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A Critical Analysis of the Gap Between Strategic Vision and Student Experience at a South African University

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Abstract: Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) globally are adopting ambitious strategic frameworks to navigate the disruptions of the Fourth Industrial Revolution (4IR). However, in the Global South, these visions encounter systemic friction with deep-seated structural inequalities. This study critically analyses the implementation gap between the Durban University of Technology's (DUT) ENVISION-2030 and the lived realities of students. Using an interpretive qualitative design involving 85 undergraduates and 10 lecturers within the Business and Information Management (BIM) program, the research uncovers divergent pathways of institutional engagement. While Work-Integrated Learning (WIL) and faculty empathy serve as strategic enablers, they are frequently overshadowed by a pervasive digital divide and resource scarcity. The paper contends that for strategic visions to be transformative rather than performative, HEIs must transition from 'strategic rhetoric' to 'foundational equity,' systematically dismantling the barriers of digital exclusion and operational burnout that impede the realisation of the adaptive graduate.

Keywords: digital divide; ENVISION-2030; higher education equity; strategic implementation; student success; transformative pedagogy

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Introduction

The contemporary South African university exists in a state of perpetual tension, caught between the global drive for 4IR-ready agility, which refers to being prepared for the Fourth Industrial Revolution, and the local reality of systemic socio-economic precarity. As higher education becomes an increasingly digitised and marketized landscape, institutions are pressured to produce adaptive graduates who can navigate technological disruption (Bozalek et al., 2021; McKenna, 2021). In response, the Durban University of Technology (DUT) launched ENVISION-2030, a roadmap designed to position the institution as a "premier, people-centred, and entrepreneurial" university of technology (Durban University of Technology (DUT), 2023). However, as Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2021) contends, the aspiration to become an "entrepreneurial" or world-class institution in Africa often risks prioritising global neoliberal metrics over the local human condition. This disparity creates a

tension where the strategic language of 'pioneering' may unintentionally overlook the decolonial imperative to address the material conversion factors, such as food security, housing, and digital capital, which enable student agency within a 4IR framework.

ENVISION-2030 is anchored in five pillars: Pillar 1 (Adaptive Graduates), Pillar 2 (Stewardship), Pillar 3 (Systems and Processes), Pillar 4 (Sustainability), and Pillar 5 (Thriving, Inclusive, and Empowered Community). However, the efficacy of such high-level strategic planning is often undermined by what Barnett (2017) describes as the gap between the university's stated identity and its operational being. This study investigates this misalignment within the Business and Information Management (BIM) program, a department characterised by historically low throughput rates. By critically evaluating the alignment of strategic intent with the lived experiences of students and lecturers, this paper seeks to uncover why, despite a clear strategic compass, a significant portion of the university community remains operationally and pedagogically marginalised.

The research, conducted as part of DUT's 'Hambisa' (moving forward) initiative, focuses on the BIM programme as a primary site of inquiry. Because the BIM curriculum is situated at the intersection of business strategy and digital fluency, it serves as a litmus test for the university's 4IR aspirations. The programme requires high-level digital integration and consistent access to information systems, which exposes a material misalignment for students entering with the structural disadvantages typical of the South African school-to-university transition. With concerningly low throughput rates, the BIM programme provides a critical vantage point for investigating the central problem of this study: a profound misalignment between the aspirational goals of ENVISION-2030 and the systemic barriers that impede their realisation. This manuscript utilises qualitative data to analyse the congruence between the ENVISION-2030 strategy and the daily realities of the students and staff it aims to empower.

Literature review: Strategy vs. Lived reality

Strategic planning in higher education is often critiqued as a 'performative exercise' intended for external stakeholders rather than internal transformation (Mintzberg & Waters, 1985). In developing contexts, the issue is exacerbated by the 'articulation gap', the distance between university expectations and the socio-economic realities of the students they serve (Letseka & Maile, 2008). The landscape of higher education strategic planning is extensive, reflecting a global drive towards institutional effectiveness, adaptability, and social responsiveness (Altbach et al., 2009). Common themes in university strategic visions often include fostering innovation, enhancing student success, promoting digital fluency, and ensuring institutional sustainability (Sanyal & Varghese, 2011). Universities frequently articulate ambitious goals around producing "future-ready graduates" who are equipped for dynamic labor markets and contributing to local and global challenges (Jongbloed et al., 2008).

