Introduction

In the wake of apartheid, the South African government faces the challenge of reforming its higher education system so to increase access for the country’s black citizens who represent a majority of the nation’s population, but are a minority of those who attend and graduate from university. One potential solution is the expansion and development of distance education, and specifically, to reach those who cannot afford to attend college, via technological advancements. In addition to attempting to equalize tertiary education access, some South African educators and policymakers hope that distance education will increase the number of students who pursue training in technology and business, decrease the nation’s significant skills and experience gap, and contribute to the growth of the struggling economy. This heightened need for distance education comes at a time when the nation’s traditional distance education model is being recognized as outmoded, but also when advances in technology present tremendous opportunities for creating better replacement models for distance learning. Both distance and contact institutions are working to meet the challenge, but a number of critical barriers still exist that slowdown its growth, including poor curriculum design and limited infrastructure. Additionally, the South African government has taken a conservative approach towards the proliferation of distance education programs. Despite these obstacles, South Africa and its higher education institutions and educators are active in finding a quality distance education model, and the South African government is supportive, albeit cautious, of these efforts.

Size and Shape of Higher Education in South Africa

South Africa has a primary, secondary and tertiary education structure. The tertiary education structure consists of 21 universities, 15 technikons (technical universities), and 50 teacher-training colleges. During the 20th century, the policy of racial segregation led to the establishment of universities along racial lines. Although the origins are still evident in the student body composition at some campuses, South Africa is working to move past the legacy of apartheid (banned in 1994). The 1997 Higher Education Act unified all higher education institutions under one Act of Parliament, governed by the Council for Higher Education.

South Africa’s 15 technikons represent a dynamic and highly innovative sector of higher education in South Africa. Today, the technikons are far more than technical colleges - many
aspire to the title of ‘universities of technology’ and since 1995 have offered degree programs up
to doctoral level. They are distinguished from the universities not by the quality of their
educational product, but rather by their focus on technology education and research and
development. Technikon education has accordingly become more international in outlook and
flexible in its method of delivery, with distance and online programs playing an increasingly
important role, and IT and computer literacy integrated into technikon education at all levels.
Many technikons are involved in collaborative industry-directed research programs and this
involvement is in turn reflected in curriculum design. The ability of graduates to ‘hit the ground
running’ and immediately begin to be economically productive is a key objective.

**Current Challenges for Higher Education in South Africa**

Four decades of apartheid in South Africa have had a severe and detrimental impact on
access to tertiary education. Blacks represent over 70% of the overall South African population,
yet they comprise only 43% of the 351,746 students enrolled in South African universities
(Probert, 1995). Although this imbalance has been improving, it is still strongly evident today.
The access issue is even more salient as the nation pushes towards equality and strives to
improve its economy through the advanced education of its citizens. Thus, one of the primary
challenges facing South African universities is to increase higher education access to students
from disadvantaged backgrounds while maintaining academic standards which will provide the
country with a population sufficiently prepared to address the country’s economic needs.

Inequality is just one aspect of a higher education system that is currently in crisis.
Enrollment in higher education in South Africa has been declining dramatically, with the
viability of some campuses threatened by a drop of almost 30% in student intake between 1998
and 1999. National enrollment figures for 1999 went down about 10% - which translates into
40,000 fewer students than in 1998. (Tagwireyi, 2000). The decline is more severe in the
historically black institutions. This decrease was due to a strong decline in the number of
students completing secondary education who satisfied the precondition for entry into
universities and some technikons, and a fall in retention rates due to unclear factors. This means
that there is a smaller pool of high school graduates/university candidates that more than 20
South African universities and 20 foreign private institutions compete.
Another concern is that the current higher education system is not only producing insufficient numbers of graduates to meet the country’s needs, but it is also producing inadequate numbers of graduates in fields such as information technology, engineering, and business.

