

Chapter 28

eLearning and Distance Education in Higher Education Accessibility: South African Perspective

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ABSTRACT

The Ministry of Education in South Africa has identified distance education as a system that should extend educational opportunities and provide access to individuals who do not have the opportunity to study fulltime. The White Paper 3 - the National Plan for higher education (DoE, 2001a) advocates an increase in the general participation rate in public higher education in South Africa, with the aim of facilitating lifelong learning, developing the skills base of the country and redressing historical inequities in the provision of education. Badat (2005) adds that through distance education access is presented to people who would not have the opportunity to study fulltime because of work commitments, personal and social circumstances, geographical distance or poor quality or inadequate prior learning experiences. Distance education offer flexible learning to students. The flexibility of learning at a distance using new technologies gives students an opportunity to study while working. The technology can make an impact in supporting teaching and learning.

INTRODUCTION

The introduction of distance education has been generally understood as a response to the new challenges of increased and diverse demands on supportive learning made on the educational sector and as one of the strategies through which higher education institutions can manage to substantially open access. More higher education institutions therefore are extending their delivery modes to include distance education to address the problem of access. Even though participation rates have increased, recent studies show that many qualified potential students who would like to pursue their studies are generally still unable

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to access higher education institutions (Dodds, Gaskell & Mills, 2008). Generally, distance education is making a significant contribution towards access to higher education in developed countries (Davies & Pigott 2004). According to Unesco (2005) access to higher education institutions appears still to be very limited in developing countries.

The Ministry of Education in South Africa has identified distance education as a system that should extend educational opportunities and provide access to individuals who do not have the opportunity to study fulltime. The White Paper 3 - the National Plan for higher education (DoE, 2001a) advocates an increase in the general participation rate in public higher education in South Africa, with the aim of facilitating lifelong learning, developing the skills base of the country and redressing historical inequities in the provision of education. Badat (2005) adds that through ODL access is presented to people who would not have the opportunity to study fulltime because of work commitments, personal and social circumstances, geographical distance or poor quality or inadequate prior learning experiences. The South African Government aims to broaden the participation rate in higher education even in remote rural areas. In distance education contexts lecturer and learner are at a distance from each other. Consequently, learners experience isolation due to separation from their institution, lecturers and fellow students (Rumble 2000:1). Distance education in South Africa has been successful in increasing the number of students enrolling in higher education institutions.

It is important to engage openly, honestly and in a robust manner on the issues of higher education accessibility in South Africa and the global communities.

Transformation of higher education in South Africa and the global communities is on top agenda. Currently there is a crisis that tertiary institutions are currently facing in South Africa. It is in this context that the chapter is proposed out and looked at the challenges and possibilities of university accessibility and the digital era. The South African government established commissions to look at crisis regarding higher education governance including accessibility. Therefore there are challenges facing higher education institution in the light of the recent fees must fall protests launched by students around the country. The students want free education as it is backed in the South African constitutions.

The unaffordability of higher education fees, critics say is exemplary of how the higher education system discriminates against and excludes poor students in South Africa. Therefore high university fees are systematic exclusion of poor students.

University of South Africa (Unisa) has been identified by the Ministry of Education as a distance education institution that should help in widening participation. However, distance education institutions in South Africa and the global communities are faced with a number of challenges including drop-out, student support etc. Some researchers, for example, Makina (2008:1) suggests that although distance education has been acclaimed for providing access to higher education for students previously denied this privilege, this formal admission has not been matched with adequate learner support strategies to ensure success.

The students in distance education often feel isolated as they are studying on their own. Boyle et al. (2010:122) state there can be particularly acute issues in the distance learning environment where students often report feelings of isolation, little sense of connection and belonging and are challenged to maintain engagement in and motivation for learning.

In South African context since 1994, the various government policy papers have outlined a number of strategies to redress the imbalances created by the apartheid system. According to Council of Higher Education (CHE) (2004) one of these strategies was to improve access for poorer students to institutions of higher learning. According to the 1995 National Commission Distance Education report, distance

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