However, a growing body of literature highlights the challenges in translating these high-level strategic aspirations into tangible, equitable outcomes on the ground (Barnett, 2017). Implementation gaps are often attributed to insufficient resources, lack of stakeholder buy-in, communication breakdowns, and an inability to adapt to complex internal and external environments (Mintzberg & Waters, 1985). Studies in developing contexts, particularly in Africa, further reveal how socio-economic disparities, inadequate infrastructure, and historical inequalities exacerbate these implementation challenges, often leading to significant disparities in student experience and outcomes (Letseka & Maile, 2008; McKenna, 2021). This transition gap is further theorised by Jones (2018), who suggests that the space between what a student expects and what they encounter is a powerful predictor of outcome gaps and eventual attrition. In the South African context, Pather and Dorasamy (2018) confirm a significant misalignment between first-year students' expectations and their actual experiences of university systems, which directly impedes access and successful integration. Furthermore, Wilson-Strydom (2015) shifts the burden of 'readiness' from the student to the institution. She suggests that South African universities often fail to be 'student-ready,' particularly for those from under-resourced schools, creating a systemic disconnect between institutional strategic planning and the actual entry-level capabilities of the student body.

The concept of student success, traditionally defined by retention and graduation rates, is increasingly being reframed to include holistic well-being, employability, and the development of critical graduate attributes (Yorke & Thomas, 2003). In this context, institutional strategies often articulate the need for supportive learning environments and comprehensive student support services. The efficacy of institutional support services is frequently compromised by systemic resource constraints. Specifically, the failure to address fundamental

material needs, including technological access and financial security (Bozalek et al., 2021), inhibits the formation of student capabilities necessary for meaningful academic and social participation.

Specifically, the 'digital divide' remains a persistent challenge in higher education, particularly in regions with unequal access to technology and internet infrastructure (Van Dijk, 2005). While many strategic plans envision digitally enabled learning environments, the reality for many students, especially those from disadvantaged backgrounds, is a struggle to access basic digital tools, leading to digital exclusion and hindering their ability to engage with contemporary pedagogy (Czerniewicz et al., 2013). This gap profoundly impacts efforts to produce 'adaptive or future-ready graduates,' as digital literacy is now a prerequisite for most academic and professional endeavours.

Digital literacy is no longer a peripheral skill but a structural prerequisite for academic integration. While many strategic plans envision digitally enabled learning environments, the reality for many students, who already navigate hybrid identities by engaging global digital cultures despite local constraints, is a struggle to access the basic tools required by the curriculum (Czerniewicz et al., 2013). This study uniquely builds upon the existing literature by exploring how the digital divide specifically disrupts the BIM program, where digital fluency is the core learning objective.

Digital capital and work-integrated learning (WIL) as strategic indicators

For Universities of Technology (UoTs), WIL is the pedagogical linchpin for producing vocationally oriented graduates (Department of Higher Education and Training (DHET), 2013). Research consistently shows that WIL facilitates the transition from theory to practice, fostering professional acculturation (Pillay & Van der Bank, 2013). However, the literature also warns that WIL is highly sensitive to resource scarcity; students who lack transport or professional attire are often excluded from high-quality placements, turning a strategic enabler into a site of further inequality (Dube & Dube, 2020). South African universities operate within a unique socio-political and economic landscape, shaped by a history of inequality and a pressing national agenda for social justice and economic development (CHE (Council on Higher Education), 2022). Consequently, strategic visions across the sector often share common aspirations with DUT's ENVISION-2030, while also reflecting their distinct institutional missions and historical mandates.

South African universities emphasise student success and graduate employability as central tenets of their strategic plans. For instance, the University of Johannesburg's (UJ) Global Excellence and Stature (GES) 4.0 strategy places a strong emphasis on educating the next generation of critical thinkers and innovators through a focus on interdisciplinarity, digital transformation, and a commitment to the 4IR (University of Johannesburg (UJ), 2020). Similarly, the University of Cape Town (UCT) Vision 2030 champions 'promoting excellence in learning and teaching' and fostering 'social responsiveness', aiming to produce graduates who are "critical citizens and leaders" (University of Cape Town (UCT), 2019). These visions echo DUT's Pillar 1, highlighting a sector-wide commitment to producing adaptable, future-ready graduates.

A critical component of achieving graduate employability and adaptability, particularly within universities of technology like DUT, is Work-Integrated Learning (WIL). WIL is globally recognised as a powerful pedagogical approach that bridges the gap between academic theory and workplace practice, fostering the development of crucial professional and transversal skills (Patrick et al., 2009; Boud & Hager, 2012; Msila, 2025). In South Africa, WIL is enshrined in the policy framework for higher education, particularly for universities of technology, which have a mandate to produce vocationally oriented graduates (Department of Higher Education and Training [DHET], 2013). It is where students participate in educational activities in the workplace. They engage in work practices in an occupational setting, and the aim of the programme is to afford students realistic experiences of workplace demands and practices. WIL activities occur in many forms and can range from internships, practicums, field/clinical placements, and professional work placements through to field observations and shadowing. WIL provides students with a rich, novel, active, and contextualized learning experience, allowing for personal and professional development.

