Distance education in South Africa

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Introduction

The advent of South Africa's first democratic government in 1994 signalled the beginning of significant policy changes in education, including a notable emphasis on distance education. Distance Education was identified as a key mechanism for facilitating access, participation and redress, especially in higher education.

Distance education plays a significant role in South Africa, particularly in teacher and higher education. It affords access to a large and diverse student population, of both mature students and school leavers, whose education needs might otherwise go unmet.

For example, in 2004 there were over 265,000 higher education students studying though distance education in South Africa. These constituted some 36% of all higher education students in the country. Most, but increasingly not all, of these students were studying part-time. About 80% were over 23 years of age, more than half were women, and 76% were black.

In this article, I will give a brief overview of the current provision of distance education in South Africa, describe the current policy context and identify some of the central issues in the field. I will conclude with outlining the approach South Africa has taken in addressing quality assurance of distance higher education.

Overview of provision

Higher education

By far the most significant distance education provision in South Africa has been in the public higher education field with the key provider being the dedicated distance education institution, the University of South Africa (Unisa), established in 1946 as the first dedicated correspondence university in the world.

As a result of the incorporation over several years of the various dedicated distance teacher education institutions, and the merger in 2004 with Technikon Southern Africa, Unisa is now the only dedicated distance education public provider in higher education. Unisa has thus become a comprehensive higher education institution, offering diplomas and the full range of degrees across general, vocational and professional fields. In 2004, it enrolled 205,000 students, including some 10,000 students from the rest of Africa. Since most of these students were studying part-time, this enrolment translates into 101,000 full-time equivalent (FTE)

students. Eight other higher education institutions enrol a further 29,000 FTEs in distance education. Together, distance education FTE students constitute 26% of all higher education FTE students.

As might be expected, in 2004 the majority of these students were registered in the Humanities and Social Sciences (59%), with 29% in Business and Management Sciences and 11% in Science, Engineering and Technology. Within the Humanities, a good proportion of students were enrolled in Education. Indeed Education students, with over 29,000 FTE students, made up 22% of FTE distance education enrolment, and exceeded the number of FTE students studying Education through 'contact' modes.

Whereas institutional student success rates for 'contact' education ranged between 66 and 90%, with a mean of 75%, for distance education this rate ranged between 50 and 84% with a mean of 60%. Given that the vast majority of distance education students are working, this lower success rate is to be expected. There is however some evidence from studies of the throughput of different cohorts of students, that only a small proportion of distance education students in three year qualifications actually completes its qualifications.

Nevertheless, distance education's share of the national total of graduates in 2004 was 32% of diplomas, 20% of Bachelor's degrees, 12% of Master's degrees and 9% of Doctorate degrees. In 2004, in the different fields, distance programmes produced 58% of all graduates in the field of Education, 21% in Business and Management, 17% in Humanities and Social Sciences and 6% in Science and Technology.

By 2003, there was little provision of distance education by private providers: largely in the fields of Theology and Management. This had not always been the case. In the mid nineties, a number of private providers had entered into partnerships with public institutions to offer large-scale distance education programmes, usually in teacher education. A number of reports of the poor quality of such programmes, and closer scrutiny by the Department of Education, led to the withdrawal of private provision in most cases.

Further Education and Training and schooling

The Further Education and Training (FET) band includes all post compulsory education and training below tertiary education. It is equivalent to grades 10, 11 and 12 in the schooling stream.

Although distance education can be found in this band, in the public education sector it is not currently a significant form of provision.

Established some 16 years ago, the Technical College of South Africa (Technisa) is the only public distance education college operating nationally in the FET band. It offers a range of technical and vocational training in the fields of Engineering, Business Studies and Tourism. In 2003, the headcount figure was in the region of 4,900 students. (Data provided by Dr Nic J. Neveling, Education Specialist, Engineering Studies, IT, Technisa.)

It is currently in the process of acquiring accreditation as a multi-purpose provider with the recently formed Sector Education and Training Authority in line with requirements post 1994.

Technisa offers national certificates and diplomas from National Qualifications Framework (NQF) levels 1 – 5. Students can choose from a wide variety of trimester and semester courses in the following learning areas: Engineering Studies (electrical, mechanical, building), Business Studies (secretarial and managerial) and General Studies (Educare, Travel and Tourism, Funeral Directing). Technisa also offers a wide variety of customised short courses and consultancy services to meet the needs of students and other clients.

In the schooling arena, in 1992 the South African Committee for Higher Education (SACHED) Trust, a prominent anti-apartheid educational organisation, embarked on a bold initiative to offer an alternative secondary curriculum to adults using distance education. Known as ASECA, the programme continues to exist with a couple of thousand students each year. There is currently a move afoot to incorporate the programme into provincial provision.

The ASECA courses were used in a small project called the Gauteng Youth Programme, initially a self-standing pilot project and then based at one of the technical colleges in the Gauteng Province, which provided a highly supported distance education programme to out-of-school youth. This programme was an early experiment to integrate education and training but despite some success has been phased out.

