



*The Office Of The Principal and Vice - Chancellor*

## **COL FORUM ON A DECADE OF ODL IN THE COMMONWEALTH**

**ABUJA 18 – 20 MAY 2009**

**A country report for COL's forum on a decade of ODL in the Commonwealth**

**THE UNIVERSITY OF SOUTH AFRICA<sup>1</sup>**

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## INTRODUCTION

Higher education the world over is in a state of flux, buffeted by ongoing and increasing demands for access, diminishing levels of funding, rapidly evolving technology and most recently, a global recession which is impacting on higher education in equal measure to the economies of the world. While it is accepted the world over that education is a driver of change and socio-economic development it could be argued that the current global dynamics and emerging trends necessitate a fresh look at higher education practice with a view to ensuring its continued relevance, impact and value in a world whose view of education is moving from that of a public good, to a tradable commodity.

Furthermore, the rapid advances of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century have thrown into stark contrast the ever growing divide between the wealthy so-called northern and western “haves” and the poorer “have-nots” in the south. In the north and west, the 21<sup>st</sup> Century is bringing with it succeeding generations of increasingly technology-savvy young men and women who know precisely what they want and who want it in the most efficient manner possible and with the minimum cost and disruption to the rest of their very busy lives. This is a generation that is used to and comfortable with technology and the kinds of changes and adaptations that have to be made to absorb it into their lives. It is a generation that is becoming less adept at social interaction as it becomes increasingly dependent on technology as the primary means of communication.

In the south, governments are not only struggling to accommodate ever increasing demands for access to higher education in an environment largely bereft of appropriate infrastructure, resources and capacity, but they have to do so in a technological world that is being driven by forces over which they have minimal control or influence. There is no escaping the fact that those nations who cannot keep up or adapt to these continually changing circumstances, will ultimately become educationally redundant. Bridging the technological divide, however, has come onto the agenda of modern nations with a bang!

It is in this environment that the notion and practice of distance education, or more recently, Open Distance Learning (ODL) has assumed a growing importance: both in terms of its inherent ability to overcome the constraints of access, quality and affordability, and

its ability to render boundaries porous, and age and personal circumstance largely irrelevant. In terms of Africa's needs, ODL is a very tantalising and viable prospect. And yet even as Africa delves into the possible benefits of ODL, it must also acknowledge the significant and serious challenges which have to be overcome or accommodated in its implementation.

## **A. OVERVIEW OF EDUCATION IN THE COUNTRY<sup>2</sup>**

In South Africa, the Department of Education is responsible for education across the country as a whole, while each of the nine provinces has its own education department. The central government provides a national framework for education policy, but operationalising education at schools level is a provincial competency. Power is further devolved to grassroots level via elected school governing bodies, which have a significant say in the running of their schools.

Under the South African Schools Act of 1996, education is compulsory for all South Africans from age 7 (grade 1) to age 15, or upon completion of grade 9. General Education and Training also includes Adult Basic Education and Training. However, given the gross historical disparities inherited from the apartheid regime, schools vary from the most basic and rudimentary rural structures, to modern, well equipped and resourced buildings and as such, social status still, to a large extent, determines the quality of education that a child will receive in terms of infrastructure, resources and even the calibre of teachers.

South Africa's National Qualifications Framework (NQF) recognises three broad bands of education: General Education and Training, Further Education and Training, and Higher Education and Training. School life spans 13 years or grades, from grade 0, otherwise known as grade R or "reception year", through to grade 12 or "matric", the year of matriculation. General Education and Training runs from grade 0 to grade 9.

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<sup>2</sup> The information in the following section was derived from *SouthAfrica.info reporter*. Updated November 2006. <http://www.southafrica.info/about/education/education.htm> (Accessed 30 March 2009)

At the primary and high school levels, South Africa has some 12.3-million learners, some 386 600 teachers and 26 292 schools, including 1 098 registered independent or private schools. Of all schools, roughly 6 000 are high schools (grade 7 to grade 12) and the rest primary (grade 0 to grade 6).

