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MEDIA RELEASE

UP launches digital lab to develop future-fit employable students

PRETORIA – The University of Pretoria (UP) launched the employability-focused Digital Capability Laboratory today, 1 November 2022.

Located on UP's Hatfield campus, the Digital Capability Laboratory will capacitate students with the requisite skill set that will enable them to thrive and adapt to the constantly evolving world of work. The newly-launched lab aims to address South Africa's staggering youth unemployment rate by upskilling students to develop them into employable, innovative and solution-driven graduates.

The lab was launched as part of the European Union's (EU) Erasmus+ SUCSESS Project, an initiative that researches ways to tackle the scourge of youth unemployment by boosting student employability in South Africa. UP is one of six higher education institutions involved in the EU Erasmus+ SUCSESS Project. At UP, the project is led by Berendien Lubbe, Emeritus Professor and Senior Research Associate in UP's Department of Historical and Heritage Studies.

The lab will employ digital collaborative learning as part of UP's efforts to develop future-fit programmes. UP Vice-Chancellor and Principal, Prof Tawana Kupe, said it is crucial for the University to prepare and equip its students for the future world of work, which is anticipated to be vastly different from the current one.

"This next generation of graduates is expected to change jobs and professions multiple times across many new emerging sectors, and will need to continuously upskill in order to stay employable. Education authors worldwide concur that the current educational systems and qualifications will rapidly become dated and obsolete. It is therefore important that we recognise which essential skills need to be developed for our graduates to actualise themselves and function optimally in the workplace, as well as contribute to the developmental aspirations of South Africa and Africa," he said at the launch.

"The Digital Capability Lab falls in line with our strategic priorities to build a robust present and future, both for the University and its students, and society at large. We are navigating ongoing disruptions at multiple levels, and face numerous complexities, which require us to collaborate across academic disciplines and national borders to co-create impactful knowledge and innovative solutions. These efforts are not only necessary to survive and thrive in the changing employment landscape, but are crucial to the livelihood of future generations," Prof Kupe added.

The Digital Capability Lab will be transdisciplinary-focused, and will be managed by the Faculties of Humanities, Economic and Management Sciences (EMS) and UP's Department of Career Services. Prof Sandy Africa, Deputy Dean: Teaching and Learning in the Faculty of Humanities said the lab's equipment and technologies will harness the students' limitless potential and nurture their talents while preparing them to be agile in their future working environments.

"When innovative ideas, industry tools, community engagement and professional simulations are effectively applied to real-world scenarios and contexts, youth employment opportunities in the global South become endless," said Prof Africa, highlighting the importance of technology in tackling youth unemployment.

Echoing Prof Africa's sentiments on the essence of technology in boosting employability, Prof Margaret Chitiga-Mabugu, Dean of the Faculty of EMS, said one of the faculty's key focus areas is to develop employable graduates who will use technology to be part of a skilled and innovative labour force in South Africa.

"It is crucial for us as a faculty to ensure that we develop employable graduates who will take advantage of these technological advancements. This lab attests to our commitment to equipping our students with capabilities for the future," she said.

Prof Chitiga-Mabugu added that postgraduate students in the Business Management and Financial Management programmes have already started using the lab to identify financial vulnerabilities in companies and explaining these using economic and supply chain data.

The lab boasts cutting-edge technologies, which will offer a creative and unique space for hands-on digital capability building. The facility is also a test bed for piloting and scaling innovative solutions. Students will have access to technologies used in various industries that will enable them to find innovative solutions to industry-specific problems.

Dr Wesley Rosslyn-Smith, Director of UP's Centre for the Future Work, who provided technological direction for the establishment of the lab said: "This state-of-the-art digital capability lab will equip students with the necessary digital, technical, management, and people skills required in the world of work. It is important for universities to forecast and to incorporate future-forward learning pathways that are economical and will facilitate faster learning for students to find meaningful employment."

Caption 1: UP's Prof Tawana Kupe and Iina Soiri of the Embassy of Finland at the official opening of the lab.

Caption 2: Prof Sandy Africa, Prof Tawana Kupe and Prof Margaret Chitiga-Mabugu in the state-of-the-art lab

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