WHAT IF THE FUTURE OF OUR UNIVERSITIES DEPENDS ON US?

Not tomorrow. Not when the budget improves. Not when technology settles down. **Now.**

Presented by

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The Old University Model Is Under Pressure

01. FORCE
FINANCIAL

02. FORCE
DIGITAL

03. FORCE
DEMOGRAPHIC

04. FORCE
WORKFORCE

05. FORCE
GOVERNANCE

06. FORCE
EXPECTATIONS

The traditional university model is undergoing profound and simultaneous changes across multiple critical fronts. Institutions can no longer rely on legacy frameworks to navigate the current global and regional landscape, driven by escalating constraints and evolving expectations from students and society.

Regional Focus: South African Higher Education

26
PUBLIC UNIVERSITIES

Within our regional context, these pressures are distinctly felt across South Africa's 26 public universities. Government planning is currently heavily focused on ensuring long-term institutional sustainability, upgrading critical infrastructure, advancing digital learning capabilities, and driving measurable student success.

GLOBAL & REGIONAL INSIGHTS

Furthermore, recent UNESCO reports highlight significant challenges regarding enrolment trends and stark regional infrastructure differences that must be addressed to maintain equitable access to higher education.

Southern African Reality: Building the Future While Managing the Past

Operating a university in Southern Africa requires navigating a complex multidimensional reality where we must transform without destroying the foundational elements that make a university a university.

TODAY

Navigating Present Realities

- Managing severe financial pressure
- Navigating legacy systems that slow down innovation
- Confronting acute skills shortages
- Navigating intricate labour complexity
- Addressing urgent, non-negotiable transformation imperatives

TOMORROW

Preparing for the Landscape

- Preparing for a radically different landscape shaped by AI and automation
- Adopting entirely new work models
- Cultivating new skills within our workforce
- Meeting rapidly changing employee expectations

ALWAYS

Upholding Our Core Mandate

- Continually prioritising our students
- Upholding rigorous academic excellence
- Driving impactful research
- Fulfilling our social responsibility
- Maintaining unwavering public trust

Operational Excellence

Strategy Without Execution Is Only an Intention

> **Operational excellence is the critical bridge between strategic intent and institutional reality. It is defined as the practice of consistently doing the right things, in the right way, at the right time, with the right people, using the right information and continuously improving how we execute these functions.**

FIVE CORE OPERATIONAL DISCIPLINES

01
Simplify
Complex workflows

>

02
Standardise
Procedures across departments

>

03
Digitise
Manual tasks to increase efficiency

>

04
Measure
Outcomes accurately

>

05
Improve
Processes iteratively

INSTITUTIONAL MINDSET SHIFT: ACTIVITY VS. VALUE

Crucially, achieving operational excellence requires a fundamental shift in our institutional mindset: we must stop measuring mere activity and start measuring actual value creation. Tracking how many tasks were completed is no longer sufficient; we must evaluate the tangible impact those tasks have on the university's overarching goals.

The HR Function Must Cross the Rubicon

From Transactional Administrative Body to Strategic Institutional Partner

Human Resources within the university sector must undergo a radical evolution. We can no longer afford to operate as a purely administrative function; we must become a strategic partner driving institutional success. It is time to stop asking for a seat at the leadership table and instead demonstrate unequivocally that the table needs our expertise.

The Past (Transactional)

Historically, HR has been defined by administrative burdens, with focus consumed by routine operational tasks:

- Heavy HR administration & policy enforcement
- Routine payroll processing
- Manual leave management
- Enforcing disciplinary procedures
- Ensuring baseline policy compliance

The Future (Transformational)

Operating on a strategic level, pivoting focus toward high-impact institutional growth:

- **Workforce Intelligence:** Generating actionable insight
- **Talent Strategy:** Designing comprehensive talent frameworks
- **Employee Experience:** Engineering compelling engagement
- **Risk & Capability:** Managing risk and building long-term capability
- **Strategic Rewards:** Attracting & retaining top academic talent

Leading Through Uncertainty: Uncertainty Is Not the Enemy

A New Operational Model: Shift perspective to transform disruption into institutional capability.

Uncertainty → Adaptability → Resilience → Opportunity

Four Critical Leadership Behaviours to Demonstrate

1 Give people clarity

While you cannot predict the future, you can provide clear direction and purpose in the present.

2 Tell the truth

Maintain absolute transparency about challenges, constraints, and institutional realities to build trust.

3 Create psychological safety

Foster an environment where staff feel secure enough to take calculated risks, voice concerns, and innovate without fear of retribution.

4 Build adaptability

Champion the continuous cycle of learning, unlearning outdated practices, and relearning new, relevant skills across the workforce.