Research on WIL in South Africa highlights both its potential and its challenges. Studies consistently demonstrate that well-designed WIL programmes provide an opportunity to develop skills, knowledge, competence, and experience, which enhance graduate employability, improve student motivation, and facilitate a smoother transition from education to employment (Pillay & Van der Bank, 2013; Zyl & De Bruin, 2020). Universities like the Cape Peninsula University of Technology (CPUT) and the Tshwane University of Technology (TUT),

similar to DUT, have integrated WIL as a core component of their curricula and strategic efforts to produce industry-ready graduates. Their strategic plans often refer to 'industry partnerships,' 'experiential learning', and 'producing employable graduates' as key performance indicators (e.g., Cape Peninsula University of Technology (CPUT), 2021; Tshwane University of Technology (TUT), 2019; Lubbe & Svensson, 2022). Key aspects of this personal and professional growth are acculturation to a community of practice and the opportunity to authentically contribute to a communal enterprise.

However, the effective implementation of WIL in the South African context is not without significant hurdles. Challenges include securing sufficient quality placements for a large student body, ensuring adequate supervision and mentorship from both academic and industry partners, managing logistical complexities, and addressing the socio-economic disparities that can affect students' ability to participate effectively (e.g., transport expenses, lack of appropriate attire, access to digital tools) (Dube & Dube, 2020; Zyl & De Bruin, 2020; Matook, 2022). These challenges resonate with the resource scarcity and socio-economic precarity identified in our study, suggesting that while the strategic intent for WIL is strong across the sector, the operational realities often fall short, particularly for vulnerable student populations. This conclusion is in line with findings from Sutherlands and Symmons (2013), who stated that barriers to adopting WIL also include lack of professional roles directly related to the discipline, undefined career outcomes, and insufficient resources for researching and developing WIL experiences that benefit students, industry partners, and the curriculum. The literature on WIL predominantly focuses on instrumental and economic objectives, reflecting neoliberal reforms. Conversely, existing scholarship offers limited philosophical and empirical inquiries aligned with liberal education, and there is a notable absence of critical, emancipatory perspectives (Milley and Kovinthan 2014). This highlights a tension between the traditional view of scholarship as knowledge for its own sake and the objective of 'producing' work-ready graduates (MacLeod and Chamberlain 2012).

Building upon this literature, this study provides a critical analysis of a strategic plan within a specific South African university context. It aims to elucidate the interaction between universal strategic aspirations, such as the integration of WIL, and interacting with unique local realities, thereby enhancing comprehension of implementation challenges and suggesting pathways for more equitable strategic realisation.

ENVISION-2030: An overview of the strategic framework

ENVISION-2030 represents DUT's strategic response to a complex local and global landscape. It is a declaration of intent to be a socially responsive institution that produces graduates capable of leading in a changing world. The strategy is built upon a foundation of stewardship and is structured around four perspectives and five interconnected pillars (Durban University of Technology (DUT), 2023). To understand the aspirational layer of the institution, it is necessary to delineate the goals of each pillar.

***Pillar 1: Adaptive Graduates and Future-Ready Learning*:** This pillar's primary goal is to provide transformative, technology-enhanced educational experiences that cultivate critical thinking, creativity, and ethical leadership (Durban University of Technology (DUT), 2023, p. 3.1). Key objectives include the systemic re-engineering of curricula, the integration of digital pedagogy, the expansion of work-integrated learning (WIL), and the improvement of student success rates to meet the demands of the 4IR (Raghubar, 2021).

***Pillar 2: Stewardship*:** This pillar focuses on institutional values, integrity, and social responsibility. Its goal is to foster a culture of accountability and ethical leadership throughout the university. By emphasising stewardship, the strategy seeks to ensure that the university's actions remain aligned with its decolonial and socially just mandates (Durban University of Technology (DUT) 2023, p. 3.2).

***Pillar 3: Systems and Processes*:** This pillar focuses on achieving digital transformation and operational excellence. It seeks to modernise the university's infrastructure to improve efficiency, transparency, and data-driven decision-making. Objectives include optimising administrative workflows and ensuring robust IT systems that support both teaching and learning (Durban University of Technology (DUT), 2023, p. 3.3).

***Pillar 4: Sustainability*:** Pillar 4 focuses on the long-term financial and environmental viability of the institution. It involves the innovative management of resources, the diversification of revenue streams, and the implementation of green campus initiatives. This pillar ensures that the university possesses the material capacity to realise its long-term vision (Durban University of Technology (DUT), 2023, p. 3.4).

***Pillar 5: A Thriving, Inclusive, and Empowered University Community*:** This pillar aims to 'cultivate a supportive, inclusive, equitable, and empowering environment where all students and staff can thrive (Durban University of Technology (DUT) 2023, p. 3.5). Its objectives centre on promoting a culture of respect,' enhancing comprehensive student support services (including mental and physical well-being), and ensuring a safe, welcoming campus environment for all stakeholders.

While all five pillars are interconnected, this study focuses specifically on Pillars 1 and 5. These pillars represent the most direct interface between the university's strategic aspirations and the lived experiences of students and lecturers, providing a critical lens through which to evaluate the alignment between policy and practice.