Further Education and Training takes place from grades 10 to 12, and also includes career-oriented education and training offered in other Further Education and Training institutions - technical colleges, community colleges and private colleges. Diplomas and certificates are qualifications recognised at this level.

Many private schools chart a path of excellence, adopting cutting-edge trends, or offering solid, sometimes religion-based education since their origins in mission or church schools. But there are many outstanding state-aided schools, on a par with some of the top private institutions. There are around 1 098 registered private schools, catering for some 340 000 students - 2.8% of the total schooling population.

## **B STATUS OF HIGHER EDUCATION IN THE COUNTRY**

World-wide there has been spectacular growth in higher education enrolments, up from 68 million in 1991 to an estimated 132 million in 2004.<sup>3</sup> However evidence of the divide mentioned above is provided in the fact that out of every 100 adults of tertiary age, 69 are enrolled in tertiary programmes in North America and Western Europe, but only 5 are enrolled in sub-Saharan Africa and 10 in South and West Asia.<sup>4</sup> Globally, the pace of tertiary enrolments has quickened, rising from 4% annually in the early 1990s to 7% annually since 1999. Between 1991 and 2004 sub-Saharan Africa had one of the highest regional growth rates with an average increase of 7% per year, adding up to a total increase of nearly 95% over the entire period, but this took off from the lowest gross enrolment ratio (GER) (3%) of any region.<sup>5</sup> In North America and Western Europe, the average growth rate has been almost 2% per year since 1991 and despite the fact that this growth is

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<sup>3</sup> Global Education Digest 2006. Comparing Education Around the World. Unesco Institute for Statistics, Montreal. 2006 pg 21.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid. pg 21

<sup>5</sup> Ibid pg 22.

not as fast as in other regions it has by far the greatest participation rate. The tertiary GER reached 70% in 2004.<sup>6</sup> The United States represents 51% of the tertiary enrolments in North America and Western Europe.<sup>7</sup> In 2004, 25 countries each had more than 1 million tertiary students, accounting together for 78% of the global total. China has the highest absolute number of tertiary students: 19 million or about 15% of the world's tertiary students. The United States, India and the Russian Federation follow, with respectively, 17 million, 11 million and 9 million tertiary students. Brazil, China, India, Indonesia, Japan, the Russian Federation and the United States each had more tertiary students than the entire region of sub-Saharan Africa.<sup>8</sup>

It is in this global context that South African higher education is located and must compete. The prospect is daunting to say the least. Both in the SADC region and in Africa overall, South Africa has one of the most efficient and effective higher education systems, with enrolment figures significantly higher than those in other African states. In 2007 the public higher education institutions employed 41 383 academic staff and 108 687 staff in total and the public higher education institutions enrolled 761 090 students in total (comprising 624 977 undergraduate students and 110 418 postgraduate students)<sup>9</sup> second only to Nigeria (at 1,289,656) in the sub-Saharan region. However it should be born in mind that South Africa's population is approximately 49 million as opposed to Nigeria's approximate 146 million. In percentage terms then, South Africa has the largest student enrolment in sub-Saharan Africa. As the only dedicated ODL institution in South Africa, and the largest provider of ODL on the Continent, the University of South Africa (Unisa) enrolls just over one-third of all students in South Africa, with approximately 262,000 headcounts in 2008<sup>10</sup>, and it also has the highest foreign student enrolment figures in Africa. Approximately 17% of age appropriate young people are enrolled in tertiary education in

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid pg 22

<sup>7</sup> Ibid pg 22

<sup>8</sup> Ibid pg 23

<sup>9</sup> SouthAfrica.info reporter. Updated November 2006.

<http://www.southafrica.info/about/education/education.htm> Accessed 30 March 2009

<sup>10</sup> Out of a total of 741 383 enrolments in 2006, Unisa accounted for 226 769 headcount students. Also offering a variety of distance courses are the Universities of North West, Pretoria, Walter Sisulu, TUT all of whom account for 37 873 enrolments. Source: EDUCATION STATISTICS IN SOUTH AFRICA 2006. Unisa's enrolments in critical fields of study are no less significant: 26283 in SET, 95 605 in Business & Management and 25 513 in teacher education, as well as 5 460 Master's and 948 doctoral studies.

