Education (Im)Possible: Reconsidering the Contribution of Distance Education in South Africa

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ABSTRACT

South Africa is facing an increasing [number/intensity] of challenges in terms of access to higher education. Distance education is currently perceived as the more affordable alternative and is presented as the answer to increasing needs for higher education. This discussion highlights a number of key assumptions that underpin the support for this perception. It is argued that these assumptions can only be supported to a limited degree, provided that the target audience of DE is revisited. Increasing numbers of underprepared students are being directed to enrol for distance education. These students are not academically mature enough to cope with the challenges related to independent learning. As a result, the affordability of distance education for both student and institution will become questionable in light of decreasing success and throughput rates. With these challenges in mind, the author proposes a more diverse higher education landscape is developed with community-based institutions to prepare students for higher and distance education. Better prepared students can migrate to distance education at higher levels of readiness, ensuring improved success and efficiency.

Keywords: Distance education, open learning, e-learning, higher education, community colleges, throughput, MOOCs

1. INTRODUCTION

Distance education (DE) is currently making a tremendous contribution to the higher-education (HE) landscape. However, South Africa (SA) faces tremendous challenges in terms of expanding access to education – specifically HE – if economic growth objectives are to be achieved. It is no surprise, then, that the South African government is looking into expanding the provision of DE. The country has an impressive history in DE that aligns with this venture.

Providing access to higher education is not only the responsibility of DE providers, but also of the public residential HE institutions. In spite of claiming to provide for the previously disadvantaged, most students qualifying for the available places at residential universities come from high-performing schools and have exited their schooling with a strong command of English (Price, 2012). Those students who do not qualify, and who may be mostly from disadvantaged schools, may opt for DE at the only DE institution in South Africa. In this way, DE has become the option of last resort, not of choice, in the SA context. In addition, DE poses additional challenges to students who, for diverse reasons, may already have performed poorly at school.
The DE challenge will be far more complex than has been assumed. The system now has to account for access to students that would otherwise not be accepted elsewhere because of their entry-level competencies. It is to be doubted if institutions, with systems that are unable to differentiate between students in terms of their unique needs, circumstances and entry-level competencies, will be able to support hundreds of thousands of students in a targeted fashion. Students lacking the academic entry requirements to cope at residential universities cannot summarily be redirected to DE where they have to be accommodated regardless. From the perspective of the host institutions, such a mission will contribute to higher failure rates.

In relation to the task faced by HE and ‘open’ distance learning (ODL) in South Africa, Allan Tait (2008: 92) makes the following assessment: “Open universities are… at their inception highly political institutions invented because of the inadequacy of the higher education sector to meet the challenge of modernity, defined both in terms of who is to be included in the goods of society and what society needs in terms of human capital.”

1.1 A Legacy of Distance-Education Challenges

DE has not received favourable reviews in SA over the past 20 years. In 1995, SAIDE painted the following picture: “Taken as a whole, distance education’s contribution to the priorities for education and training in the Policy Framework is variously marginal, inefficient and, in respect of the values sought for a democratic South Africa, dysfunctional” (SAIDE 1995:xxii in CHE 2004: 142). The report by the CHE (2004: 20) also quotes the findings of the International Commission on Open Learning and Distance Education (1995), which described current provision in DE as follows: “What in South Africa is called distance education is essentially correspondence education. With very little assistance other than from study materials, extramural students sit an institution’s examinations and, depending on their success, proceed toward the completion of certificates, diplomas and degrees. Considered as distance teaching, virtually everything depends on the quality of the study materials prepared by lecturers in each institution for student use. With few exceptions, these are of inferior quality.”