Theoretical framework: The tripple integration model

This study synthesises Tinto's (1993) Model of Student Integration with the Capability Approach (Walker & Mathebula, 2020) to analyse the gap between strategy and reality. While Tinto explains that student persistence depends on academic and social integration, this study argues that in a 21st-century African context, these are mediated by a third, foundational dimension: digital integration.

Digital Integration is not a parallel pillar but a mediating condition; without it, academic and social systems remain inaccessible. The Capability Approach provides the evaluative lens to understand this failure. For low-income students, 'capabilities for success' are stunted not by a lack of potential but by the unequal distribution of 'conversion factors' (data, devices, and mental health support). Therefore, institutional strategy fails when it provides 'formal access' to a digital curriculum without ensuring a 'real opportunity' for students to utilise those resources.

Harrison et al. (2018) offer a capability-based perspective, theorising that success should be measured through 'flourishing' and 'well-being.' They argue that institutional support mechanisms are essential contributors to a student's capability to lead a life they value within the academy, moving the definition of success from simple completion to holistic flourishing.

This is particularly salient in the South African context, which is marked by a crisis of throughput stemming from historical inequality, a severe articulation gap between school and university, and widespread student precarity (CHE (Council on Higher Education), 2022; McKenna, 2021). ENVISION-2030 represents a strategic effort to address these challenges; however, the success of the framework remains contingent upon the institution's capacity to navigate deep-seated structural issues. The interplay between institutional strategy, student experience, and the overarching socio-economic context of South Africa constitutes the analytical lens of this study.

Methodology

This study employed an interpretive qualitative research design (Denzin & Lincoln, 2017) to capture the subjective experiences of students and lecturers within the BIM program. This approach was chosen to gain an in-depth understanding of participants' perceptions, meanings, and lived realities regarding the implementation of ENVISION-2030.

***Participants*:** A total of 85 undergraduates and 10 lecturers from the Business and Information Management (BIM) programme at DUT participated. Students were drawn from various years of study (e.g., first year to final year) to capture a broad range of experiences. Lecturers involved represented a mix of junior and senior academic staff within the department. Participants were recruited through purposive sampling to ensure representation of individuals directly impacted by and involved in the implementation of ENVISION-2030's objectives. While the primary data was gathered from students and lecturers, the systemic impact on support staff was analyzed through the lens of 'administrative friction' and 'resource bottlenecks' described by participants. This allowed for an evaluation of institutional precarity as it affects the entire university community, even where support staff were not the direct primary respondents.

***Data collection*:** Data was collected through focus group interviews (FGI) with students and individual semi-structured interviews with lecturers. The FGIs (ranging from 6 to 10 students per group, 10 groups in total) allowed for rich discussions and the exploration of shared experiences and collective perspectives. Lecturers' interviews provided in-depth insights into institutional challenges and strategic implementation from an academic staff perspective. All interviews were conducted in English, audio-recorded, and transcribed verbatim. Informed consent was obtained from all participants, ensuring anonymity and confidentiality.

***Data analysis*:** Thematic analysis was performed using NVivo, applying the Braun and Clarke (2006) framework to identify latent themes that contradicted or supported the *ENVISION-2030* pillars. The analysis process involved familiarising with the data, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and producing the report. Recurring patterns and salient experiences related to ENVISION-2030's pillars were identified and then juxtaposed with the stated goals and objectives of the strategic framework to highlight areas of alignment and divergence. Data analysis was facilitated by qualitative data analysis software (e.g., NVivo) to manage and organise the extensive dataset.

***Trustworthiness and ethics*:** To ensure qualitative rigor, this study employed member-checking for credibility and maintained an audit trail in NVivo for dependability. A reflexivity statement was utilised to acknowledge the researcher's positionality.

Table 1. Summary of themes and sub-themes derived from nvivo analysis

Core strategy pillar	Enabling theme (track 1)	Constraining theme (track 2)
Pillar 1: Adaptive graduates	Authentic professionalisation via wil	The digital divide & Epistemic exclusion
Pillar 5: Thriving community	Faculty empathy & Relational ethics	Operational burnout & Resource scarcity
Cross-cutting theme	Entrepreneurial mindset integration	The affective gap (cynicism & Hunger)

Findings: Divergent pathways of strategic realisation

The thematic analysis revealed a stark dichotomy within the DUT experience, exposing **two distinct pathways** for students and staff. On one hand, there are clear pockets of excellence where the vision of ENVISION-2030 is being realised. On the other hand, these are overshadowed by pervasive systemic barriers that actively contradict the strategy's core tenets.

Dimensions of strategic alignment

Participants identified several key areas where the university's practice aligned with the strategic vision, particularly Pillar 1 (*Adaptive Graduates and Future-Ready Learning*). This, in turn, identified WIL as the primary site where ENVISION-2030 manifests authentically.

