

### Context

The Digital: it is already infusing much of our daily lives in unprecedented and complex ways, we are in the throes of writing the script for what lies ahead in this novel realm. To what extent should we ask more critical questions about the digital's spectacular yet surreptitious manifestation, spread, and endless transformation? How does the digital emerge in mundane as well as technologically advanced guises? How does it fortify existing patterns of exploitation and exclusion yet creates new realities? At the Interdisciplinary Centre for Digital Futures (ICDF), we grapple with this full continuum of the digital, to respond to, as well as to harness its inevitable revolutionary and disruptive nature, and to imagine and construct futures that are more responsive and responsible to our immediate needs and concerns characteristic of the Global South.

### ICDF Vision

In a world where digital solutions for social and epistemic justice, poverty alleviation, job creation, responsible and reflective citizenship, and long-term sustainability are co-created with the Global South as an equal and dynamic player, advancing thought and scholarship on the Digital, its uses, meanings, and applications through dynamic, ever evolving, interdisciplinary partnerships across the world, and where its digital agency advances its well-being by focusing on the specific needs of our globally shared yet locally unique context.

### Why UFS and ICDF

The University of the Free State (UFS) is a research-led institution focused on impactful and engaged scholarship. ICDF within UFS exists *to deepen understanding of the role of the Digital in creating and solving issues of international relevance, and providing co-created and collaborative solutions, with local and global partners.*

Our *raison d'être* is firmly vested in addressing the stark and urgent need to grapple with the ubiquitous realm of the digital. The digital's often 'taken-for-granted' nature as well as its rapid emergence and evolution, generates manifold opportunities but also complex collateral damage and unintended, sometimes dangerously random, consequences. It is imperative for scholars to bring their skills of impartiality, objectivity, investigation, and creativity, to both the opportunities, and the fallout, of digital development and applications.

The UFSs has created the ICDF in both concept, and implementation, its core team of interdisciplinary scholars to respond to this growing sphere of prospect and peril. We see it as incumbent on us, through locally inspired projects with global reach and impact, to address issues which find their most stark definition in our immediate context - such as for example, the growing digital divide – a divide that is economic, epistemic, and social in nature - through digital praxis that should influence both discourse development as well as innovation. Without such a hub of activity, co-creation, and critique, we will not bring our perspective, experience, and solutions to critical aspects of contemporary global developments. We seek to ensure that through the ICDF, African scholarship and contribution to these issues is integral to international developments, and the continent is not a mere onlooker and consumer of digital vicissitudes, devoid of agency and decision-making capacities and power.

### **How will ICDF achieve this?**

Through the ICDF, the UFS will create opportunities for research in the fast-evolving and multifaceted realm of the digital. We already lead on interdisciplinary projects within the socio-digital domain, built on dialogues of co-creation and co-development among diverse partners to unlock a wide array of contributions to address societal challenges.

### **The ICDF ‘hub’**

Integral to our vision is a physical ‘hub’ inspired by the concept and power of a pixel which will enable dynamic interaction between creative teams focussed on digital solutions to social and epistemic justice, poverty alleviation, job creation, responsible and reflective citizenship, and long-term sustainability.

We have started and will continue to connect with and promote lasting relationships with non-academic partners as well as to forge dynamic and mutually beneficial networks between Global South and Global North scholars.

We have begun to put roots down from which a reputable and vibrant hub, which attracts post-graduate students, and academic, and non-academic partners will grow, delivering research and empirical solutions of international relevance and impact. Our motto is: *“Scholarly research with societal impact.”*

### Values

Our activities at the ICDF will be driven by processes characterised by wide consultation, inclusion, and integrity. We are focused on projects that have strong elements of social justice, and that are relevant and responsive to our immediate contextual needs.