The CHE (2004: 72–73) also outlines some problematic issues with DE delivery. These include insufficient time spent by some institutions on curricula materials and development/design, and the assumption, for example, that materials can be made available online without any adaptation. In some programmes, the levels of exit outcomes are questionable. In addition, a lack of academic support, a lack of formative assessment processes and the optional nature of, and the failure to mark or provide individualised feedback on, assignments are weaknesses identified. Concern was expressed that these problems may be contributing to low throughput rates. The CHE (2004: 189) goes on to state that the potential contribution of DE will be seriously undermined if the concerns about quality identified through research across the different types of institutions, especially in large-scale programmes, are not tackled and resolved.

1.2 The Assumptions

Against the backdrop of the aforementioned challenges and concerns, the expectation still seems to be that the current DE system and providers will be able to cope with the current and future needs of HE (targeting many more poorly prepared students). In this regard,
the proposed initiatives by the DHET (2012 & 2014) are an affirmation. These initiatives are based, at least partly, on a number of interrelated assumptions (the list below is not exhaustive):

- Technology-enhanced DE is the answer to quality delivery
- Open learning is inherent to DE
- Student support can be affordable and effective for a very diverse audience;
- Throughput challenges can be overcome
- DE is more affordable

It is possible that DE may no longer be as coherent a mode as it was in the past, as it is currently associated with other variants, like open learning and e-learning. Some traditional DE institutions were founded on core strengths, like content production, and this focus may make them unsuitable to an audience that is in need of unqualified levels of support and tutoring to cope with independent learning. Such support may not be affordable or viable in a particular context. It has to be accepted that there will be failing students on any mode but, because DE is considered as the solution for all (especially in developing contexts), there may be lower success and throughput rates.

1.3 The Question

Can DE make the contribution it is expected to in the South African context? The overarching objective of this discussion is to question some of the assumptions informing DE and to refocus attention on the real contribution that DE can make in expanding HE in the South African context in the future.

2. METHODOLOGY

In this paper, an argument is presented to affirm that the actual contribution that DE can make is limited, and that it will, therefore, be problematic to assume that DE will be a solution, as the drive to broaden access is strengthened, for an even more diverse student population than exists at present. This is not an empirical study aiming at producing results, as is customary with quantitative research.

A critical approach will be followed to determine the value of the underlying assumptions. For Jessop (2012: 3), a critical approach is politically committed in the sense that it aims to achieve emancipation through human action: “Theory and practice form a single process and philosophy is ‘put to work’ to provide analysis and critique of society leading to social change”. Kellner (2003) holds a similar view and sees critical theory as having “a normative and even utopian dimension, dealing with issues of democracy, equality and social justice”. The challenge is to think more deeply about assumptions that underpin distance education. Such an approach will allow us the opportunity to question the decades-old commitments that we made in terms of what DE is and what DE can achieve – we will be able to at least interrogate our own understanding as DE practitioners. In the process, we will have to think again about the answers that we support and we need to see if we can indeed ask certain questions at a particular point (Higgs, 2002: 170). The assumptions listed in the Introduction that support the apparent suitability of DE to deal with the HE challenge in the SA context will have to be assessed in terms of validity. Some of these may deserve only qualified support.
There is also a need to question the positioning of DE for future HE opportunities. This task has to be critical in terms of the power underlying the future DE assumptions in the South Africa context. There is currently a drive to “re-assign” the ever-increasing responsibility of access to HE to DE. As alluded to earlier, this drive makes DE “highly political” (Tait, 2008: 92) because of the current inability of HE in South Africa to cope with existing need. Nevertheless, this drive seems to have been accepted in the official documentation (DHET, 2012 & 2014) and it needs to be critically assessed in terms of its political value to address the problems related to HE. DE may be assigned responsibilities in the SA context that it may not be able to cope with regarding the underlying assumptions and the criticisms leveled against it by the regulatory authorities, external watchdogs and the very authorities. It may need to be linked to the current challenges in HE in a more flexible way as it cannot possibly be the answer to all support and finance challenges.