Distance education at this level is, in the main, provided by private institutions such as Intec, Damelin, and Lyceum/Success, for students in grades 10 to 12 who don't want to or are unable to study at a face-to-face school. (The largest of the private providers is Intec, which has over 25,000 students, and offers courses ranging from Industrial Psychology through Pet Grooming to Game Ranging). Unfortunately, comprehensive information about the private FET sector is not readily available.

There is also a range of exciting initiatives to support schooling using different media. For example, a non-profit organisation called Mindset supports teachers and learners through the extensive provision of digital video and text materials, especially in English, Mathematics and Physical Science. Mindset is pioneering advanced satellite technology to deliver the resources to schools equipped with receiving storage devices.

Supplementary education aimed at learners in both public and private schooling is also offered through the Learning Channel, which broadcasts educational television programmes with supporting newspaper supplements.

In addition, the Open Learning Systems Education Trust (OLSET) works closely with Provincial Departments of Education to produce and deliver high quality audio and integrated print support materials which are consistent with the pedagogy of the new constructivist curriculum. OLSET targets poorly resourced primary schools located in disadvantaged urban and remote rural communities.

Adult and community education

The acronym ABET is used in South Africa to refer to Adult Basic Education and Training. The acronym attempts to highlight the integration between education and training – a marriage which was arranged by the wide range of post-apartheid legislation and which is grounded in the NQF via the South African Qualifications Authority (SAQA) Act of 1995. It allows for the recognition and accreditation of learning achievements on the part of even basic level learners. It permits portability, accessibility and transferability of skills, knowledge and abilities.

ABET implies more than just literacy: it is intended to serve a range of social, economic and developmental roles and it is also viewed as fundamental to building the dignity and self-esteem of the learner.

A significant example of training adult educators using distance education to roll out ABET programmes is the ABET Institute at Unisa, which has trained over 37,000 ABET educators. For 2002 to 2004, it used this network to provide literacy training to over 100,000 learners as part of the South African National Literacy Initiative (SANLI).

Policy environment

In 1994, the African National Congress (ANC) document: *A Policy Framework for Education and Training* outlined a vision of a future 'well-designed and quality distance education system based on the principles of open learning' (ANC, 1994: 78) that would contribute to increased access to South Africa's newly enfranchised majority, as well as provide opportunities for redress. The need to expand access to higher education was prioritised, as was a commitment to an open learning approach:

The African National Congress commissioned the South African Institute for Distance Education (SAIDE), to organise a review of current distance education and also propose ways in which distance education could contribute integrally to the proposed education and training system. This review was carried out in early 1994 by an international team of experts. It was deeply critical of much of the distance education on offer in South Africa but identified a number of explicit roles that distance education could play in transformation of education.

The 1995 *White Paper on Education and Training*, the first policy statement on education from the newly elected government took up this theme, stating:

> The dimensions of South Africa's learning deficit are so vast in relation to the needs of the people, the constitutional guarantee of the right to basic education, and the severe financial constraints on infrastructural development on a large scale, that a completely fresh approach is required to the provision of learning opportunities (Department of Education/DoE, 1995: 28).

The term 'open learning' was understood in the White Paper, as follows:

> Open learning is an approach which combines the principles of learner centredness, lifelong learning, flexibility of learning provision, the removal of barriers to access learning, the recognition for credit of prior learning experience, the provision of learner support, the construction of learning programmes in the expectation that learners can succeed, and the maintenance of rigorous quality assurance over the design of learning materials and support systems.

South Africa is able to gain from worldwide experience over several decades in the development of innovative methods of education, including the use of guided self-study, and the appropriate use of a variety of media, which give practical expression to open learning principles (DoE, 1995: 28).

Explicit policy around distance education was then to be taken up within the policy documents of the different sectors. Given the significant provision for distance education within higher education, considerable attention was given to distance education in this sector.

Higher education policy

Early in 1995, a presidential proclamation established a National Commission on Higher Education (NCHE) to advise government on issues concerning the restructuring of higher education. The Commission was required to formulate a vision and policy proposals to ensure the development of a well-planned, integrated, high quality system of higher education, the vision and policy needed to address unjust regularities and inefficiencies inherited from the apartheid era, and to respond to the new social cultural and economic demands.

Participation and access

The NCHE advocated substantially increased participation rates in higher education. It emphasised the role that resource-based learning and distance education could play with respect to expansion, to the principle of redress as it applies to those previously denied higher education opportunities, as well as their role in meeting the growing economic and other imperatives for flexible lifelong opportunities (DoE,1996:6.4.5./119).

Echoing the sentiments of the 1995 White Paper, *White Paper 3: A Programme for the Transformation of Higher Education* (DoE,1997) endorsed the notion that distance education and on-campus resource-based learning have a crucial role to play in addressing the challenges of expanding access, diversifying the body of learners, being responsive to the needs of non-traditional students (for example, those already in employment or who need to earn in order to meet study costs) and enhancing quality within the context of limited resources (DoE: 26).

Thus, it is clear that the new South African government sought to encourage massification of the higher education system. This, together with international trends towards lifelong learning, resulted in high expectations in policy on the role distance education might play across the system in increasing access and cost-effectiveness.

