

IS ODL A CHEAPER OPTION FOR EXPANDING THE HIGHER EDUCATION SYSTEM IN SOUTH AFRICA?

Ms Liana Griesel
Unisa

griesl@unisa.ac.za

+27 12 429 3280

Abstract

The South African higher education sector is confronted by a number of challenges to effectively contribute to the social and economic development of the country. Key among these is the continuation of gender, class, racial and other inequalities with regard to access and success and the system's inability to meet the demand and needs of the economy and society as a whole. Transitional contact universities are already adopting new modes of delivery used within an open and distance learning (ODL) context. This acknowledges that the distinction between different modes of operation and delivery models is becoming increasingly blurred. This will require universities to rethink and reshape their institutional identities and cost structures. This paper illuminates the different cost drivers for ODL and its consequences on the unit cost of education. The paper concludes by questioning the sustainability of higher education within a funding model that retains ODL as a cheaper option than the traditional forms of education.

Proposal

As a force contributing to social and economic development, ODL is fast becoming an accepted and indispensable part of the mainstream of educational systems in both developed and developing countries, with particular emphasis of the latter (UNESCO 2002). Policy shifts in the South African higher education system as evident in the recent Green Paper released by the Minister of Higher Education and Training in January 2012 again highlight the challenges of higher education. The continuation of gender, class, racial and other inequalities with regard to access and success and the system's inability to meet the needs of the economy and society as a whole still feature strongly. Addressing these challenges will require South African higher education universities to make profound changes in terms of organisational architectures and modes of operation. In the years to come South African universities will transform from purely contact institutions to blended modes of operation to provide students with quality educational resources and learning experiences. A number of contact universities have already adopted methods used within open distance learning in the campus setting, offering a combination of resource-based and independent learning.

However, ODL as a mechanism to address the anticipated expansion of the higher education landscape requires an in-depth understanding of the processes required to provide affordable access to quality education. The required processes include a

range of technology-enhanced student support services, new innovative assessment practices and a self-determined learning model where students learn from one another through newer technologies such as social media. This will result in yet further changes in the costs and cost structure of educational provision, which are still being investigated (UNESCO 2002). However, the indications are that many of the cost factors involved in online learning have been underestimated (Rumble 2001).

This paper focuses on the policy shifts in the South African higher education sector and uses the University of South Africa as a case study to create an understanding of the shifting resource requirements and demand for new cost structures in addressing the challenges of the system as a whole. The transition from earlier generations of ODL towards a new advanced generation is structured around the student journey of learner self-directedness in information discovery, and encompasses related processes and activities. This transition gradually demonstrates changing trends in the allocation of resources. Key among these is the movement from a fixed academic salary cost component to a more flexible variable staffing model. In addition, developing technology platforms that successfully facilitate computer-mediated communication between learners has already shown a substantial shift in ICT-related resources.

Changes in Unisa's resource allocations are noticeable, and this change will result in higher costs as ODL delivery requires an influx of new capital. Investment in ODL is expensive and secures a cost advantage over competitors, thus inhibiting full-scale imitation. ODL as a potential model to address the expansion into higher education will require alliances between universities that have complementary assets and an understating of the drivers of ODL.

The paper focuses on the drivers that may affect the cost-efficiency of open distance learning if this mode of operation is to be the future of higher education. According to the UNESCO study, a number of drivers influence the cost of ODL. This paper examines these drivers within a South African context, and Unisa in particular. These include the following:

- **The number of student enrolments:** Increased enrolments will require additional administrative costs, but the development of curriculum and learning materials will allow for a lower unit cost per student.
- **The size of the programme qualification mix (PQM) (curriculum):** The more complex the PQM, the higher the number of courses to be offered. This will require additional investment in curriculum and learning materials development. The unit cost will rise, unless there is a market need for the content and it is covered by an increase in the number of students.
- **The lifespan of modules:** Sound curriculum design and development using multimedia and social media formats has the advantage that the content can be used to teach successive cohorts of students. The design should accommodate easy amendments to the content and modules should have a shelf life of at least several years.
- **Open educational resources:** The sharing of costs in the design and development component can reduce the unit cost and significantly improve and enrich the learning materials.

- **Technology-enhanced educational resources:** It is evident that each technology requirement has its own cost structure and will have an impact on the unit cost. The cost of new knowledge, together with the choice of technology and equipment as well as maintenance cost involved in the development, production and delivery of learning materials will require expert teams to ensure quality.
- **The level of student support:** The three pillars of a successful ODL model are high quality learning materials, efficient and effective academic and administrative support systems and excellent student support. The latter is driven by the number of enrolments together with the lecturer to tutor, tutor to student and student to student ratios. These ODL-specific ratios will increase the cost of providing student services and increase the direct cost. The quality and quantity of student support necessitated by an ODL mode of operation will consequently be the most important cost driver that will demonstrate that ODL is not necessarily a cheaper option than traditional education.
- **Staff cost distribution:** Employment on a fixed-term contract basis combined with short-term contracts on an hourly rate for tutors, curriculum designers, web and graphical designers and editors, can result in open distance learning institutions having a small cohort of full-time academic staff. However, this will require a policy decision to redefine the core functions of a full-time academic in an ODL context.

The paper concludes by questioning the sustainability of higher education within a funding model that retains ODL as a cheaper option than the traditional forms of education.

References

Department of Higher Education and Training. 2012. Green Paper for Post-school Education and Training: The doors of learning and culture shall be opened. Pretoria.

Rumble, G. 2001. The costs and costing of networked learning. *Journal of Asynchronous Learning Networks*, 5(2):75-96.

UNESCO. 2002. *Open and distance learning: trends, policy and strategy considerations*. Paris.