2.1 Objectives

To achieve the above objectives, the assumptions listed earlier will be challenged through the following questions related to the SA context:

- To what extent does technology-enhanced DE address the challenges of DE?
- To what extent does open learning (OL) present additional responsibilities that disrupt the ability of DE to be successful?
- What is the relationship between OL and DE?
- If DE is assigned the responsibility of caring for underprepared students not accepted elsewhere, what are the financial implications for institutions in so far as offering additional support and quality tutoring services to its students?
- Given that DE is perceived as the solution for underprepared students, to what extent is it going to contribute to even poorer throughput and success rates?

These questions will be addressed from within the literature with reference to the assumptions that inform them.

3. REVISITING THE CHALLENGES

Moore and Kearsly (2011) and Frydenberg (2002: 1) see DE proceeding from the idea that learning can be nurtured without requiring teachers and students to be in the same place at the same time. The student has the advantage of being independent, is in control of his/her time and may study in any location (Rovai, Ponton & Baker, 2008: 1). The “nurturing” of learning via a distance is at the heart of the major challenges faced by DE.

Various mixes and blends of technologies and face-to-face support are presented as alternative modes to advance progress in the direction of sufficient and effective support of learning at a distance. In conjunction with the principles of open learning, DE is also presented as able to accommodate students that do not qualify for standard access to HE. However, the issues of maturity and readiness influence the extent of affordable support, the financing of DE, and throughput and success rates.

To make matters more complicated, many “alternatives” – some with questionable agendas and unproven results – are now rising next to or in the place of what can be considered DE. This scenario may make a re-alignment of DE with national objectives and contextual solutions problematic, and it is worthwhile to revisit some opinions in the
literature with regard to the issues underpinning the assumptions and related questions introduced earlier.

3.1 What Constitutes DE Today?

Lea and Nicoll (2001: 1) highlight “the breaking down of the historical distinction between distance and face-to-face teaching…”. In this regard, DHET (2012: 4) is of the opinion that DE is “not a single mode of delivery”. It is a collection of methods for the provision of structured learning and, according to DHET (2012:20), it is no longer possible to uphold the “dated notion that equates distance education with print-based correspondence”. This statement can be accepted, but what is DE currently equated with and how viable are those “alternatives”?

E-learning: Naidu (2013: 253) acknowledges that online education is growing rapidly and the use of new technologies is challenging conventional educational practices. E-learning or online learning is often presented as an alternative to DE. However, this presentation may distract from the unique problems related to DE in different contexts, as e-learning may not be a solution in all contexts. Therefore, the drive towards using e-learning and new ICTs can be both the solution and part of the problem (Hamilton, Dahlgren, Hult, Roos and Soderstrom, 2004: 851). The pressure to use ICTs to provide and facilitate learning contributes to substantial confusion around its usefulness in education. Sometimes it is supposed to be enabling and, at other times, it is presented as a delivery mode in and of itself. Sangra et al (2012: 145–159) recognise the confusion when they state that the different meanings or definitions of e-learning, for example, are influenced by the approaches of different agents and by particular business interests.

Hamilton et al (2004: 846) are of the opinion that the technology “turbulence of the last 70 years has failed to create shared understandings about ICT. The field is a junkyard of discarded jargon, mantra and acronyms. Yet, somehow, salvation is always just beyond the horizon. The attempt to be all things to everyone, [is] itself a variant of policy hysteria…”. DHET (2012: 11) supports the need for a proper understanding and definition of terms as confusion can lead to poor planning: “E-learning continues to grow in importance in HE. A tendency has, however, grown for using ‘distance education’ and ‘e-learning’ interchangeably. The use of DE and e-learning as interchangeable or composite phrases introduces a blurring conflation of the terms, which has sometimes led to poor quality strategic planning”.

E-learning did indeed initiate a rethink of DE pedagogy and this was a positive contribution to solving the support challenge (Heydenrych & Prinsloo, 2010:20). However, under-resourced communities in emerging countries may have limited access and it is exactly this target group that finds itself underprepared for the challenges of HE in general and DE in particular.