South Africa, and the intention is to increase that number to 21% by 2015. As such Unisa has a direct impact on higher education in South Africa, and increasingly, on the Continent, and its successes or failures will be reflected similarly.

The general purpose of Higher Education in South Africa is set out in the White Paper of 1997 and can be briefly summarised as follows:

- “To meet the learning needs and aspirations of individuals through the development of their intellectual abilities and aptitudes throughout their lives
- To address the development needs of society and provide the labour market in a knowledge-driven and knowledge-dependant society, with the ever-changing high-level competencies and expertise necessary for the growth and prosperity of a modern economy
- To contribute to the socialisation of enlightened, responsible and constructively critical citizens; and
- To contribute to the creation, sharing and evaluation of knowledge.”<sup>11</sup>

Higher Education in South Africa has been “ ... charged with developing a citizenry capable of participating effectively in democratic processes, and thus enhancing the project of democracy; with producing intellectuals who can engage with the most intractable problems of society and so develop more generally the ability of citizens to participate politically, economically and socially; and with producing high-level skilled graduates and new bases of knowledge to drive economic and social development, and to enhance the overall levels of intellectual and cultural development.”<sup>12</sup>

It should be noted that Unisa’s notion of “graduateness” that is, the range of attributes that would distinguish Unisa Graduates and equip them holistically for their future life, is founded on both the Constitution of the Republic of South Africa and the above mentioned Higher Education Act (1997). These attributes include cognitive development, critical

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<sup>11</sup> White Paper, 1997: Section 1.3.

<sup>12</sup> South African Higher Education in the First Decade of Democracy. The Council on Higher Education. Compress. Pretoria 2004. Ch 1, pg 14.

thinking, self-assured citizenship; social, cultural and environmental awareness, an African consciousness, entrepreneurship and being responsive to societal needs.

Unisa operates under the South African Higher Education Act (101 of 1997), and it is accredited by the South African Department of Education as well as the South African Council for Higher Education. Its qualifications are registered with the South African Qualifications Authority (SAQA). That means that Unisa, like all South African higher education institutions, operates within the policy framework set by the state, receives state funding according to an agreed funding framework, with accreditation and quality oversight entrusted to the Council for Higher Education. The environment for the practice of ODL in South Africa is affected by the absence of an ODL Policy. In 2003, recognising that the absence of an ODL Policy Framework was affecting ODL operations in South Africa, then Minister of Education Prof Kader Asmal sought advice from the CHE the report of whose investigation was presented to him before he left office in 2004. His successor Minister Naledi Pandor, however, did not act on this matter until 2008 when she requested the CHE to prepare an ODL Policy. That exercise has not yet been completed. This is unfortunate for ODL in South Africa. It means that regulations meant to apply to higher education in general are being applied to ODL programmes at Unisa. There is inadequate appreciation of the demands of 5<sup>th</sup> generation ODL practice: appropriate resources, learner support, admission criteria, assessment and flexible learning.

The National Plan for Higher Education 2001 (NPHE) gives effect to the vision of a transformed higher education system. It provides an implementation framework and identifies the strategic interventions and levers necessary for that transformation. In terms of the NPHE the number of public higher education institutions was reduced (through a number of mergers and incorporations) from 36 to the current 23 when restructuring of higher education was implemented beginning 2004. These comprise 11 universities, 6 comprehensive universities (a new institutional type resulting from the merging of former universities and technikons that offer both academic and vocational qualifications) and 6 universities of technology. As of January 2009, there were also 79 registered and 15 provisionally registered private higher education institutions.

The public higher education institutions awarded 126 641 qualifications at all levels, comprising 31 064 qualifications in business and commerce, 36 429 qualifications in science and technology, and 59 148 qualifications in the human and social sciences. The public higher education institutions produced 7 516 master's degrees and 1 274 doctoral degrees.<sup>13</sup> Unisa's contribution to the graduation rate of South Africa's higher education institutions is commendable: 841 in SET, 3838 in Business and Management, 621 Master's and 81 doctoral degrees. The university has now set in motion a determined effort to improve post-graduate success rates by establishing a Graduate School and Science and Agriculture Research and Tuition Centre to improve results in these fields.

