

Chapter 9

South Africa—Commentary



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Extending access has, as Prinsloo correctly points out, been the major emphasis of distance education in university education in South Africa. Elaborating on Prinsloo's theme of the importance of context, we should note that this role began in the Apartheid era. From 1959, black students were systematically denied access to all but one of the established universities. In alignment with apartheid ideology, racially segregated institutions were established, mostly in the so-called homelands. UNISA—South Africa's only distance education provider at the time—was however able to play an important role in continuing to provide access to students from all racial groups to their programmes, while all other universities were restricted to particular race and language groups.¹

Subsequently, post-apartheid South Africa saw a huge emphasis on seeking redress to the hugely racially skewed participation rates in South Africa's university system, with UNISA and other distance education providers playing a major part in both increasing overall participation rates in university education and in increasing the proportion of black students amongst those enrolled.² This access was not only for those adults seeking their first possibility of tertiary study, but was also for a range of recent school-leavers who were, for a range of reasons, unable to attend a traditional face-to-face university. In 2015, this last group constitutes some 20–25% of UNISA students.

¹ Such students had to write exams in racially segregated venues. Graduations were also segregated.

² Since the dawn of democracy in 1994, enrolments of university students have doubled.

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Unfortunately, students taking advantage of this opportunity seldom translated it into completion of a qualification. Recent figures published by South Africa's Department of Higher Education and Training (DHET), show that of a 100 distance university students who enrolled for undergraduate diplomas and degrees in 2004, just over 15 had graduated by 2014.³ While this figure was an improvement on the 11.6% throughput rate of such students between 2000 and 2010, and is not dissimilar to some other open universities, it indicates a highly inefficient use of state resources⁴ and explains Hulsman's finding, referred to in Prinsloo's article, that distance education *cannot claim* to be cost effective in terms of cost per graduate.

These distressing throughput figures not only reflect inefficient use of state resources but also lay bare the wastage of human time and talent. They call into question the quality of most distance education provision in South Africa. This concern has been a major theme of higher education policy since 1994, not only in relation to the throughput of students, assumed to result from the lack of support and feedback given to students, but in respect of the level of rote learning in many distance education programmes, particularly in teacher education. It was this concern that led to the moratorium, referred to by Prinsloo, on distance education programmes outside of the dedicated provider until 2014, and which led to the publication of the Good Practice Guide on Provision of Distance Education in a Digital Age by the Council on Higher Education. This publication also provides an interpretation of the programme accreditation criteria used in giving permission to offer distance education.

The emerging⁵ digital environment provides a remarkable opportunity to improve quality: through access to a wider range of learning resources, both in terms of form (not just print) but also voices (not a single prescribed textbook which students often cannot afford); through quicker feedback on assignments; and through greater ability to interact with, support and track the progress of students. The experiment of the signature courses at UNISA referred to by Prinsloo is important for it demonstrated how such digital support resulted in a 12% improvement in course success rate.

Finally, 2015 and 2016 saw major disruption of universities in South Africa, with students protesting against the ever-rising fees and demanding free university education, and the state arguing that, in the current economic downturn, this is not affordable. This context requires South Africa to find ways of improving the cost effectiveness of university education. In this respect, distance education has two possible advantages. The first is that distance education does not require students to be in a university residence. Recent data⁶ from South Africa's student financial

³This figure compares with an overall 61.4% for "contact" students over a period of 6 years. (DHET presentation to the University Capacity Development Programme Consultative Workshop, September 2016).

⁴The state subsidises around half of the cost of a university place, with student fees covering the rest.

⁵It is only in the last few years that different undersea cables reaching the shores of South Africa have enabled a rapid growth in bandwidth in major urban areas and on all university campuses. However data through 3 and 4G networks remains expensive compared to international norms.

⁶Council on Higher Education. (p 94, 2015), Vital Statistics—Public Higher Education 2013, Pretoria: CHE.

aid scheme shows that when supporting a poor student, only about 40% of the support needed relates to tuition and books, the remaining 60% is for costs relating to student residence and food. It can safely be assumed that remaining at home is considerably cheaper than moving to a residence, although the quantum is not known. The second advantage is the potential economies of scale through amortising the costs of programme design and resource development over large numbers. Here the online environment may push up the costs to make the provision more expensive than correspondence study but possibly less expensive than building and maintaining campuses. We trust that the additional support given by the online environment will reap dividends in improved success and throughput rates, but we don't yet have the data.

Meanwhile, in its quest to further extend access to universities and colleges, especially Community Colleges, our Department of Higher Education and Training has committed itself to exploring an open education system comprising a network of learning centres supported by a network of providers, and utilising wherever possible existing or newly developed open education resources.⁷

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⁷DHET (2013), White Paper for Post-School Education and Training, Pretoria: DHET. <http://www.dhet.gov.za/SiteAssets/Latest%20News/White%20paper%20for%20postschool%20education%20and%20training.pdf>.