MOOLOs, MOOCs and MOORFAPs: Currently, there is much hype around MOOCs (massive open online courses), created through MOOLOs (massive open online learning opportunities). MOOCs do influence the debate about progress in the field of DE and open opportunities. Roos (2014) is of the opinion that we do need to pay attention to developments related to MOOCs: “The arguments between MOOCs proponents and skeptics are filling newspaper articles, blog posts, tweets and conferences. Will MOOCs
fundamentally transform higher education, or is it just hype playing on the emotional appeal of bringing inexpensive higher education to millions? No matter what it is, it seems clear that university leaders need to start paying greater attention.”

There are concerns about non-completion rates and MOORFAPs (massive open online repetitions of failed pedagogy). The hype for participation in MOOC-related development is seen as both a threat and a disruption (Roos, 2014). Many students will not opt for MOOCs as the typical MOOC does not fit the undergraduate profile and, in large parts of the world, there is insufficient access (Paun, 2013). Naidu (2013:254) and Prinsloo (2014b) highlighted the prevalence of MOORFAPs in the MOOC sphere. According to the latter author, the initial promise of the reconfiguration of HE did not happen and there has been very little pedagogical innovation in MOOCs.

**Mixing, blending and hybridising:** Mixed-mode delivery refers to the integration of communication technologies into DE or residential education. Kuboni, Thurab-Kkhosi and Chen (nd) describe the use of ICTs on DE courses described as ‘mixed mode’ – this term more accurately describes institutions offering two modes of delivery. Therefore, it may be more appropriate to talk about mixed technologies rather than mixed mode. For Lin and Kinshuk (2007), the curriculum (learning materials and activities included) can be divided into online and face-to-face components “according to the relevant strength of the available resources”. According to Graham (2005: 4–5), blended learning is “the art of the ongoing convergence of two archetypal learning environments. On the one hand, we have the traditional F2F learning environment that has been around for centuries. On the other hand, we have the distributed learning environments that have begun to grow and expand in exponential ways as new technologies have expanded the possibilities for distributed communication and interaction.”

Garrison and Vaughan (2007: 4–5) argue that the time has come to “reject the dualistic thinking that seems to demand choosing between conventional face-to-face and online learning, a dualism that is no longer tenable, theoretically and practically”. Caulfield (2011: 3) expresses the need to understand the definition of a hybrid course before proceeding with such a venture. He sees hybrid courses as face-to-face delivery with time spent outside of the classroom – this is enabled with the help of technologies. The similarity with blended and distributed courses, where the use of technologies changes conventional classroom teaching, is evident.

In the South African context, issues like access to technology and affordable access are still determining the extent of enhancements to traditional text-based DE. Therefore, the support challenges may not be sufficiently addressed by technology enhancements. At the same time, there is no successful strategy to avoid engaging with new innovations and what they represent, as they are part of the DE landscape. However, costly mistakes can be made by joining the hype. Many of the proposed solutions may not provide conclusive answers to the challenges faced by DE and some of them may cause confusion at the levels of decision-making, policy drafting and application (DHET, 2012: 20).

### 3.2 Open Learning

Open learning (OL) is often associated with DE and is used as part of the integrated term Open and Distance Learning (ODL). Open learning refers to the ability of institutions
and programmes to accommodate adults of any age without them meeting the requirements for university admission in a particular country or system. Normally, adults who missed an earlier opportunity would be admitted with work experience or based on maturity and the associated ability to take charge of their own learning.

Villamejor-Mendoza (2013: 135–136) is inspired by the inaugural speech of the first Chancellor of the UK Open University, Lord Crowther, in 1969, who defined the meaning of “open” in the UK Open University as “being open to people, places, methods, and ideas”. The dimensions of “openness” have generally revolved around “open admissions; distance learning at scale, and open curricula” (Daniel in Villamejor-Mendoza, 2013: 135). Open admission generally has no specific requirements for entry into a programme of study. It also implies recognition and accreditation of prior learning and work experience as relevant antecedents to the prospective student’s end goals. Open curricula may include a sense of studying at one’s own pace and place, selecting the modules one wants to study and “stacking” those to a bachelor’s or graduate programme. It also implies entry and exit points in a curriculum and the possibility of constructing one’s own curriculum, using stand-alone courses or other courses that can be combined into a full degree.