**Department of Education Programme Grid – Student Outputs of Higher Education, 1998**

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<tr>
<td><strong>Technikons</strong></td>
<td>• 21,500 graduates</td>
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<td>• 80% received qualifications in applied fields: 31% business commerce and management, 24% in social sciences and applied humanities, and 22% in engineering and the applied sciences</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Universities</strong></td>
<td>• 67,500 graduates</td>
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<td>• 45% received qualifications in applied fields</td>
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<td>• Remaining 55% consisted of: 25% education, 13% humanities, 9% health sciences, and 8% in natural and mathematical sciences</td>
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**History of Distance Education in South Africa and Current Challenges**

Distance education has played a major role in South African higher education since first pioneered in 1946 at the University of South Africa (UNISA), a distance learning institution and the oldest and largest university in South Africa. Following a “correspondence” model from its inception, this structure has been replicated at a number of institutions across the country. In this model, students receive lecture notes by mail and turn in their written responses in the same manner. In recent years, this model has received criticism that the curricula focuses on teaching rather than on learning and that students learn to pass an examination, rather than to acquire the competencies needed to be effective in their work. (Bosman & Frost, 1996)

In sharp positive contrast to traditional university enrollment, distance-learning enrollment grew by 492% between 1993 and 1999, from 14,000 to 69,000 with no signs of decline (Probert, 1995). However, retention and graduation rates are low. For example, only 10 percent of UNISA’s students graduated in 1999. With such low graduation rates, the Department of Education declared that the traditional correspondence model was outmoded and limited in its ability to further advanced education and to address the tremendous challenges of a new era in South African history. Thus, recent and current developments in South African distance education have and are focused on changing the nation’s model for delivering distance learning.

The new model incorporates the provision of learner support through a variety of mechanisms, including learning centers with audio-visual and computer-assisted support.
“Ten years ago in South Africa unreformed correspondence education, driven by provider needs, and resulting in drop-out that was as devastating for individuals as it was in terms of national educational investment, was the dominant model. From this position there has been considerable hard-fought change...Dominant amongst the insights is that learner support has to be integrated into distance education.” (Tait, 2000)

South Africa’s distance education systems are rapidly adapting to meet the needs of post-apartheid society. This change is primarily due to four factors: (i) developments in IT which allow for different modes of delivery; (ii) the need for greater cost-efficiency to deal with increased enrollments without having to increase staff or build infrastructure; (iii) competition from private higher education providers, and (iv) the government’s public stance that distance education has a crucial role to play in expanding access, diversifying the body of learners in South Africa, and enhancing the quality of instruction within economic constraints.

Recent Developments in Distance Education

According to the International Center for Distance Learning, South Africa currently has over 65 institutions providing distance learning in higher education. The communications between learners and instructors in these distance education programs is provided by technologies, which has traditionally been print-based. However, there are now a wide variety of technologies available, including broadcast radio and television; audio and video tape, interactive audio and video teleconferencing and computer and Internet technologies. (SAGDEN, 2001)

UNISA recently launched the first phase of its Internet based “Students On-line” service. With this service students who have Internet access may communicate with their lecturers and fellow students via e-mail and have controlled access to records and library holdings. At the Technikon SA, another distance education institution, the school promotes what they call an “Integrated Learner-Centered Distance Education Model”, based on three fundamental principles: better student support on a regional basis, quality courseware, and capable administration. At Technikon South Africa, learners who have access to computers and the Internet are able to access their assignments, examination schedules and grades on-line through its TSA Virtual Campus. In some cases, study material is also accessible via the Internet.

Traditional distance education institutions are not the only source of distance learning in South Africa; some contact institutions have also designed distance education courses to
supplement classroom instruction. For example, the University of Pretoria now offers interactive television and Web-based courses. These courses use a variety of instructional delivery methods and incorporate television, radio, and the Internet to expand learning beyond the classroom.

**The Promise of Technology and Distance Education**

On an educational level, the biggest challenge for South Africa lies in addressing the enormous imbalances in skills and experience between different sectors in the community. The role distance education can play in this regard is undeniably important. (Bosman & Frost, 1996) For low-income and working citizens, distance education is more cost effective than full time study and allows students to work while they study. Distance education also provides for the enrollment of large numbers of students. These factors are of vital importance to the new group of tertiary level students in South Africa.

New modes of instructional delivery are also being promoted to support the new focus on principles of open learning like free and open access, freedom of time, place, and pacing of education. Radio remains the most effective medium for distributing information to marginalized groups in Africa. It overcomes the barriers of distance, cost and illiteracy. In most Eastern and Southern African countries, existing radio transmitter networks reach between 60 and 90 percent of the populations. Combined with the Internet, radio can provide a powerful programming tool for community broadcasters, with the ability to exchange relevant program content and to access a much wider audience. (IRDC, 2001) Broadcasting policies are developing constantly as the government stresses the new responsibility of broadcasting to play a constructive educational role.

