

# **Academic Administration in Transition: Reimagining Support, Strategy, and Human Capacity in the Age of Artificial Intelligence**

Presented by: Anthony

Phaahlamohlaka & Support Staff  
Team

University of South Africa: Institute  
for Social and Health Sciences (ISHS)



# Background and Literature

- Higher education is rapidly transforming digitally (Alshatti Schmidt et al., 2025)
- Paper systems are replaced by digital platforms (Williamson, 2017)
- Artificial intelligence is reshaping administrative work (Williamson et al., 2023)
- Roles are becoming complex and data-driven (Simpson & Shaw, 2023)
- There are efficiency gains alongside identity tensions (Castañeda & Selwyn, 2018)



# UNISA Context

- UNISA is a mega Open Distance e-Learning (ODeL) university
- Students and staff are geographically dispersed
- Teaching, administration and research are digitally enabled

# ISHS Characteristics



## Africa-Centred

A space for community-engaged scholars and activists.



## Transdisciplinary Practices

Scholars situate themselves in transdisciplinary and liberatory knowledge practices.



## Compassionate Engagement

Compassionate community engagement is a core value.



## Human Development

The ISHS serves human development through research and action.



## Collective Contributions

The ISHS develops collective and individual contributions of researchers.



## Harnessing Expertise

Expertise is harnessed within social, psychological, and public health sciences.



## Deepening Understanding

The ISHS produces knowledges and actions that deepen understanding.



