

Distance Education in South Africa: An analysis of access, 50 years after Apartheid.

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## **Education and Distance Education in Apartheid South Africa**

This is an examination of the practice of distance education in pre- and post- Apartheid South Africa and explains how distance education has improved the cultural and ethnic conditions in South Africa as well as its progress and growth through the different phases of distance learning –print, broadcast, television, and the Internet. This is presented in four sections, an introduction, the background that provides a historical account of Apartheid education how it evolved and its effect on education. A section on the structure of the education system in South Africa its challenges and its significance to distance education and the history of distance education and the establishment of the first distance learning institutions. The final section summarizes the achievements of distance education and its effects on society and its importance to South Africa's transformation and provides an analysis of distance education and its achievements to access.

### **Background**

#### **History of Apartheid and the implications to education**

Apartheid mandated racial separateness in public, social and civil liberties and services. It evolved under the British government in the 1930s during colonial times and ruled from 1948 until 1991. The government imposed education sanctions that mandated two separate systems, one for non-whites and Afrikaans students, and one for whites (Wikipedia, 2011). To enforce separateness, the government implemented several legislations known as "petty laws" that condoned the practice of inequity and inequality. These laws were detrimental to education in any form.

## **Structure of Education**

The structure of the education system in South Africa was important for accessibility and delivery. Education was structured much like the system in the United States (South African History online, 2012). It began around age one, known as preschool as in the United States. It was state mandated and funded by the state and federal governments. South Africa also has three levels of education and it is compulsory up to grade 9, whereas in the United States it is compulsory up to grade 10 or age 16. First to seventh grade is primary school and from eight to twelfth grade is high school or secondary school. Beyond 15 years of age is tertiary or university level. At this level, access to education impacts the quality of life. Because after 12th grade students begin to look for specialty areas to continue their education or enter the workforce, distance education has filled this need by providing occupational and trade training, as well as skills in specialty areas.

Prior to distance education several legislations were limiting access to education. The Bantu Education Act of 1953, mandated segregated education at the university level and resulted in inferior schools for blacks and non-white. The result was inadequate or limited distribution of resources from kindergartner to the university level (World Book Online, 2012). In addition, the government passed the Reservation of Separate Amenities Act of 1953 that mandated separate education facilities and systems of education for non-whites. The government further restricted student's ability to achieve educational success by passing the Afrikaans Medium Decree of 1974. This law affected student access because it restricted blacks from learning in their native tongue, Afrikaans. This law affected student learning in high schools outside of their homeland (World Book Online, 2012), restricting student access to learning materials. In 1959, began a period of change.

## **History of Distance Education**

The South African government began creating separate universities and schools to accommodate blacks and non-whites. Although distance education had been practiced in South Africa since the early 1800, non-whites had to meet entry requirements. Distance education was originally called correspondence learning and operated under the auspices of the state at the University of Cape Town (UCT). The UCT was established pre-Apartheid in the colonial era and was open to all ethnic groups, entry; however, it was limited to those who had obtained the necessary certifications or able to pass entry exams. To improve access to distance learning this practice was later relaxed to allow admission for those denied opportunities for education during pre-Apartheid era.

### **Forming of major distance education institutions**

South Africa's government funded and established the oldest and largest distance or correspondence universities in the world (Ngengebule, 2003). These included the University of Fort Hare, North Zululand, and Westville each established pre-Apartheid for specific ethnic groups and to offer career programs and university degree courses. The University of the Western Cape, established in 1959, admitted Indian students and used radio and cassette tapes as a broadcast medium. Today, Western Cape is a member of Open Courseware. In the 1980s, Vista University Distance Education catered to blacks, and provided technology type education, such as print, TV and radio. Earlier, Damelin Correspondence College was established and offered distance learning for businesses, and to obtain tertiary level qualifications (Ngengebule, 2003).