> **WIL as the embodiment of an adaptive graduate:** Pillar 1.1 states the goal is to provide transformative, technology-enhanced educational experiences that cultivate critical thinking (Durban University of Technology (DUT), 2023, p. 12). Students unanimously praised WIL as the site where its vision manifested authentically. A final-year student remarked: *In the workplace, I stopped being a student and started being the person ENVISION-2030 describes.* WIL was unanimously praised as the program's most effective element for producing future-ready graduates. It was considered as the primary vehicle for developing practical skills, critical thinking, and adaptability, championed by ENVISION-2030. Another student stated, *WIL is where ENVISION-2030 comes to life. You stop being just a student and start becoming a professional. It's the most important thing we do.* This finding is supported by Winberg et al. (2020), who emphasise that in the South African UoT sector, WIL is not merely an internship but a critical pedagogical site for the development of professional identity. For students enrolled in vocational programmes like BIM, WIL serves as the most significant 'strategic enabler,' bridging the gap between abstract Envision-2030 goals and tangible industry competence.
>
> **Faculty empathy as guerilla support:** Pillar 5 aims to 'cultivate a supportive environment'. Findings show this currently rests on the emotional labour of staff rather than formal systems. Students highlighted "individualised support" from lecturers as the only reason they felt part of a 'thriving community'. This suggests that the 'people-centred' vision currently rests on the emotional labour of staff rather than formal institutional systems. These faculty members exemplify the university's 'people-centred' and 'student-centric' values by frequently exceeding their official responsibilities to offer mentorship and support, thus fostering an inclusive community. This 'guerilla support' provided by faculty members is a manifestation of an Ubuntu-based pedagogy. As Le Grange (2019) suggests, a thriving African university community is not built through strategic documents alone but through 'relational ethics' where the success of the lecturer is inextricably linked to the humanity and flourishing of the student.

As one second-year student remarked, *"My lecturer in [Course Name] genuinely cares. They don't just teach; they guide us through personal struggles sometimes."*

Entrepreneurship education as a catalyst for innovation (Pillar 1.1): The inclusion of entrepreneurship modules was seen as directly empowering students with the creative and proactive mindset needed for a changing world, aligning perfectly with the goal of fostering innovation. Lecturers highlighted efforts to integrate practical business skills, with one lecturer noting, *"We're trying to move beyond just theory; students are encouraged to develop real-world business ideas. This is directly from ENVISION-2030's call for innovation."*

Dimensions of strategic contradiction

Despite these successes, participants described a range of barriers that fundamentally undermine the university's ability to achieve its strategic goals for all students.

The digital divide as a structural barrier: A first-year student noted: *"How can I be 'future-ready' when the university cannot even provide us with the most basic tool of the present?"* This demonstrates that digital exclusion is a direct threat to the "Adaptive Graduate" ideal. The most visceral finding was the failure of "Future-Ready Learning." A first-year student noted: *"How can I be 'future-ready' when I spend half my day on campus just looking for a spot where the Wi-Fi doesn't drop?"* This indicates that the 'Digital Divide' is a direct threat to Pillar 1. This was the most significant barrier. Students described how poor Wi-Fi, the prohibitive cost of data, and a lack of personal devices made it impossible to engage with the technology-enhanced learning promised in the strategy. This digital exclusion actively prevents them from becoming adaptive graduates and creates a profound sense of inequity. A first-year student poignantly asked, *"How can we be 'future-ready' when the university can't even provide us with the most basic tool of the present? The strategy says one thing, but our reality is another. I spend half my study time just trying to find Wi-Fi."* This digital exclusion exists despite the state-provided NSFAS allowances intended for learning materials. Participants highlighted a critical policy failure: allowances are often diverted to basic survival needs like food and rent, or the hardware provided is insufficient for the high-bandwidth requirements of the BIM curriculum. This renders state support ineffective in bridging the institutional strategic gap, as students are forced to choose between digital participation and physical survival. This issue extended beyond students, with some lecturers noting challenges in implementing digitally driven pedagogy due to inconsistent access to reliable internet and technology resources.

Operational burnout: Lecturers described a 'survivalist' culture, noting they are *'building a 2030 vision on 1990 resources'*. This phenomenon identifies a strategic decoupling where high-level goals are resourced at levels that make their achievement mathematically impossible. One lecturer stated, *"We are building a 2030 vision on 1990 resources. It is unsustainable."* Chronic understaffing and high student-to-lecturer ratios were considered a major impediment to a supportive learning environment. Lecturers spoke of burnout and an inability to provide the individual attention needed to foster student success. This reality stands in stark contrast to the ENVISION-2030 goal of cultivating a thriving community. One lecturer admitted, *"the vision in Pillar 5 is beautiful, but we are in survival mode. You can't have a 'thriving community' when both students and staff are just trying to stay afloat. We need more support staff, more teaching assistants; otherwise, the workload is unsustainable*. Students also expressed frustration with long queues for administrative services and limited access to essential support structures.

