

Mancosa shows its value as the South African tertiary education landscape navigates a value debate

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The South African tertiary education system is currently the subject of significant scrutiny, with the future value proposition offered by its tertiary education providers taking centre stage in many household debates and family discussions.



Paresh Soni, director of the Mancosa School of Information and Digital Technology (SIDT).

Paresh Soni, the director of the Mancosa School of Information and Digital Technology (SIDT), points out that this debate started during the Covid pandemic and has continued as the world navigates one of the harshest economic environments in recent history.

"The South African tertiary education value system is being questioned. This debate includes but is not limited to, access to education, its associated costs, and the support offered to students enabling their success. Clearly, the current model is reaching its expiration date, and innovation needs to take centre stage when redefining value. Technology will be at the heart of these changes," says Soni.

A blessing or a curse

During the opening of the Mancosa AI for Higher Education Leaders Masterclass, which was held on 7 June, Soni pointed out that technology will open a Pandora's box for tertiary education providers, and the impacts of this

will be felt over the next 18 to 24 months. In Greek mythology, Pandora opened a box containing the world's curses and blessings.

"One of the biggest factors influencing the debate regarding the future value of tertiary education is the impact of artificial intelligence (AI). Many education providers are struggling to ascertain the future impact of this technology on their operating model and whether AI will be a blessing or a curse. This is very common in the nascent stage of accepting a technological development," says Soni.

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– Paresh Soni

Who is at the centre of your value discussion?

Generative AI opens a whole new world of information to students and those who need to use information for a specific purpose. This can shift the focus away from tertiary education providers if they are unprepared for its impact.

"We need to find our place in a world governed by information in a way that has never been encountered in the past. When addressing the changing nature of providing effective tertiary education programmes, tertiary education providers need to assess the type of information they are presented with; how they will assess this information; and why this information needs to be assessed," says Soni.

He adds that this exercise needs to be prefaced with a concerted shift towards enhancing the student journey, an issue which has always been an important component of the provision of tertiary education.

Moving towards an enhanced value model

One of the advantages associated with increased access to information is that risk assessment and risk planning become easier. AI can then provide insights into lessons and coping mechanisms that were adopted in the past to address similar challenges.

One of the dangers of tertiary education is that it can often become difficult to customise the student journey and provide tailored support that will enable success because of the sheer volume of students.

Enter Estrella, a project that the Mancosa SIDT has been developing over several years and was rolled out at the beginning of August.

"The Estrella project is something that Mancosa is very proud of and excited about. Estrella essentially enhances our previous operating model by focusing on skills associated with increasing the skills that will be in high demand in the future world of work. Additionally, Estrella has been built into the Mancosa academic programme so that academic providers can respond to student needs in real time," says Soni.

A different approach to education

A technological innovation introduced during Covid was the creation, entrenchment and growth of online platforms that make remote work and distance learning possible.

"The reaction to these online platforms is a classic case of Pandora's box being played out in the business environment," says Soni, "the global business environment was significantly sceptical about the possibility of running their business remotely. Ultimately, these platforms are proving to be a blessing."

One of the significant lessons learned through remote and hybrid working environments is that humans have become accustomed to the flexibility associated with this. There is a considerable shift from planning home life and personal responsibilities around work to planning work around home life and personal commitments while remaining productive.

"Additionally, Mancosa has noticed a need for increased flexibility in how tertiary learning is structured. In the current economic environment, many young people who would have been full-time students are expected to find a job and help financially contribute towards running a household. With this in mind, Mancosa has decided to drop the semester structure with Estrella. Instead, there will be an intake every six weeks as modules are completed," says Soni.

He adds that this is in line with the growing global trend of certain businesses looking for future employees with a specific skill set to fill a particular role over prospective employees with a degree and a multitude of post-graduate qualifications.

Shaping the future of education

Soni points out that the fact that there is a growing need for the realignment of the value proposition when it comes to the provision of tertiary education is positive as it will force education providers to try and find a way to offer enhanced support towards the student journey.

An ancient curse (often wrongly attributed to the Chinese) says: 'May you live in interesting times.' The end of that curse states: '... and may you always get what you want.' We live in interesting times where technology constantly influences global value models.

"Mancosa decided to integrate tech skills into its courses long before Covid so that students have the transferable skills to help them prosper in a tech-driven world. Will the AI Pandora's box provide the South African tertiary education landscape with blessings or curses? Mancosa feels that Estrella will be a game changer and hopefully redefine the tertiary education

landscape. We are confident that the future of tertiary education looks very bright," concludes Soni.

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