### Objectives

At the ICDF, we strive towards the following:

- to engage with interdisciplinary endeavours, as this would encapsulate our existing strength and our most fundamental value – that of collaboration and co-creation. The ICDF seeks to think beyond using siloed discipline-specific solutions, and focuses on the cross-pollination of skills, perspectives, and human capital in a digital era to culminate into more sustainable solutions.
- to create and to sustain long-term third-stream income activities in collaboration with other institutions of higher learning, industry, and the public sector. This will be attained through the development of shared intellectual property endeavours, commercialisation, short-learning programmes, and curriculum development at graduate and post-graduate level.
- to enhance the UFS's academic footprint by producing quality research outputs that are academic as well as entrepreneurial in nature.
- to be socially relevant and impactful through research, innovation, and entrepreneurship to lead to job creation, poverty alleviation, gender empowerment, and the creation of novel additions to existing university curricula.
- to forge strong linkages between a wide array of partners, such as Global South and Global North allies to cooperate on joint proposal calls and projects, to create shared degrees and to co-supervise students, to develop shared intellectual property, as well as to leverage from skills that will benefit both contexts in meaningful ways.

The ICDF engages with digital science, data science, digital humanities, data reuse, and data analytics in domains that are interdisciplinary in nature, such as social media, eHealth, and digital agriculture. The problems to address will attempt to uplift society with sustainable solutions as well as to explore novel solutions to complex problems. The interdisciplinarity of

our projects will make us cognisant to avoid a focus on technologically deterministic projects that do not consider important contextual and ethically problematic features.

We are actively seeking advancement partners that will add value to our emerging initiative. As a team of scholars, students, and consultants, are already actively pursuing projects that include:

- 1) The accumulation of knowledge and expertise to create clusters within specific sectors – economic or social clusters – where stakeholders from different and even competing areas find common ground for synergistic endeavours. The focus is especially on inculcating regional innovation (funded project through the Friedrich Schiller University in Jena, with participation of academics and students from Sustainable Food Systems, Business Management, Sociology, and external partners from a South African bank. Our first cluster to be developed is especially focused on the Agricultural sector, given its importance in our province as well as within our Faculty of Natural and Agricultural Sciences at the UFS).
- 2) The accumulation of information to create a comprehensive dataset of COVID-19 vaccine hesitancy as expressed on social media sites (cooperation with the Free State Department of Health, the National Department of Health, South African NGOs, other South African universities).
- 3) The development of a digital tool to digitise and digitalise South African place name sign language, which will allow a proof of concept to be re-used in other contexts (funding obtained for a 3-year period and cooperation with the Department of Deaf Studies and Sign Language at the UFS).
- 4) In conjunction with a mega farmer, the ICDF intends on adding value in the form of co-creative projects using the FreeFarm Innovation (FFI) platform to develop innovative solutions for the agriculture sector.
- 5) Engagement with a local heritage collection of art and artefacts that should be harnessed physically and digitally to enhance visibility and impact (cooperation with the custodians of the art collection, the large South African farming conglomerate, local NGO, local communities).

- 6) The development of a Smart Campus initiative that will encompass – among many others – e-waste recycling, smart grid usage of electricity and the constant accumulation of data that will track the development of the various components of such a project (cooperation with colleagues from Sustainable Food Systems, Engineering, Chemistry, Sociology, Physical Resources, etc.)

### **Katinka de Wet: Co-Director ICDF**

Katinka de Wet is an associate professor at the Sociology Department at the University of the Free State. In 2007, she obtained her PhD at the *Ecole des Hautes Etudes en Sciences Sociales* in Paris, France. Since 2021, she is the interim co-director of the Interdisciplinary Centre for Digital Futures. In 2019, she published a monograph entitled: “The Normalisation of the HIV and AIDS Epidemic in South Africa”.



### **Herkulaas Combrink: Co-Director ICDF**

Herkulaas Combrink is a data scientist within the Faculty of Economic and Management Sciences within the University of the Free State with a specialisation on text, tabular, and image data as well as reinforcement learning between a variety of different domains. He is a PhD candidate at the University of Pretoria, an award-winning BRICS young scientist (2020 & 2022), a scholar within the academy of science (2022) and AIMS institute (2021 & 2022) as well as a member of the Data Science for Social Impact (DSFSI) research group in Africa. Currently he has more than 15 peer reviewed articles and 3 chapters in books specific to education, healthcare, data science and agriculture.



**Kgomotso Motlhakoana: Strategic Support Specialist ICDF**

Kgomotso Motlhakoana is a vital part of the ICDF administrative support. Her role and responsibility ensures that the student assistants, financial processes as well as the contracts of staff and students are streamlined with university policy. She holds a qualification in accounting and has extensive work experience in the key accounts and account management sphere.