Socio-economic precarity: The unseen barrier to success (Pillar 5.2): The immense pressure of financial instability and poor mental health creates a constant state of anxiety for many students. This directly contradicts the objective of enhancing student well-being, as students perceive institutional support services as insufficient to meet their needs. A third-year student lamented, *"It's hard to focus on studies when you're worried about your next meal or how to pay for transport. The university has counsellors, but they are always fully booked, and the help feels too little, too late"*. This precarity was often linked to family responsibilities and

> the general economic conditions prevalent in South Africa (Bozalek et al., 2021). Furthermore, limited resources also impacted staff, leading to increased stress and burnout, making it challenging for them to fully engage in fostering a 'thriving' community. This systemic strain highlights a fractured social contract. Moja (2021) observes that South African universities are increasingly caught between the state's failure to provide basic welfare (food, housing and data) and the institution's strategic desire to compete globally. The result is a 'survivalist' campus where the strategic vision becomes a luxury that the impoverished student body cannot yet afford to entertain.

***The affective gap: Cynicism and strategic disenchantment*:** Beyond physical and financial barriers, the study uncovered an 'affective gap', a growing sense of cynicism among students who perceive ENVISION-2030 as a performative marketing strategy rather than an educational promise. One student poignantly remarked: They use these big words about pioneering futures on the posters in the library, but my stomach is empty. It makes the university feel like it's living in a completely different world than me. This disenchantment suggests that the strategic vision is currently failing to achieve the 'emotional buy-in' required for true institutional transformation.

Discussion: Reconciling vision with reality

The research exposes a 'strategic decoupling' a phenomenon where the university's high-level strategy (the 'vision') becomes disconnected from the everyday operational constraints (the 'reality'). This study reveals a critical implementation gap within DUT, exposing a stark two-track journey for its community members. While ENVISION-2030 provides a compelling and necessary roadmap, its success is being compromised by a failure to address foundational, systemic issues. One track, characterised by enabling factors like WIL and dedicated faculty, represents instances where the vision is tangibly realised, benefitting a segment of students. The other track, however, is defined by pervasive structural barriers, the digital divide, resource scarcity, and socio-economic precarity that actively impede the progress and well-being of a significant portion of the university community.

The findings demonstrate that digital integration is the linchpin for achieving Pillar 1 (Adaptive Graduates and Future-Ready Learning). Without equitable access to digital tools and platforms, the goal of producing adaptive graduates remains an aspiration, not a reality. The digital divide is no longer just an access issue; it is the primary mechanism through which educational inequality is being perpetuated in the 21st century (Czerniewicz et al., 2013). As Prinsloo (2020) observes, digital exclusion in contemporary South African higher education functions as a 'structural gateway'. When students are unable to afford the 'bandwidth of participation', they are not only academically hindered but systemically marginalised within the university's digital ecosystem, rendering strategic goals of 'future-readiness' impossible for the digitally impoverished. This directly challenges the university's mandate to provide technology-enhanced educational experiences, raising critical questions about institutional responsibility versus individual student preparation. This tension highlights the specific vulnerability of 'nontraditional' students, those who are often first-generation or from low-income backgrounds. Wong (2018) posits that for these students, academic success is rarely the result of 'chance' but requires a deliberate, intentional institutional 'plan' to mitigate structural barriers. Without such a plan, even well-funded aid schemes fail to translate into the 'flourishing' described by Harrison et al. (2018), because they do not cover the full spectrum of digital and social participation costs required by the modern university. While bodies like the National Student Financial Aid Scheme (NSFAS) provide some financial support, its effective use of digital access needs closer scrutiny and better alignment with actual student needs.

Furthermore, the resource shortages and immense pressure on staff directly undermine the goals of Pillar 5 (*A Thriving, Inclusive, and Empowered Community*). A thriving community cannot be willed into existence through strategy documents alone. It must be built on a foundation of adequate resources, manageable workloads, and robust support systems for both students and staff. The current environment risks creating a culture of burnout, not empowerment, mirroring concerns raised by other scholars on the impact of precarity on higher education stakeholders (Bozalek et al., 2021; McKenna, 2021). The supportive role of faculty, though highlighted as an enabling factor, is ultimately jeopardised by the systemic lack of resources and overwhelming workloads. This puts the onus on the university leadership to ensure that the vision is actively driven and resourced from the top down, with clear accountability across all levels.

Connecting back to Tinto's (1993) model, the pervasive digital divide and socio-economic precarity fundamentally disrupt both academic and social integration for a substantial number of students. Their inability to fully

participate in online learning environments (academic integration) and their constant struggle with basic needs (social integration) create a profound sense of alienation and disengagement, leading to reduced persistence and success rates (Letseka & Maile, 2008). The 'two-track journey' observed is a direct manifestation of this fractured integration, where some students are able to navigate and thrive due to existing support systems and personal resilience, while others are systematically disadvantaged.