Like most distance education institutions, Unisa continues to experience a rather low graduation or throughput rate at 5% for undergraduate and diploma programmes, and 11% and 9% respectively for master's and doctoral studies compared to a much more commendable success rate in courses. That has to do in part to the fact that a significant number of Unisa students do not present for whole qualifications, and the drop-out and start-up phenomenon has an effect as well. We have always argued that the comparison of Unisa's completion rates with residential institutions was unfair. Rather, we believe that Unisa is comparable to other institutions in its success rate, even though that too needs improvement. Considerable investment has already gone into mechanisms to improve throughput and success rates at Unisa.

The total adjusted budget for education for 2007/08 was R106.3 billion, of which R16.4 billion was allocated to the national department and R89.9 billion to the provincial departments of Education. The overall budget increased by 15.5% to R122.8 billion for 2008/09. In comparison to our Continent and even the rest of the world, South Africa is in a privileged position in terms of national expenditure on higher education.

Reductions in public funding (which is increasingly being linked to institutional throughput rates) have resulted in higher education institutions having to generate income

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<sup>13</sup> CHE 2008. Overview of Higher Education in South Africa. [www.che.ac.za/heinsa/](http://www.che.ac.za/heinsa/)



from other sources, to accommodate funding shortfalls and to fund self-initiated projects. (This so-called “third stream” income will supplement the more traditional first and second streams of income namely, public subsidies and tuition income.) Third stream income is derived from a number of sources and in South Africa it varies in terms of its generation, its extent and its application. In the face of a general decline in both tuition and subsidy income, third stream income is assuming increasing importance in the South African Higher Education management, to the extent that the average South African University now gets more than a quarter of its income from Third Stream sources.

Third Stream Income offers the prospect of substantial relief in regard to helping higher education institutions to meet their missions, positioning them more competitively internationally and developing the next generation of scholars. Third stream income also purports to encourage entrepreneurialism, creative thinking and problem solving – all characteristics of sound scholarship. Where third stream income succeeds, there is likely to be the spin-off benefit of raising South Africa’s higher education profile in the international community.

## **C GROWTH, DEVELOPMENT AND PROGRESS OF ODL IN SOUTH AFRICA**

Distance Education has a long and interesting history in South Africa, as told through the story of the University of South Africa.

The former Unisa was founded in 1873 as the University of the Cape of Good Hope (initially an examining body), and went through a series of changes and incorporations to become the University of South Africa on 2 April 1916. UNISA moved its headquarters from Cape Town to Pretoria (Tshwane) in 1918, and although it continued to be an examining body, it also incorporated a number of university colleges which later became fully autonomous teaching universities. However, even before the disappearance of the University of the Cape of Good Hope, correspondence tuition had been established to cater for the needs of students examined by the university. This established Unisa as the oldest formal distance education institution in the world.

In January 2004, the former Unisa merged with Technikon Southern Africa and incorporated the distance education component of Vista University (VUDEC) to form the new Unisa, the only dedicated and comprehensive distance education institution in South Africa, with a combined student total of 205 811 students (headcount enrolments). By 2008 this number had risen to over 262 000 in 2008 (preliminary figures) exhibiting growth of more than 26.9% over the five years post merger. Of these, just over 90% are South African nationals, just over 9% are African nationals, and just less than 1% is other foreign nationals. Residentially, the vast majority of students are located in South Africa, with a smaller proportion in Africa and beyond. For this reason, Unisa provides its teaching and learning and administrative services worldwide. Unisa accounts for over 30% of total headcounts in South Africa and this has a key role to play in providing affordable, widely accessible higher education to a wide cross-section of the South African society. It has also brought together vast resources and infrastructure, while consolidating the knowledge bases built up over the years by the three former institutions.