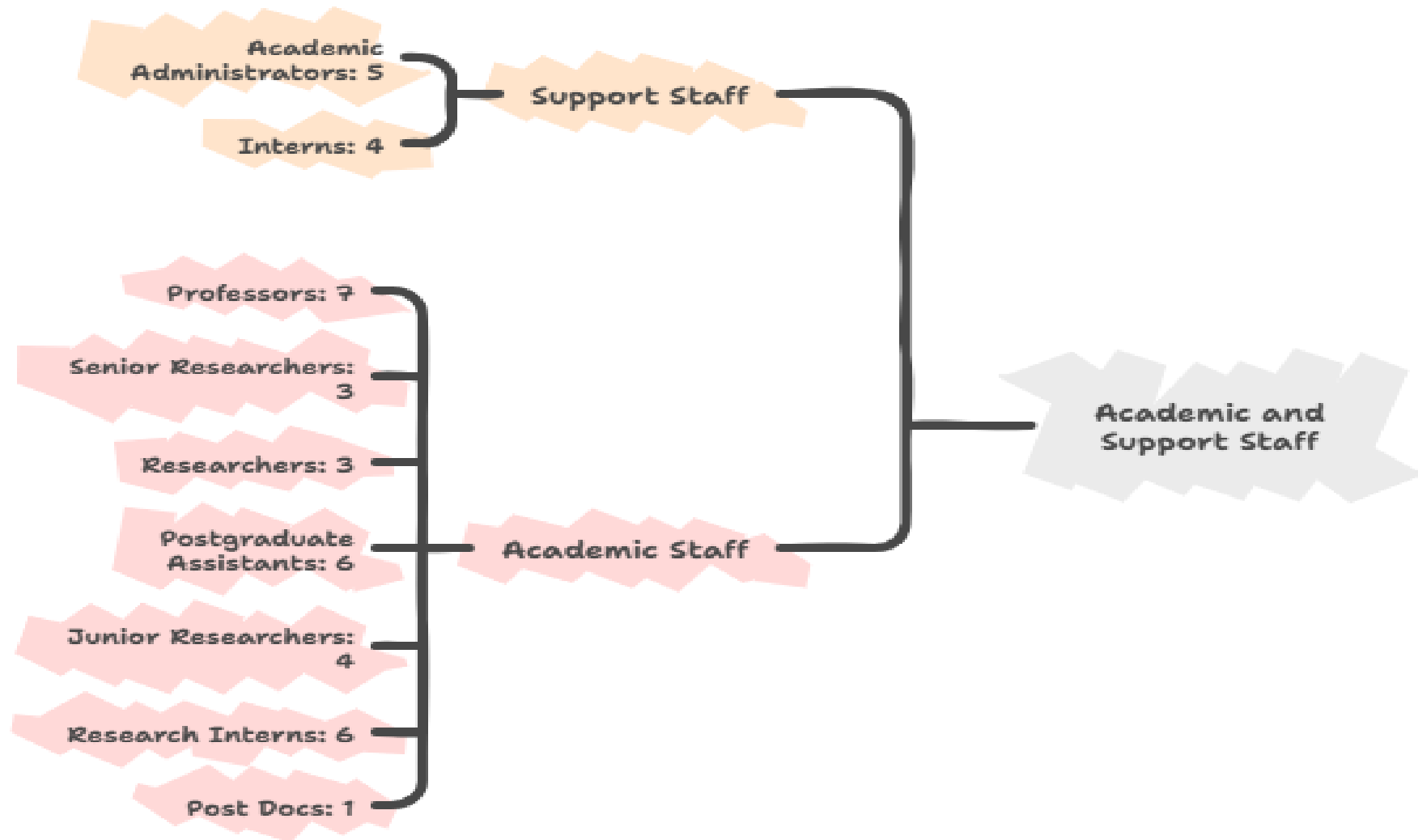
## Transforming Sciences

The ISHS aims to transform social and health sciences.

# ISHS context

- About the work we do
- Support Staff – academic administrators: 5 and 4 interns
- Academic staff: 7 Professors, 3 Senior Researchers, 3 Researchers, 6 Postgraduate Assistants, 4 Junior Researchers, 6 Research Interns, 1 Post Doc

# Academic and Support Staff Structure



# Research aim

## **Aim:**

To explore and describe support staff experiences of digital transformation and AI