The Ministry of Education's 2001 National Plan for Higher Education (NPHE) set revised targets for participation rates and, for the first time, for graduation rates and ratios for enrolment among different fields of study, thus dramatically refining the notion of increased participation. With regard to the notion of access for groups previously marginalized, the report has a separate outcome on 'broadening the social base of students', emphasising in particular workers, mature learners, and the disabled (ibid: 28). No special mention is made of the role of distance education in this regard, perhaps because of the Ministry's concern expressed in their report on the quality of distance education provision.

Cost effectiveness

Particular emphasis was placed on cost-effectiveness of distance education in the NCHE 1996 report . It gave, as its reason for proposing to expand distance education more than 'contact' education, relatively lower 'cost per qualifier' in distance education institutions (ibid: 95). It goes on to suggest that increased use of resource-based learning and distance education would contribute to more efficiency in the use of resources.

The White Paper on Higher Education, as its first comment on distance education, spoke of the challenge to expand access, diversify the body of learners, and enhance quality, in the context of resource constraints. It encouraged resource-based learning and distance education throughout the higher education system, as, it argued, 'the quality and success of teaching need not be dependent upon staff levels rising in tandem with increased enrolments. In other words…better use can be made of scarce and costly physical resources scholarship and teaching expertise' (DoE, 1997: 26). The White Paper did however caution about the efficiency and effectiveness of much current distance education provision (ibid: 27).

The NPHE cites economies of scale as one of its motivations for deciding to establish the single dedicated distance education institution, referring in particular to the expense of the rapidly changing and expensive information and communication technologies (MoE, 2001: 63). This decision resulted in the establishment in 2004 of the new much larger comprehensive institution, Unisa, referred to above.

New policy in distance higher education

In 2003, the Minister of Education requested the advisory body, the Council on Higher Education(CHE), to provide advice on a range of issues around regulation, funding and co-ordination of distance education. The key questions centred on:

- Who should be allowed to offer distance education and under what conditions?
- What funding arrangements should be in place?
- What co-ordination mechanisms might be useful?

The CHE conducted an extensive investigation under the leadership of SAIDE (CHE, 2004) and on the basis of its findings, developed advice for the Minister (CHE, 2004).

In short, the CHE argued that there was already a range of requirements for public institutions to meet before they were

entitled to offer programmes. These included matching the institution's mission, meeting regional needs, having the necessary capacity and meeting the quality criteria established by the Higher Education Quality Committee (HEQC). It advised that these criteria needed to be strengthen to take account of particular concerns, particularly around quality issues, but that no new conditions should be added except that contact institutions should remain predominantly 'contact' and not drift to being predominantly distance education. It suggested that the dedicated distance education institution was not under threat and that it should seek to optimise possibilities of economies of scale in its programme offerings.

From a funding perspective, the CHE advised that given the continuing preponderance still of largely correspondence type courses, the current reduced input subsidy should remain, but that resources for increased learner support and extensive materials development should be made available on receipt of well substantiated and motivated submissions.

This advice was circulated for public comment. A draft policy document should be available by the end of 2006.

Quality assurance

Meanwhile, the HEQC has developed an approach to the quality assurance of distance education that incorporates most of the CHE proposals. This approach is as follows:

- Quality assurance mechanisms for contact and distance educations and programmes should be the same. This implies that there will be one set of institutional audit criteria and one set of programme accreditation criteria for all modes of delivery. However, account is taken of different modes through infusing particular concerns into the criteria, through the interpretation of the criteria and through the training given to evaluators;

- Programmes moving to distance education and online delivery will be viewed as new programmes and will require new accreditation;

- In the HEQC process of national reviews, large-scale distance education programmes have been and will be considered using the above approach;

- In order to promote quality in distance education, the HEQC supported NADEOSA, the National Association of Distance Education Organisations of South Africa (NADEOSA), to publish a volume, *Designing and Delivering Distance Education: Quality Criteria and Case Studies from South Africa*, which not only identifies some criteria but also exemplifies good practice relating to these criteria. In addition, NADEOSA and the South African Institute for Distance Education (SAIDE) have collaborated with the HEQC to produce a *Good Practice Guide for Distance Education*, which will be available shortly.

Conclusion

The above analysis makes clear that, while distance education plays an important role in South African education – especially in providing access and redress to hundreds of thousands of South Africans, its potential is still fully to be realised. In particular, two key issues need to be addressed: the first is ensuring quality in higher distance education across the system, rather than in a few isolated pockets; the second is the rigorous development of the role that distance education can play in expanding further education in South Africa. Both processes are firmly underway.

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Biographical notes

Jennifer Glennie is the Director of the South African Institute for Distance Education (SAIDE), a prominent non-profit research and development agency committed to increasing access to quality education for all South Africans, particularly through distance education and the appropriate use of technology. She is a member of the Council on Higher Education (which advises the Minister of Education in South Africa), Deputy Chairperson of the Higher Education Quality Committee, a member of the Unisa Council and South Africa's representative on the Board of the Commonwealth of Learning.