#### **D SPECIFIC AND SPECTACULAR ACHIEVEMENTS IN THE DEVELOPMENT OF ODL IN THE COUNTRY**

Although Unisa is generally recognised as having played a pioneering role in the “first generation” of distance education, namely the correspondence model, it currently has all of the elements of 4<sup>th</sup> generation ODL, but needs to integrate them more systematically to raise the level to 5<sup>th</sup> generation, which is characterised amongst others, by economies of scale. Currently Unisa has in place its own ODL policy and it is in the process of rolling out the implementation plan in support of the ODL model.

The University has a sophisticated strategic plan entitled *Unisa 2015: An agenda for transformation*, and a planning framework that includes a 3-year Institutional Operational Plan (IOP) which is aligned to the planning rhythms of the Department of Education. In terms of the IOP and in line with the institutional strategy, Unisa has embarked on a process to realise its vision of becoming *the* African university in the service of humanity. There are various initiatives and processes underway to ensure that the strategy is

efficiently and effectively executed. These include an Integrated Strategic Management Framework, Corporate Performance Management (Business Intelligence/Institutional Research/Monitoring and Evaluation), Integrated Performance Management System, Quality Assurance, Risk Management & Internal Audit and a Service Charter.

Unisa's planning process remains a key instrument for change and innovation. It is a pragmatic process that carefully assesses the rate and degree of change that can be absorbed by the institution, and is linked to the institution's integrated performance management system. The integrated planning approach seeks alignment of all levels of planning with the allocation of financial, infrastructural and human resources, as well as Unisa's ODL delivery model. This is further supported by policies, processes, systems, and capacities needed to achieve planned outcomes. Key among the systems put in place is a quality assurance regimen. Critical capacities in management information, business intelligence, monitoring and evaluation, institutional research planning and methods, and quality assurance and promotion place Unisa at the leading edge in planning nationally and abroad.

Unisa's broad agenda echoes the Institution's mission statement's two-fold purpose, that is, to promote critical scholarship from an African perspective and to fulfil the mandate of a comprehensive university by providing academic offerings which range from general academic to vocationally oriented programmes. As part of this process Unisa established the Centre for African Renaissance Studies (CARS) in 2003, with the aim of promoting a Multi-Inter-and Transdisciplinary (MIT) approach to knowledge by focussing on African Renaissance studies and pursuing cutting edge research through an interdisciplinary paradigm. CARS aims to encourage the Unisa community to think beyond discrete disciplines towards a more open and flexible epistemological framework, particularly in relation to core issues such as rearticulation, which will have a fundamental impact on Unisa's identity. CARS produces a much respected international journal *African Renaissance* which is now fully accredited.

In pursuit of the striving for a truly African university Unisa is forging a distinctive ethos, as well as programmes, 'graduateness' and organisational culture and practices

appropriate to our context. Part of its development focus includes engagement with local communities, national and continental consultation in solving problems and addressing developmental needs and inter- multi- & trans-disciplinarity research and teaching, drawing from complementary epistemologies

Unisa's identity is fundamentally characterised by its ODL orientation, its Africaness, its comprehensiveness and the balance of its teaching/research and community engagement. The Institution offers a large number of qualifications over a very broad spectrum by means of a semesterised tuition delivery model. The initial Programme and Qualifications Mix (PQM) of the newly merged institution comprised more than 1 200 qualifications. This has been managed down to approximately 600 specialised and 230 generic qualifications in 2008. Similarly the number of modules has been managed down from an initial 5 000 to about 3 000 currently. This has in fact been identified as an impediment to the successful rollout of our ODL model, and the process of accreditation, and as such the PQM is revisited and refined on an ongoing basis, while the curriculum is being rationalised to one that is leaner and more relevant to Unisa's social mandate and its aspirations. Programme content is also being revised and developed to ensure consonance with our African identity and knowledge systems.

Unisa also offers more than 250 Short Learning Programmes which draw an additional 60 000 enrolments annually. In so doing the institution is supporting the notion of lifelong learning and access to higher education academic programmes for the wider population. Some short learning programmes grant credits towards formal programmes and students may be admitted to formal programmes once they have completed a short learning programme. SLP's are part of Unisa's core business and complementary to the formal academic tuition and are subjected to rigorous quality checks.

