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MEDIA RELEASE

University of Pretoria first in Africa to adopt Blackboard Ally to support inclusive learning

PRETORIA – The University of Pretoria (UP) is the first higher education institution in Africa to select Blackboard, a leading EdTech software and solutions company, to implement Ally software to make the University’s digital courses more accessible to all students.

This software will enable students with learning disabilities as well as second-language students to improve their academic performance.

“The adoption of Ally is to foster an inclusive learning environment for our nearly 55 000 students,” said Dolf Jordaan, Deputy Director of the Department for Education Innovation at UP. “Our use of Ally aligns with the University’s policies regarding equality and its commitment to embracing diversity. UP is the first university in Africa to implement this innovative technology.”

Ally is a revolutionary solution that integrates seamlessly into leading learning management systems, making digital course content accessible to a greater diversity of students. It automatically checks digital files for accessibility issues, and generates alternative formats, including HTML, ePUB, audio and electronic braille, which are engineered to work better with assistive mobile devices and study tools. Ally also provides feedback to instructors so that they can improve the accessibility of their course material.

While the focus is on content accessibility, all students, including first-generation ones, may benefit from accessing learning content in alternative formats. Students with inconsistent internet access may be able to use offline, low-bandwidth formats, and those with undiagnosed learning disabilities could benefit from downloading an audio MP3 format file to read and listen to content.

“Ally has helped institutions to identify and resolve accessibility issues, and has boosted student experience and performance,” said Oleg Figlin, Vice-President for Europe, Middle East and Africa at Blackboard. “UP is an important partner in South Africa. The University has become the first university in Africa to adopt Ally. This move will benefit their students, and it will help their instructors develop courses according to Universal Design for Learning best practices. We are proud to support UP as it works to meet the needs of its diverse learners.”

Thousands of educators, administrators and learners across 800 schools and higher education institutions worldwide are now reaping the benefits of increased accessibility using Blackboard Ally. The solution has processed more than 70 million courses and has scanned over 2 billion content items.

Ally is being piloted at UP among a small group of students and academics for the next few months. Academic staff will use the software to improve the accessibility of their digital learning content and as a catalyst to

create more equitable opportunities for all students. It will also boost digital accessibility across devices, in line with the University's hybrid learning environment and strategies to improve student success.

"Our goal is to build an inclusive digital learning environment to honour diversity," said Professor Norman Duncan, Vice-Principal: Academic at UP. "We strive for excellence in teaching and learning. In the contemporary world, accessibility to digital content is not a luxury but a necessity. Meeting accessibility standards is a must, especially given the increasing ubiquity of online learning technologies."

Alongside the introduction of Ally, Dr Alecia Samuels of the Centre for Augmentative and Alternative Communication at UP, has also developed a digital accessibility course. It aims to create awareness among academic staff of the need to design accessible digital materials and give them the skills to make digital content more accessible from the very beginning.

"We have about 1 000 students at UP who have declared their disabilities, but there are many more second-language students who could also benefit from enhanced accessibility," Dr Samuels said. "One example is text/closed captioning on videos. By making our content accessible for students with disabilities, we are making our content accessible for everyone."

"UP has partnered with Blackboard for more than two decades," said Professor Gerrit Stols, Director of the Department for Education Innovation at UP. "We provide an educational technology ecosystem to support the institutional hybrid learning model and student success. With the onset of lockdown because of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020, the transition to online learning was less daunting than it may have been for other universities. Adding accessibility features to enhance digital content will assist UP to proactively identify barriers to digital content for all students. We want to ensure that no student is left behind in their studies."

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ABOUT THE UNIVERSITY OF PRETORIA

The University of Pretoria (UP) is one of the largest contact and residential universities in South Africa, with its administration offices located on the Hatfield Campus, Pretoria. This 113-year-old institution is also the largest producer of research in South Africa.

Spread over seven campuses, it has nine faculties and a business school, the Gordon Institute of Business Science (GIBS). It is the only University in the country with a Faculty of Veterinary Science, which is ranked top in Africa. UP has 120 academic departments and 92 centres and institutes, accommodating more than 55 000 students and offering about 1 100 study programmes.

UP is one of the top five universities in South Africa, according to the 2019-2020 rankings by the Center for World University Rankings. The QS World University Rankings also placed UP among the top 100 universities worldwide in three fields of study (veterinary science, theology and law), and UP is in the top 1% in eight fields of study (agricultural sciences, clinical medicine, engineering, environment/ecology, immunology, microbiology, plant and animal sciences and social sciences), according to the Web of Science Essential Indicators.

In May 2020, the annual UK Financial Times Executive Education Rankings again ranked GIBS as the top South African and African business school. The University also has an extensive community engagement programme

with approximately 33,000 students involved in community upliftment. Furthermore, UP is building considerable capacities and strengths for the Fourth Industrial Revolution by preparing students for the world beyond University and offering work-readiness and entrepreneurship training.

As one of South Africa's research-intensive universities, UP launched the Future Africa Campus in March 2019 as a hub for inter- and transdisciplinary research networks within UP and the global research community to maximise 4IR innovation and address the challenges and stresses our continent and world is facing. In addition, UP also launched the Javett Art Centre in September 2019 as a driver of transdisciplinary research development between the Humanities and other faculties. In November 2020 UP launched Engineering 4.0. as a hub not only for Smart Cities and Transport, but also to link the vast resources in technology and data sciences to other faculties via Future Africa. These initiatives are stimulating new thinking at the frontier of 'science for transformation'.

For more information, go to www.up.ac.za

ABOUT BLACKBOARD

Blackboard is a leading EdTech company, serving higher education, K-12, business and government clients around the world. We connect a deep understanding of education with the power of technology to continuously push the boundaries of learning. Our mission is to advance learning together with the world's education community, so that all learners, educators and institutions can realise their goals today and prepare for tomorrow.