The Employee Experience Is the Institution

Every Administrative Transaction Tells a Story

Institutional brand is defined not by marketing campaigns, but by the cumulative employee experience. Every administrative transaction serves as a touchpoint communicating worth to staff across the university lifecycle.

Critical Touchpoints Across the Employee Lifecycle

Appointment	Payroll	Advancement	Performance	Benefits	Leave	Grievances	Retirement
Initial Letter	Salary Reliability	Promotion Clarity	Review Fairness	Administration	Approval Speed	Empathy & Response	Respect Conveyed

"How does this institution value me?"

During every transaction, staff subconsciously ask this core question. If operational processes are broken, delayed, or impersonal, our implicit answer is that they are not valued—directly undermining institutional capability.

Digital Transformation

Digital Is Not About Technology

Critical Institutional Warning

"Digitising a bad process simply creates a faster bad process."

Key Strategic Questions Before Technology Implementation



Process Interrogation

Interrogate the true purpose of every form and workflow to eliminate redundancy.



Decision Automation

Explore automation opportunities to free up human capital for strategic work.



Intuitive Self-Service

Design self-service portals that empower staff and students directly.



Ethical AI Integration

Carefully consider the ethical and practical integration of AI into systems.



Preserving Humanity & Empathy

Throughout this digital shift, we must ensure we preserve humanity and empathy in all institutional interactions.

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The Future of Reward: Reward Is No Longer Just About Pay

To attract and retain talent for a future-ready university, we must rethink our compensation models through a holistic approach.

1. Pay
Competitive financial remuneration to attract top talent.

2. Purpose
A deep sense of meaningful purpose in everyday work.

3. Recognition
Meaningful appreciation for individual and team contributions.

4. Flexibility
Agility in how, when, and where work is accomplished.

5. Development
Continuous learning, upskilling, and growth opportunities.

6. Wellbeing
Comprehensive support for physical, mental, and social health.

7. Fairness
Systemic equity, transparency, and consistency across roles.

8. Career
Clear progression pathways and sustainable advancement.

Defining Strategic Question

What specific reward architecture gives us the precise organisational capability we need, at a cost that the institution can realistically and sustainably maintain over the long term?

Governance, Equity and Trust

COMPLIANCE IS THE FLOOR

Mere adherence to rules is insufficient. The law and strict compliance tell us where the boundaries are, defining the minimum acceptable standard of operation.

TRUST IS THE CEILING

True institutional excellence requires aiming for the ceiling. Leadership determines how ethically, equitably, and effectively we operate to foster trust.

CORE VALUES EMBEDDED IN OPERATIONS

Fairness

Absolute fairness in all our institutional dealings and interactions.

Transparency

Radical transparency across our decision-making processes.

Accountability

Strict accountability for all our leadership actions and outcomes.

Consistency

Unwavering consistency in our application of policy across the board.

LEADERSHIP IMPERATIVE: Recognise the vital distinction between what is Legal and what is Wise.

The Future-Ready University

8 Pillars of Institutional Capability

1. **Strategic Clarity:** A unified, universally understood vision and direction.
2. **Operational Excellence:** Flawless, value-driven execution of daily functions.
3. **Digital Intelligence:** Leveraging technology to enhance, not just automate, the academic and administrative mission.
4. **Human Capability:** Investing deeply in the skills, adaptability, and wellbeing of our workforce.
5. **Agility:** The institutional reflex to pivot rapidly in response to external shocks or new opportunities.
6. **Fairness:** Ensuring equitable treatment and opportunities across the entire university community.
7. **Strong Governance:** Maintaining rigorous, transparent oversight that enables rather than constricts innovation.
8. **Institutional Resilience:** The capacity to absorb disruption, recover quickly, and emerge stronger.

Interactive Exercise: The 10-Year Test (October 2036)

Audience Prompt

Imagine it is October 2036. Your university is widely regarded as one of the most successful, resilient, and future-ready institutions in Southern Africa.

Looking back from that vantage point, what specific, bold changes did you initiate in 2026/27 that made that future reality possible?

⏱️ **60 Seconds**
Silent reflection

🗣️ **2 Minutes**
Discussion with your neighbour to share strategic interventions

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WHAT WILL YOU DO DIFFERENTLY ON MONDAY?

Transformation cannot remain a theoretical concept; it demands immediate, practical application. We must confront our daily operations with rigorous core questions:

- **Are we doing things simply because they've always been done that way?**
- **Are our processes genuinely designed around the users?**
- **Is our data actually predictive, or just historical?**
- **Are our institutional values truly experienced by our staff and students?**

ULTIMATE QUESTION

Will our current trajectory lead to success or failure in the next 5 years?

CALL TO ACTION: Return to your desks on Monday with a renewed ambition to actively build trust, expand human capability, enforce fairness, and fortify our institutions for the future.