As a result of the quality, relevance, range and size of its programme offerings, enrolments and graduates, and its research output Unisa makes a significant contribution to human resource development, to meeting labour market needs, to socio-economic development and to the enrichment of intellectual and cultural life in South Africa and on the Continent.

Over the past five years, Unisa has produced over 72,000 graduates. Unisa's contribution is evident in the wide variety of these graduates across the various fields of study, programme types and qualification levels. In 2008, around 40% of its graduates were in the Education, just under 30% in Business/Management, just over 25% in Other Humanities and around 6% in Science, Engineering and Technology. More specifically, in 2007 Unisa produced over 2000 graduates in Accounting and other 1800 in Management. Around 87% of Unisa's graduates were in university-type academic programmes and the remaining 13% in technikon-type vocational programmes. Around 75% of graduates were at the undergraduate level, with about 36% graduating with undergraduate certificates and diplomas and 39% with degrees. A quarter of graduates were at the postgraduate level, with around 3% at the Masters and doctoral level. Over the past five years, Unisa has graduated just under 3000 Masters and doctoral students and just under 14,000 below Masters. Unisa's contribution can also be measured in terms of students enrolled for non-degree purposes. Approximately 7% of current enrolments are occasional students who are either completing qualifications at other institutions or are pursuing studies for the formative intrinsic value of higher learning.

Unisa has a dedicated Department of Strategy, Planning and Quality Assurance which manages all quality initiatives in the Institution. The Institution is aiming for continuous quality improvement. This is supported by an Integrated Quality Management Framework and a Quality Improvement Plan that emanated from the Commonwealth of Learning Trial Audit conducted initiated by the university in 2007, in preparation for the Higher Education Quality Committee Institutional Audit conducted in 2008. This national programme reviews and internal programme and module reviews of all public universities in South Africa over a period of time.

As it matures in its expression of its ODL character, Unisa is also tackling in a planned and systematic manner, amongst others, issues of learner support, assessment, success and throughput. At the course level, Unisa's examination success rates have ranged from 65% to 70% over the past few years. As a result of pre-examination attrition and financial withdrawals and cancellations, the overall course success rates are uniformly lower at

around 54%. At the qualification level, the main challenge facing Unisa in improving graduation rates involves reducing the considerable number of students who, for a variety of academic and non-academic reasons, dropout or stopout of their studies.

To this end, significant projects are underway to understand the academic and non-academic life circumstances experienced by Unisa students and thereby to systematically and comprehensively identify all factors impacting on success and throughput in the ODL context. In the light of these, current systems and practices are being reviewed, and effective interventions to enhance success, throughput and a positive student experience are being identified and implemented. The analytical methodology and models involved are cutting edge and reflect the institution's open-mindedness, innovation and commitment when it comes to matters of transformation and progress. We look forward to solid incremental improvements in Unisa's success and throughput rates as new initiatives are implemented.

Unisa's students are distributed over South African and the rest of the world. Their average age is now below 30 and they speak a diverse number of languages including South Africa's 11 official languages and various international languages. 82% of students are currently part-time learners.

In regard to other ODL bodies and associations, mention can be made of NADEOSA and DEASA both of which enjoy significant Unisa representation and leadership and which seek to harmonise ODL efforts in the SADC region. The result is that there is a great deal of cooperation among ODL practitioners in the region. Unisa is also an active member of the African Council of Distance Education and plays an active and participatory role in its activities.

Unisa can report has several unique and impressive achievements and characteristics:

- One of Unisa's strategic objectives is to utilise information technology innovatively to develop cutting edge ODL teaching and learning practices and administrative and

management support services. To this end, in 2008 Unisa committed a budget of over R240-million to enhancing ICTs.

