

# Reimagining Universities

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Civilisations the world over have faced all sorts of disruptions. What is critical is how we respond to them. Do they drive us to extinction, or do we find a way forward?

This is the crossroad we face in 2021. Over the past year, our societies and universities have been deeply and directly disrupted by the COVID-19 pandemic. This has exacerbated and brought multiple disruptions and crises to the fore, and is symptomatic of the deep fault lines in the way we live on our planet. In response, we need to holistically rethink, reimagine and reposition our universities and our role in broader society, and come up with strategies which we can collaboratively implement to achieve social equality and environmental sustainability. Universities need to be at the forefront of formulating these strategies, and need to be strongly and visibly experienced as key drivers and collaborative agents of change.

The emergence of transdisciplinary research approaches locally and globally offers a unique opportunity for universities to take the lead in creating new knowledge, and new ways of doing things. UP strongly supports the internationalisation of knowledge and global engagement, and about 44% of the research we conduct is done with international collaborators. The advantage of international collaboration is that it enables universities to take significant research and innovation leaps by building on each other's areas of expertise. It also elevates learning and research facilities to a new level, including teaching and collaborating across continents with the use of online platforms and video calling in real time. In this environment, information and communications technology (ICT) is an essential strategic resource for all aspects of university functioning.

At UP, our staff and students have proactively been pursuing trans-institutional and transdisciplinary research in a range of fields, with Food Nutrition and Well-being; Genomics Research; Zoonotic Diseases; Human Rights & Diversity; and Ecosystem Services and Livelihoods identified as themes to align with international partnerships. This includes COVID-19-specific research at multiple levels.

In order to manage our partnerships through an increasingly multilateral approach, we have formulated an *African-Global University Project (AGUP)* to choose 20-30 universities (10-15 African and 10-15 global institutions) who will become strategic institutional partners and collaborators, and help develop young intellectual leaders with a global outlook.

Our four key transdisciplinary innovation platforms for collaboration and partnership, launched in 2018 and 2019, include:

**Our Future Africa institute** – a transdisciplinary research hub which aims to become a pan-African space for thinking, research and tackling of continental and global problems;

**Engineering 4.0** – a hub for Smart Cities and Transport for economic development in a disruptive 4IR society;

**Javett-UP Art Centre** – this centre is all about exploring what makes us human, what inspires us to think, feel, act, innovate and advance;

**Innovation Africa@UP** – the focus is on smart, sustainable agriculture to co-create knowledge, and innovative technologies to develop systems of agricultural production that are resilient to climate change.

The COVID-19 pandemic has exposed the glaring inequalities in education, where a lack of access to online learning and digital skills deepens the divide and undermines the goal of creating more equitable societies. It's therefore imperative to accelerate access to technology and connectivity for institutions and students. Higher education and knowledge creation both directly and indirectly drive innovation, which is critical for growth. With 65% of the population in Africa falling into the



youth category, it makes sense that access to relevant and quality higher education is a fundamental building block for creating inclusive economies and sustainable societies.

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#### University of Pretoria



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