programmes in economic and management sciences offered by South African universities. The setting is six South African and five top-tier US and UK universities. The study used a non-positivist qualitative research design and specifically the case-study approach. A document analysis of the information in university yearbooks and prospectuses was conducted, using a purposive sampling design. The results indicate that an online presence will become more important due to increased disruption, and will not only ensure an additional revenue stream, but also promote continuity in operations and mitigate threats from competitors. COVID-19 has accelerated the extent of this disruption and expedited the migration to online teaching and learning platforms. Furthermore, since science, technology, engineering and mathematics are integral to the majority of 4IR-related modules, South African universities must not shy away from degree programmes that ignore inter- and multi-disciplinary curriculum designs. Coupled with the challenges facing the majority of South African students to access electronic devices, data and the internet, COVID-19 has thrust this challenge to the forefront in the South African higher education landscape. By comparing the developments in South African universities with those in trendsetting, top-tier, global universities, management can assess the extent to which they are internationally competitive and adapting to the demands of the 4IR.

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