- Unisa's College of Law is the top law research faculty in the country, with highly rated quality research outputs that exceed those of any of the other law departments in the country.
- The College of Economic and Management Sciences is the largest such faculty in the country whose headcount of approximately 129 000 students exceeds that of all of the other similar colleges in South Africa combined. This college also produces more than 37% of all of South Africa's Accountants.
- At the time of the merger in 2004 a small College of Agriculture and Environmental Sciences was established. It is also making its mark in terms of research and success. Enrolments have quadrupled in five years.
- As a distance education provider, Unisa is well placed to meet the needs of students with *disabilities*. Just over 1 000 of these students are currently enrolled with Unisa, of whom more than a quarter have visual disabilities.
- Enrolment patterns are changing. A growing number of younger full-time students means that there is increasing pressure on facilities, and learner support is very much in demand.
- Unisa has a comprehensive teacher education programme that will make a significant contribution to the re-skilling and upskilling of the nations' teachers.
- Initiatives underway include rationalisation of the PQM, a new curriculum, a review of the assessment practices, enhanced technology utilisation in registrations and academic management, learning support and enterprise architecture.

## **E CHALLENGES FACING THE DEVELOPMENT OF ODL**

There are many challenges facing higher education in Africa today some of which include increasing their capacity and enrolment; new demands created by over-extended capacity; and demands from broader society. In many ways the challenges faced by higher education on the African continent can be regarded as a legacy of Africa's political history,

affected additionally by the pace at which economic and social development are taking place. Sound, strong and transparent governance poses immense challenges under difficult conditions, particularly in regard to institutional autonomy or the lack thereof, and its impact on, teaching, research and community engagement. The control of universities by governments still remains a challenge on the African Continent despite the fact that such control has been rationalised on various grounds, including the need for accountability for the spending of public funds, responsiveness to the demands of the nation, or the achievement of the public good.

In South Africa, a form of co-operative governance or “steering” is employed between government and higher education institutions in the management and oversight of higher education institutions. Higher education seeks to assert institutional autonomy and academic freedom in an environment where the state is under pressure to rein higher education institutions in matters like access, throughput rates and transformation. The CHE recently published a framework report on academic freedom and institutional autonomy.

Perhaps the most fundamental concern that is facing ODL in South Africa is the same as that which is being faced by higher education in South Africa in general, namely, the low throughput rates. The problem is being addressed actively by both government and higher education institutions, with the government setting throughput targets and favouring those institutions (in terms of funding) that show clear progress and improvement in throughput rates.

The Department of Education also sets enrolment targets for HEIs in South Africa, which are focused to a large extent on those disciplines whose graduates are in short supply and desperately needed. Currently the emphasis is very much on Science and Technology, which have been allocated the highest ratios. Unfortunately these do not always correspond with student desires and accordingly enrolment ratios and targets have become a bone of contention, particularly given the large numbers of enrolments and the limited means of sorting these into the ratios set by the DoE prior to final registration. Enrolment targets also have serious implications in terms of the Programme and Qualifications Mix,



appropriate staffing levels and even, in some cases, the continued existence of departments.

These dynamics have contributed to concerted attention on the issue of access and means of ensuring not only appropriate numbers, but also suitable equipped students who have a fair chance of success in their studies. At Unisa, instruments such as the Responsible Open Admission Programme have been developed and investigations into the issue of access are ongoing.

The Recognition of Prior Learning is perhaps not recognised as widely as it should be. The acceptance that previous experiences and educational qualifications could be somewhat irrelevant predictors of success in learning at mature age has not yet taken root at most universities in South Africa

Furthermore, in Africa, learner access to advanced technology cannot be taken for granted because relatively few students have easy access to the Internet and other electronic media. In addition, technology changes fast and if universities do not update their technologies and concomitant systems continuously, stagnation and redundancy will be the result. Available bandwidth also remains a problem both in terms of access and affordability. In South Africa there are increasing calls from all quarters for government to improve bandwidth and to reduce costs.

In regard to its ODL model, Unisa faces challenges not only in finding sufficient and appropriately qualified tutors to service large numbers of students, but also in ensuring sufficient funding for them over the longer term. Furthermore, the ICT intensive nature of the model demands continued upgrading of the both the software and the hardware and this has obvious and escalating cost implications for the institution. It must however be noted that this challenge is being faced by all higher education institutions. The overriding danger in funding technology at a time when public funding is decreasing is that the cost will somehow be transferred to the student, which over the long term will impact on the affordability of higher education and ODL in particular.