**Problems and Concerns about Distance Education**

Despite movement in the direction of reform and expansion of distance education programs in South Africa, problems still exist in the area of distance education curriculum. Distance education programs are too often based on poorly designed materials and rely on a single medium of delivery that is frequently inappropriate to the student. “Mixing technologies will always produce better results than any single technology. Getting the optimum mixture though requires great skill and knowledge. Ultimately it depends more on the quality of course design and the quality of instruction than on technology itself.” (SAGDEN, 2001) Programs for Internet
based education are too often no more than e-mail versions of poorly written correspondence texts with designers focused on minimizing costs instead of improving education. (Department of Education, 2001) Even the use of radio brings with it curricular problems due to historical links to apartheid educational policies. This past connection continues to generate resistance to the inclusion of educational programming into African language radio stations line-up as station programmers do not trust the curriculum provided by South African Broadcasting Corporation (SAIDE, 1998). Issues of curriculum design and content continue to plague distance education.

Beyond issues of content, there are a number of constraints to the expansion of distance education. (SAIDE, 1998) Limited infrastructure and resources along with problems in learner preparedness and antiquated learning systems are all challenges facing growth in the area. These problems make learner support particularly important. Access to educational materials does not promote equality of educational opportunity unless learner support is also offered. A high percentage of learners are unlikely to succeed if admitted to distance education institutions but not provided with adequate support due to the poor quality of basic education for the majority of the population. (Mays, 2000) “Many learners undertaking distance education programmes at secondary and tertiary level do so on the basis of very negative experiences of education. Their schools have operated sporadically, their educators have often been alienated, unmotivated, and authoritarian, and rote learning will have been the norm. The prospective learners are likely to lack many essential learning skills, and in general, are unprepared.” (Glennie, in Mays, 2000) Issues of curriculum, preparedness, support and access are critical barriers to the effective growth of distance education.

**Government Policies and Regulations**

The overarching vision of the Plan is to establish a countrywide, coordinated higher education system to meet the learning needs of South African citizens, and the developmental needs of South African society and economy. The Plan emphasizes the need to increase the participation rate in higher education, both to address the “imperative for equity, as well as changing human resource and labour needs” (Department of Education, 2001). The Plan stresses the need to:

1. Increase graduate outputs
2. Increase participation rate through broader recruiting (e.g., workers, mature students especially women, the disabled) and address equity access and retention for black and women students as well as black and women staff
3. Shift enrollments away from humanities toward business, science, engineering and technology, and increase black and women representation in these areas
4. Ensure that all graduates have the “skills and competencies necessary to function in modern society, in particular, computer literacy, information management, communication and analytical skills.”

In the report, the government expresses support for the growth of distance education but also voices strong concerns about current programs and unrealistic expectations:

“One of the greatest challenges that faces higher education in South Africa is to ensure that it educates and nurtures the next generation of intellectuals and leaders, especially black intellectuals, including professionals and researchers. It is unlikely this role can be played by “virtual” universities – they cannot replace the traditional contact higher education institutions where scholarship, research, teaching and service are valued in equal measure and where the focus is on the full range and breadth of disciplines. And more importantly, where knowledge generation and intellectual development are themselves the product of social interaction and engagement.” (Department of Education, 2001)

The recent proliferation of distance education programs in contact institutions raised a number of issues for the government. One worry is that the rapid growth of contact institution distance education programs will negatively affect the sustainability of the dedicated distance education institutions in South Africa. The Department of Education also wonders how the development of these programs addresses the need to improve the quality and learner support services as well as cost-efficiency and effectiveness of programs. With so much money and energy focused on expansion of programs they are concerned that quality is not being addressed. Their concerns about quality and efficiency intensified and led to a moratorium on the development of distance education courses or programs within contact institutions.

However, the government has not backed away from distance education. They released a new policy for increasing access to learning technology. The new Telecommunications Act
mandates the development of a Universal Service Agency (USA), which, as its primary responsibility, is to create universal access to the information infrastructure available in South Africa. Multi-purpose community centers or tele-centers have been targeted as a key mechanism for achieving this goal. Potentially, these tele-centers would be placed inside post offices, schools, clinics, community centers and/or private franchises to provide universal access to learning technology and continue the expansion of distance education. (IDRC study, 2001)

The Plan condones the introduction of new distance learning education programs by lifting a previous moratorium established in 2000, although it does provide approval restrictions and recommends “the establishment of a single dedicated distance education institution to address the opportunities presented by distance education for increasing access both locally and in the rest of Africa.” Initially this institution would be established through the merger of UNISA, Technikon South Africa, and the Distance Education Centre of Vista University. These three institutions are in fact already part of a collaborative called the Confederation of Open Learning Institutions of South Africa (COLISA), which aims to be a national resource and reference point for providing quality higher education in South Africa. COLISA supports an integrated flexible learning system with regional nodal points within which quality distance education can be provided. The Plan also recommends investigating potential consolidation of non-distance learning focused institutions, though not delivery sites, and promotes collaboration between institutions for program development, delivery, rationalization, and research.