The study's findings are particularly salient within the broader context of strategic planning in South African higher education. While many institutions articulate similar aspirational goals, the practical challenges of implementation in a resource-constrained environment, exacerbated by historical inequalities, often result in a significant disparity between policy and practice. This research, therefore, serves as a critical case study, offering insights not only for DUT but also for other institutions striving to make their strategic visions a lived reality for all stakeholders.

The strategic-realities alignment model (SRAM)

Based on the finding that foundational needs (data, food) currently dictate the success of aspirational goals (innovation), this study proposes the SRAM (Figure 1). Unlike previous models, SRAM is derived from the data showing that the 'Foundational Layer' (Layer 3) exerts a downward pull on the 'Aspirational Layer' (Layer 1). While existing models of student success (Tinto, 1993; Wilson-Strydom, 2015) focus on the student's transition, they often treat the university's strategic vision as a fixed, neutral backdrop. This study proposes the Strategic-Realities Alignment Model (SRAM) (see Figure 1) to account for the unique structural pressures of the African University of Technology.

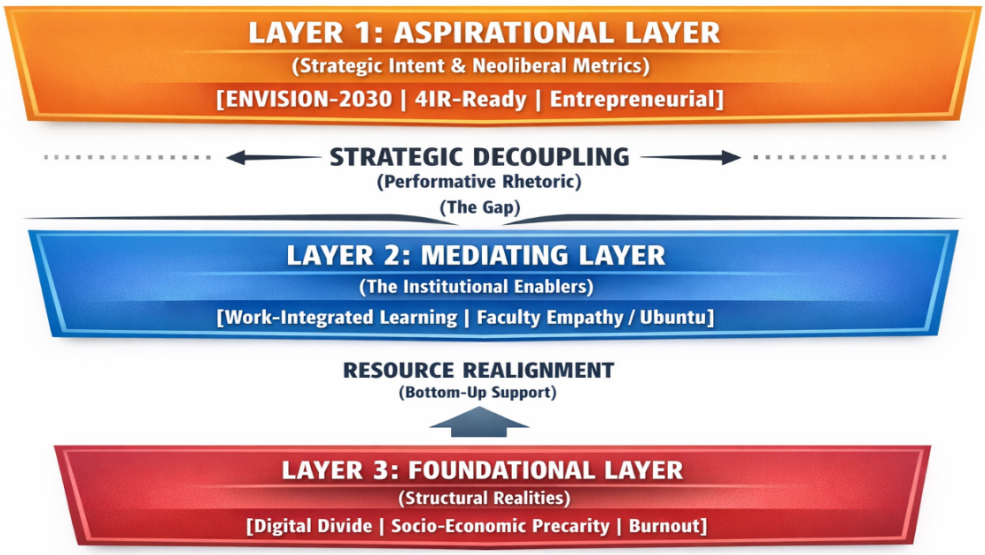

Figure 1. Bottom-Up Strategic Resourcing Model (SRAM)
Note: This model was conceptualised by the author based on the thematic analysis of focus group data (students) and semi-structured interviews (lecturers) conducted for this study.

The SRAM framework posits that institutional transformation is not a linear progression but a negotiated alignment between three distinct layers of existence:

1. The Aspirational Layer (Strategic Intent)

This layer represents the visible summit of the institution, the language of ENVISION-2030, 4IR-readiness, and entrepreneurial premier status. In the current South African climate, this layer is often decoupled from the base. It speaks to global neoliberal metrics and "Pioneering Futures."

2. The Mediating Layer (Institutional Enablers)

This layer represents the bridges that currently hold the university together. As identified in this study, these are primarily Work-Integrated Learning (WIL) and Faculty Empathy (Ubuntu-pedagogy). These enablers allow the strategy to manifest occasionally, but they are currently "overloaded" as they attempt to compensate for foundational failures, such as inadequate resources and insufficient institutional support for effective learning environments.

3. The Foundational Layer (Structural Realities)

This layer is the submerged reality of the African university. It consists of the Digital Divide, Socio-Economic Precarity (Hunger/Rent), and Operational Burnout. The SRAM model argues that this layer is the most powerful; if it is neglected, it exerts a downward pull on the other layers, turning the Aspirational Layer into performative rhetoric and the Mediating Layer into a site of exhaustion.

The SRAM logic: Bottom-up strategic resourcing

The central logic of the SRAM model is that strategic realisation is impossible without foundational equity. Institutional leadership often attempts top-down implementation, imposing digital pedagogies (Layer 1) onto a digitally impoverished foundation (Layer 3). SRAM suggests a bottom-up approach:

- **Step 1:** Secure the Foundation (Data, Food, Staffing).
- **Step 2:** Strengthen the Mediators (WIL funding, mental health support for staff).
- **Step 3:** Realise the Aspirations (Adaptive graduates and innovation).