## **Key focus areas:**

daily work practices

perceptions of AI

changes in roles and identity

# Methods

Qualitative, co-ethnographic case study – *collaborative: pilot study*

Conducted within a research-intensive institute

## **Data collection:**

Focus group discussion

Reflective engagement through reflective diaries

## **Approach:**

Participants as co-reflectors

Emphasis on shared experience

# Key Findings

**Digital tools are not simply adopted  
They are negotiated**

Participants

adapt

resist

question

and rework technology in practice

# COVID-19 as the Turning Point

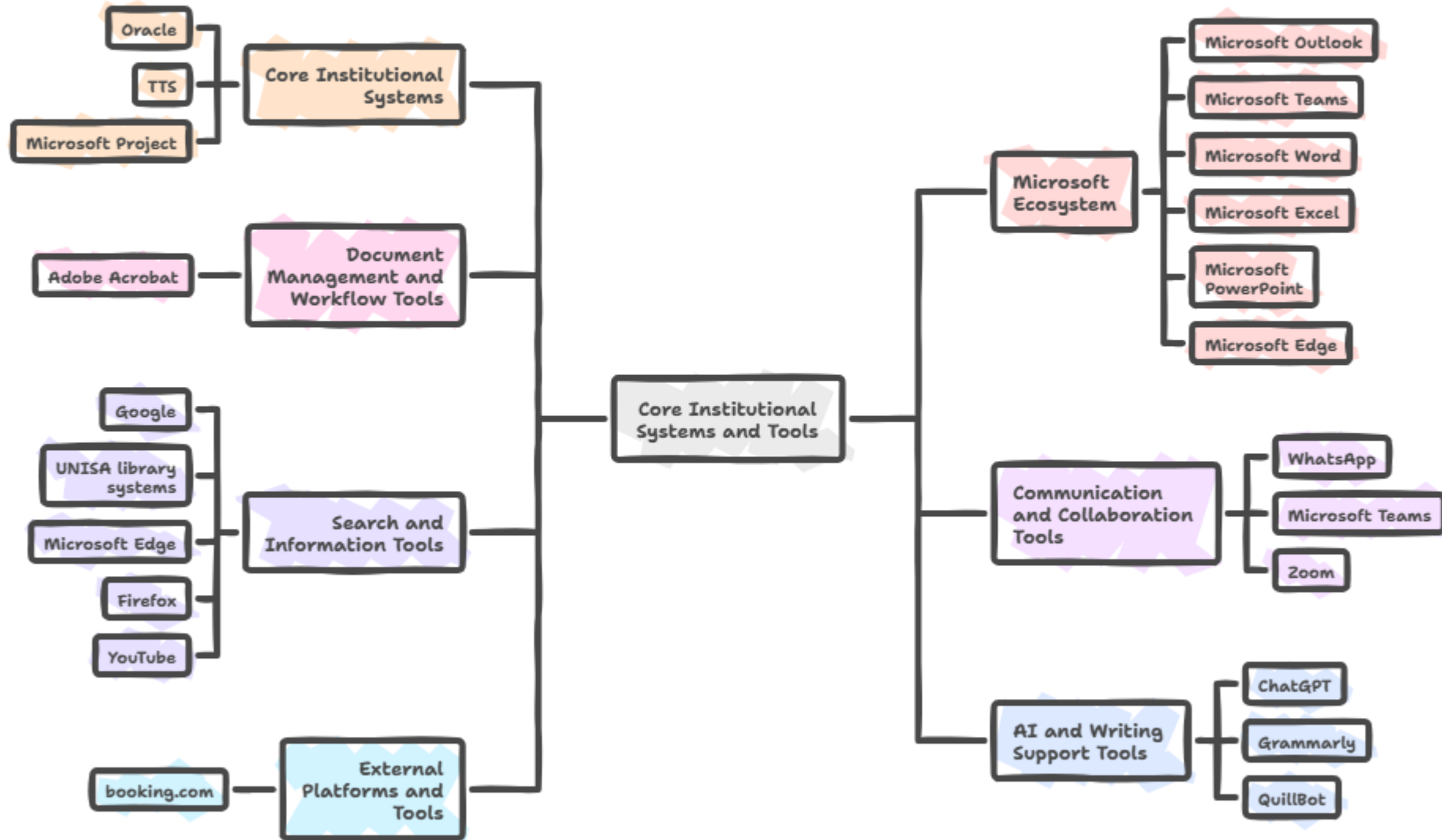
## The moment everything shifted

- COVID-19 accelerated full digital adoption
- Work moved from partially digital → fully online
- Physical offices were replaced by remote work

## What changed for us:

- Increased reliance on digital systems for all tasks
  - Rapid, often self-directed learning
  - Blurring of boundaries between work and personal space
- 💡 *“We used to think work must happen in the office... now we can work anywhere.”*
- 💡 *“I had to learn quickly... there was no other option.”*

# Core Institutional Systems and Tools



# We were already digital before AI arrived

- Managing processes, not just tasks
- Digital work is already complex and demanding
- 💡 *“We are using these systems every day... for everything we do.”*
- 💡 *“You move from one system to another... just to complete one task.”*

# Theme 1 – Efficiency vs Dependency

## **Positive:**

faster work

better organisation

improved accuracy

Improved performance

## **BUT:**

fear of over-reliance – *“leading staff to become lazy”*

concern about losing skills – *“due to digital systems doing it all”*

💬 *“It improves my workflow... but what if I rely on it too much?”*

# Theme 2: Learning and Adaptation

Transition from paper → digital → AI

Learning is ongoing and uneven

💬 *“I’m still using papers... but I’m accepting the change.”*

💬 *“I had to learn... even from my kids.”*

👉 Key point:

Digital competence is **developed, not given**

# Theme 3: Social and Organisational Pressure

Institutional shift creates pressure to adapt

Colleagues influence each other

💬 *“The institution is shifting... we also have to move.”*

💬 *“ChatGPT is my friend now...”*

👉 Key point:  
Adoption is **social, not individual**

# Theme 4: Risk and Uncertainty

Fear of job loss – *one person is doing tasks use to be done by two or more people*

Concerns about trust and accuracy

Data privacy worries

💬 *“I thought it would take our jobs.”*

💬 *“Can we really trust it?”*

👉 Key point:  
AI is both **opportunity and threat**

# Theme 5: Identity Shift

**We are becoming different kinds of professionals**

**From:**

paper-based administrators

**To:**

digital, mobile, AI-supported workers

💡 *“We can work anywhere now...”*

💡 *“Something is shifting... I feel like I’m reborn.”*

💡 *We easily respond to emails via mobile phones without opening a laptop*

# What surprised us most...

We were already using AI — without naming it

Our biggest challenge was not technology, but confidence

We learned from each other more than from formal training

Talking about AI changed how we see our work

💬 *“The eyes of my mind have been opened...”*

💬 *“It feels like something is shifting...”*

# Key Insight

**Digital transformation is not just about systems...  
It is about people becoming.**

Identity is changing

Work is changing

Relationships with technology are changing

Therefore, administrators are adapting to the changes

# Implications

## **For institutions:**

Training must be ongoing and practical

Support must be human-centred

Staff must be included in transformation processes

## **For staff:**

Continuous learning is essential

Reflection is critical

Collaboration matters

# Closing

***“AI will not replace people...  
But it will change what it means to work.”***

Administrative roles are evolving

Human judgement remains essential

The future is collaborative (human + AI)

# References

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Thank You

Thank you

*[phaahak@unisa.ac.za](mailto:phaahak@unisa.ac.za)*

Questions &  
Discussion