The University of Tanzania was also accessible the first years after Apartheid and admitted 30% of underserved qualified students (Biao, 2012). In 1980, the Technikon Republic

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South Africa was established as a technical public distance education university. It was formed by the government the result of the Government Act of 1967 (Ngengebule, 2003) to better prepare students for distance learning and university learning. Technikon was the first distance university structured on teaching with technology (Moore & Kearsley, 2005) and provided vocational or career training for underserved South Africans to ensure job readiness, albeit with many challenges, discussed in the next section.

The major contribution to distance education in South Africa was the merging of several public and private universities to attack Apartheid. This created the country's and the world's largest open/ correspondence learning institution – the University of South Africa (UNISA) (McGregor, 2001). UNISA was the sole distance education provider at that time. UNISA was a world leader in research and teaching and was established as a federal institution to serve the many distance learning institutions in South Africa (History Online, 2010). UNISA was initially a testing and certification center using print based study guides and cassette tapes to prepare or provide educational access to the underserved population of Apartheid. It also offered students an opportunity to study at the university level (Ngengebule, 2003).

### **Educational challenges in South Africa**

Apartheid laws hindered access to education, creating barriers that continue today, these include unplanned and poorly structured programs, inferior instruction compared to non-white institutions, under qualified teachers, poor pass rates, retention problems, gender inequality, faculty acceptance, and ambiguous admission criteria, and student success rates (Ndoye, 2008).

Student readiness or lack of preparation for tertiary learning was a major problem post Apartheid for those seeking distance education. Students lacked literacy skills because they had no prior formal education. Many students also lacked basic skills in math and reading that prevented them from reaching twelfth grade because they were not prepared beyond the primary or secondary levels of education (see table 4 below). As a result, many students dropped out or performed poorly. This was also attributed to poor government funding that resulted in schools not being able to obtain resources like books and computers, which contributed to poor student retention. This was a major barrier to student acceptance and persistence in distance education

**Table 4: NEETs by highest level of education attainment by single ages, 2011**

Education level	Age										Total
	15	16	17	18	19	20	21	22	23	24	
No schooling	4 885	5 592	6 702	8 193	10 425	12 710	14 786	15 075	15 930	15 339	109 637
Primary or less	23 228	28 976	35 029	38 013	42 749	47 177	50 436	47 807	51 054	49 267	413 736
Secondary education less than Grade 12	25 055	43 105	70 430	105 556	147 099	191 275	223 171	224 849	230 216	220 837	1 481 593
Grade 12	-	-	9 802	52 492	115 576	163 710	191 424	193 857	191 182	184 074	1 102 117
Grade 12 with certificate/ Diploma	-	-	-	1 267	3 484	7 444	11 757	15 079	17 042	17 496	73 569
Degree <sup>a</sup>	-	-	-	-	-	298	902	2 422	3 486	4 129	11 273
Other and unspecified	119	169	225	332	564	820	987	1 050	1 078	1 099	6 443
<b>Total</b>	<b>53 287</b>	<b>77 842</b>	<b>122 188</b>	<b>205 853</b>	<b>319 897</b>	<b>423 434</b>	<b>493 463</b>	<b>500 139</b>	<b>509 988</b>	<b>492 241</b>	<b>3 198 332</b>

*Source: Statistics SA, Census 2011 Supercross, extracted 09 April 2013 (calculation by DHET)*

universities, according to the South African 2013 Census Bureau Report.

Gender inequality in education was also an issue in South Africa. Women suffered due to racial status and gender because of cultural beliefs and practices. Education was not open to women and children. Adequate women's programs were an issue in distance learning; although much improved, today. In South Africa, women and children's health have greatly improved.

Through distance learning, women have access to knowledge and pertinent information for making healthy choices and more trained health care providers are accessible. This resulted in decreases in the high rates of communicable diseases, HIV/AIDS, and for teens, unwanted pregnancy rates.