**Moving Forward: The Working Group**

As a means of implementing the integration of the three institutions into one center of distance learning, the Plan created a Working Group to oversee the integration. It is important to consider the challenges and opportunities this Working Group confronts as it makes its decisions. Some of the issues the Working Group must confront include:

- Administration and logistics
- Courseware design and development
- Joint offerings, rationalization, articulation, intermediate qualifications
- Learner support and community colleges
- Human resources development
- Technology
- Quality assurance
- Communication, marketing and fundraising
The existing organizational infrastructure among the distance learning institutions presents another set of challenges. The infrastructure suggests that strong potentially competing and entrenched constituencies must be balanced. These constituencies include: students, employers, government, the community, the global academic community, and staff.

COLISA and other distance learning partners have launched two projects of particular note for the future. These two projects target distance learning tools in areas where no university or technikon exists. The first project was created when the Premier of Mpumalanga appointed a commission to investigate and make proposals on the provision of higher education in the Province - one of two provinces in the country, which does not have a university or technikon of its own. A relatively inexpensive regional educenter has been created in Nelspruit where a lead partner renders services to the other partners on an agency basis. The University of Pretoria has joined the project and other institutions are also considering participation. The three COLISA partners also decided to launch a project similar to the one in Mpumalanga in Kimberley in the Northern Cape - the other Province without a higher education institution of its own. Because of the smaller number of students in the Northern Cape, this project is of a more limited scope, but incorporates the ideas of using learner support tools to produce higher levels of productivity. Both of these projects reveal that the three institutions can coordinate their efforts with positive results and suggest that further integration on a nation-wide basis is possible.

**Private Sector Providers**

Private sector providers of distance learning have been in existence since just after the formation of UNISA. These providers were first organized under the Association of Correspondence Colleges of Southern Africa (ACCOSA). In 1965, ACCOSA promoted a private bill in Parliament, which was approved and became The Correspondence Colleges Act. (Act 59 of 1965). In 1990, ACCOSA changed its name to the Association of Distance Education Colleges of South Africa (ADEC). ADEC serves as the industry association and lobbying body for the fragmented private education providers. The Plan outlined the government’s concerns that private education providers often fail to meet basic quality requirements. ADEC and its member companies are engaged with the government in ongoing talks to establish reasonable regulatory policy and to coordinate how private education providers will fit into the government’s overall education strategy.
Criticisms and Conclusion

Former South African president Nelson Mandela is arguably the most famous South African citizen to have received a college degree through distance learning. Mandela did his degree through UNISA during his imprisonment at Robben Island. Decades later, a now democratic, apartheid-free South Africa faces the immense challenge of achieving full equality and increasing access to higher education for its black students. Distance education poses an opportunity, but one that the Government of South Africa has been treating with caution. There exist multiple dualities with distance learning for South Africa. For one, there is a quantity versus quality problem—should the nation’s policy be to prioritize access over instructional effectiveness? Is it more important to enroll as many citizens as possible to give them some higher education or focus on increasing graduation rates by providing such drivers as learner support, and not just aspects of a traditional correspondence model. Another concern is whether pushing access will not just result in a two-tiered system whereby black students receive their degrees in distance education institutions and white students attend contact universities.

The Department of Education’s Plan is a useful first step towards addressing some of these issues, but it appears that very little action has been taken to put policy into effect. Like many high-level government documents, the Plan speaks in generalities and presents few specific policy action steps. The Department of Education has also made some contradictory remarks with respect to distance learning. For example, it declared traditional distance education to be outmoded yet limited the growth of innovative distance education when it imposed a moratorium and other restrictions. The Department has also stated that it believes "Virtual Universities" cannot replace contact institutions yet it looks to grow Virtual Universities, not contact institutions. The government has also stated that distance education can reduce staff needs, but at the same time recommends increasing distance learning staff for student support. The Department of Education will first have to determine internally what the government’s position is on distance learning and their recommended distance education model before it can attempt to develop a comprehensive plan and set of actions for the nation.
BIBLIOGRAPHY