ODL initiatives have the world at their fingertips via the Internet and related technologies, but cost and technologies go hand in hand. It is not surprising then, that the mobile telephone, which is increasingly common in even the lowest-income countries, is being seen by educators, as an ideal facilitator of distance education.

## **F POLICIES, STRATEGIES FOR ADVOCACY AND STAKEHOLDER MOBILISATION IN THE DEVELOPMENT OF ODL IN SOUTH AFRICA.**

One of the most significant challenges and difficulties faced by ODL in South Africa has been and continues to be the lack of a formal Distance Education Policy. Over time this has had quite severe consequences and difficulties for Unisa, especially in terms of aspects such as the definition of the active student, admission criteria and practices, capping and a variety of other policy matters which pertain to contact institutions, but which Unisa is also obliged to adhere to despite the material differences in its operations and its student profile. In 2008 Unisa established the Institute for Open and Distance Learning (IODL) which is aimed at growing research and researchers in ODL and which is involved in the rollout of Unisa ODL programme. Unisa has developed its own ODL policy and implementation plan and is eagerly awaiting the new ODL policy from the DoE (which is currently in draft form).

Unisa is also a core member of a number of regional, continental and international ODL associations including, SAIDE, NADEOSA, DEASA, the African Council on Distance Education (ACDE) and the International Council on Distance Education (ICDE). The University plays a major role in many of these bodies and their activities. Special mention must be made of the ACDE which is committed to ensuring greater cooperation and cohesion amongst ODL practitioners in Africa across a number of fronts. To this end, in February 2008 UNISA held a stakeholder workshop that was aimed at creating a consortium of African DE practitioners and an all-Africa quality assurance system. Efforts in this regard are ongoing.

## **G      SUSTAINABLE STRATEGIES AND NEXT STEPS**

Previously identified as a challenge to both contact higher education and ODL, technology in terms of both currency and cost will have to be carefully managed to ensure the sustainability of higher education in Africa and South Africa. Given the current global recession and its concomitant impact on the global economy and in turn, higher education, it is likely that higher education institutions will find themselves increasingly constrained in terms of the funds that are available for operations. Probably one of the most direct consequences of this will be an increased drive towards greater collaborations and the sharing of resources. This can only bode well of ODL in Africa. Given its fragmented nature and practice, a greater alignment and cooperation amongst ODL practitioners would provide a stronger and more cohesive platform from which to practice ODL on the Continent.

Higher Education in Africa continues to be in crisis, having suffered, and continuing to suffer from the perennial problems of poverty, resource, infrastructure and human capacity constraints, internecine conflict and inconsistent external funding. In addition to this, the world is experiencing a global recession which is also impacting on higher education, especially in terms of the amounts that governments are able to make available for education and in terms of international aid. As higher education institutions grapple to come to terms with a diverse and complex array of dynamics and constraints, ODL is increasingly being seen as an educational delivery model which to a large extent, can circumvent or ameliorate a number of these problems. It is not uncommon now, to find some means of ODL education being offered by virtually all higher education institutions.

When it comes to Africa, and given Africa's huge constraints, ODL offers a viable and proven option. The multitude of challenges faced by African Universities suggest that unless there are dedicated efforts at cohesion and a common strategic view efforts at advancing ODL will remain fragmented and largely unsuccessful and unproductive. Given its sound infrastructure, resources, governance and management practices, quality programme offerings, well supported teaching and learning, and sophisticated learner

support, UNISA is ideally placed to play a leading role in bringing Africa into meaningful and fruitful ODL practice.

We remain convinced, however, that in terms of the South African government's declared priorities in advancing education, Unisa and ODL will remain a critical part of that strategy as a dedicated, distance education and comprehensive university.

As an institution we are committed, however, to building partnerships and collaboration across the Continent through the aegis of ACDE to raise the standards of ODL practices, spread the extent of ODL practitioners, and assist new programmes and developments across Africa.

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