Technology or the use of computers has become a growing phenomenon in distance education and have provided alternative modes of access. Computers were first used during the pre- Apartheid era to maintain databases or registries of non-whites or the indigenous population. While computer access is more prevalent today and has become a growing phenomenon in South Africa, access is a challenge in rural areas where Internet connectivity is not always readily available and government funding is scarce.

Finally, as the demand for distance education continues to increase, so does the need for state and local governance policies at universities. Policies and standards are needed to govern the development and practice of distance education and to gain faculty acceptance and improve student persistence. This includes policies that govern faculty creativity and intellectual rights to own their digital or creative intellectual property. The government's responsiveness to setting standards and policy frameworks are critical for meeting learner needs from first experiences in formal education settings (Badat, 2005). This was obvious in the framing of distance education institutions in South Africa.

### **Achievements**

Distance education has been a major contributor to overcoming the effects of Apartheid education by providing many an opportunity for university study. It has improved access to education in rural areas, enabling many to overcome poverty and to learn skills to become self-sufficient. Examples of its success include, hosting the world's first mega distance learning

university—the UNISA. Today, UNISA has over 310,000 students, many matriculates outside the continent, addressing the growing demand for education (Aderinoye, Siaciwen, & Wright, 2009) and it has met needs that were not easily catered for by other means of delivery (Holmberg, 2005, p. 47).

South Africa has several initiatives that address access to education. Students have access to free compulsory education, an initiative to increase literacy, numeracy, and livelihood (Biao, 2012). The WorldBank initiated programs to better prepare preschoolers for higher education by eradicating inferior programs at the primary and secondary levels. The government has attacked literacy by placing emphasis on education at the primary level, and through distance education set up remedial courses to better prepare students for the learning environment. In addition, distance education resource centers were established to better accommodate students where they are (Lawoe, 2005). Distance learning continues to be key to South Africa's economic growth, providing access to education at the primary and secondary levels through both in-service and out- service programs to eliminate problems such as literacy.

The government has also established official policies to regulate the use of technology in distance and online learning, resulting in the integration of technology in learning. This has provided students access to knowledge and information across the globe. Through technology, South Africa has achieved recognition for its capacity to reach global populations. This is evident by the new distance learning schools and initiatives. For example, the University of the Western Cape has a new school of Public Health that addresses the shortage of health care professionals by offering advanced training credentials to new healthcare professionals. This has improved the standards of living for women and teens by providing access to knowledge and information. Through distance learning programs young girls and adolescents are learning to



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make healthier choices that have curtailed teen pregnancy and sexually transmitted diseases. A new online law school was established and reaches across the globe. Also, distance education is providing a flexible mode for teachers to obtain needed certifications.

The 21<sup>st</sup> century has also realized great achievements. This includes the integration of mobile phones, Internet, and social media to meet the new demands of higher education, any place or time. Students today, have access to e-readers, social network sites, and various technologies improving their means of access. Most importantly, students can remain in their communities or at work while learning.

### **Conclusion**

Distance learning has been key to South Africa's economic growth by providing access to education at the primary and secondary levels through both in-service and out- service programs to eliminate problems such as literacy. It has also provided an alternative mode of learning and has become the most preferred mode of delivery (Lawoe, 2005). Such positive changes to the educational system in South Africa has realized the most rapidly growing field of education and the most widely accepted form of education in developing and underdeveloped. The practice of distance education in South Africa has successfully changed lives for 14 decades and provides a sense of continuity (Makhanya, 2013). It has improved attrition, and gender equality of access (Ndoye, 2008).

Although the effects of Apartheid continue to be a challenge, the merging of many of the public and private schools have equalized the racially structured system by opening education to all. It instituted a process of inclusiveness, not obvious in the past. The effectiveness of distance education is evident through the education of many prominent figures, through UNISA's

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programs: Nelson Mandela (President), and Desmond Tutu (Archbishop). However, the government can and must do more to ensure continuity to validate distance education.

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