By adopting the SRAM model, the university moves from 'pioneering futures' for a few to 'facing realities' for the many, ensuring that the ENVISION-2030 strategy becomes an inclusive lived reality rather than a performative document.

Conclusion and recommendations for ENVISION-2030

ENVISION-2030 is a necessary strategic response to the disruptions brought about by 4IR. However, the 'Two-Track Journey' identified in this study indicates that the university is currently pioneering a future that a significant portion of its student body cannot yet access. Success in achieving these goals requires a deliberate alignment between the elegance of strategic prose and the material realities of the student experience. Based on the findings and the SRAM model, the following recommendations are proposed:

1. Prioritise foundational equity through the triple integration model: The objectives of ENVISION-2030 cannot be achieved without first ensuring foundational equity. In line with the **triple integration model**, digital integration must be treated as a structural prerequisite for academic and social success, rather than a peripheral skill. This requires elevating the resolution of the digital divide to a top-tier institutional priority. Beyond providing Wi-Fi and hardware, the university must focus on digital capability development and curriculum redesign to ensure that digital platforms are usable and inclusive for students from under-resourced backgrounds. Investment in infrastructure should be treated as a direct investment in the realisation of Pillar 1 (Adaptive Graduates).

2. Resource: The strategy for success as a capability imperative: A strategy without adequate resourcing remains performative. The university should conduct a critical review of resource allocation to ensure that it serves as a conversion factor for student capabilities. This includes investing in more academic and support staff to alleviate unsustainable workloads, thereby creating the capacity for the high-quality, relational pedagogy that underpins a thriving community (Pillar 5). Furthermore, institutional leadership must ensure that external funding, such as NSFAS allowances, is effectively utilised for its intended purpose, bridging the gap between digital requirements and student financial precarity.

3. Institutionalise empirical alignment assessments: To ensure ENVISION-2030 remains a living document, the university must create formal mechanisms to continuously monitor the lived experiences of its community. The 'Hambisa' project should be institutionalised as a series of systematic alignment assessments. These assessments would provide the empirical data necessary to inform the ongoing review of the strategy, ensuring

it adapts to the actual needs of students and staff. Moving beyond quantitative throughput metrics to include qualitative indicators of student well-being will provide a more accurate measure of strategic success.

4. Rebuild institutional legitimacy and address the affective gap: The findings highlighted a growing sense of cynicism, an 'affective gap', among students who perceive strategic goals as marketing rhetoric. To counter this trend, the university must foster inclusive stakeholder engagement that moves beyond top-down implementation. By involving students and staff in the co-creation of strategic pathways, the institution can rebuild trust and ensure emotional buy-in. Transparent communication regarding institutional limitations, alongside a shared commitment to addressing structural barriers, will strengthen the social contract between the university and its community.

By adopting these steps, the Durban University of Technology can begin to close the gap between its powerful vision and the complex realities on the ground. Ultimately, this transformation requires what Odora Hoppers (2020) describes as a 'restorative' approach to higher education. For a South African university, bridging this gap means moving beyond the production of 'human capital' for the market and embracing a 'culture of care'. This approach acknowledges and mitigates the structural violence of poverty, defined here as the systematic denial of developmental opportunities due to economic deprivation, and ensures that the digital future is an inclusive reality for all.

Limitations and future research

While this study provides rich, in-depth insights into the BIM programme at DUT, several limitations must be acknowledged. First, the qualitative focus on a single academic department within one institution restricts the generalizability of the findings to other faculties or universities. Future research would benefit from a mixed-methods approach, integrating quantitative datasets, such as institutional Wi-Fi traffic logs, student digital access rates, and success metrics pre- and post-intervention, with qualitative inquiry to provide a more granular understanding of the digital divide. Additionally, longitudinal studies are necessary to track the evolving implementation of ENVISION-2030 and its impact on student and staff experiences over time. Such research would provide critical evidence regarding the long-term efficacy of the proposed Strategic-Realities Alignment Model (SRAM). Finally, comparative studies across diverse South African higher education institutions could further delineate the institutional resourcing models and administrative structures most effective in reconciling strategic aspirations with operational realities, thereby identifying best practices that can be adopted to enhance institutional effectiveness and student outcomes.

Declarations

Interdisciplinary Scope: This study brings together insights from higher education studies, digital sociology, development studies, and strategic management to examine the "implementation gap" in institutional transformation. By analysing the misalignment between strategic vision (ENVISION-2030) and student experience, the research integrates concepts from organizational behaviour (strategic decoupling), educational psychology (Tinto's integration model), and decolonial pedagogy. The development and application of the **Strategic-Realities Alignment Model (SRAM)** demonstrate how interdisciplinary frameworks can delineate the impact of structural barriers, such as digital inequality and socio-economic precarity, on the success of institutional roadmaps in African higher education.

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