The Open University of the United Kingdom (OUUK) was established with the aim of assisting working, mature adults to further their education (Daniel, 2012). In Botswana, the Botswana College of Distance and Open Learning (BOCODOL) was also founded with OL principles in mind – it aims at serving adults and unemployed people who have left school at any level (Tau, 2005). Athabasca (Canada’s open university) does not have admission requirements and allows open enrolling (flexible dates). This is, however, not the case at the Open University of Catalunya (UOC) (Grau-Valldosera and Minguillón, 2014: 292). In recent years, Unisa (Unisa, 2012: 4) launched “access for success” initiatives. However, DE in South Africa is currently less open than ever before – access courses have been discontinued and entry requirements to degree studies have been standardised and legislated (HEQSF, 2013: 33).

DE is not necessarily open by default. The curriculum and instructional design, admission and administrative services, and teaching and student-support practices and systems have to be based on the principles of OL or open access. SA has minimum HE requirements that may not necessarily support the needs of OL students. DHET (2012) does touch on the issue of openness and recognises a drive to open, more affordable DE in South Africa in future. However, we are not provided with information on how open it will be. In popular language, DE institutions are associated with open access and learning because they are expected to cater for those who have unique circumstances, need additional support and cannot afford the residential experience. This is different from a mandate that accommodates open access for mature and responsible adults. Some institutions may be setting themselves up for failure by accepting this responsibility and, overall, it may be a costly rather than an affordable affair.

3.3 Student Support

Student support and communication is one of the biggest challenges in DE due to the distance and differences in the circumstances of individual students. Different institutions succeed in enabling communication and support to varying degrees, depending on
capacity, resources and infrastructure in the particular context. Distance students have the 
expectation that student support has to accommodate them from entry to completion 
(Floyd and Casey-Powell, 2004: 63). However, a significant number of first-time distance 
students disconnect from general institutional support services (Brown, Hughes, Keppell, 
Hard & Smith, 2013: 63).

The phrase “tyranny of distance” was first coined by Geoffrey Blainey in his book 
_Tyranny of distance: How distance shaped Australia’s history_ (1966, revised in 1982). In 
this book, he examines the isolation and distance that had to be addressed in DE. Rossi 
and Sirna (2008: 7), reporting from the Australian context, also employ the term when 
describing the challenges related to overcoming transactional distance. Even though 
content transmission is still widely used, the authors are of the opinion that the tyranny of 
distance is not overcome by the “dispatch of a compact disc or video materials”. Other 
authors are of the view that the asynchronicity of DE increase the communication 
challenge. For Croft, Dalton and Grant (2011: 37), real-time student communities are not 
really viable, as students may not all be available at the same time. Eventually, social 
isoation develops against the backdrop of spatial (physical) isolation. These authors 
report that, in their research, spatial isolation was not such an issue for the students.

Different contexts may have different needs and solutions. Wright, Dhanarajan and Reju 
(2009) warn about education consultants from developed countries arriving in developing 
contexts to implement unsuitable systems and/or to set up delivery based on one-way 
“information dumps” that do not offer opportunities for participants to discuss how to 
adapt what they have heard. This is important given that the tutoring models in the West 
usually involve one instructor with a few students – this would be unsustainable in 
developing countries. In the South African context, hundreds of thousands of students in 
need of HE have to be supported by a single institution. This implies that student 
circumstances and unique needs must inform effective student support (Dearnly, 2003: 
11). This may be a tall order in the contexts of mega open- and distance-learning 
institutions, specifically those found in the developing world. MacIntyre and MacDonald 
(2011: 11), reporting from the Open University in the UK, add the differences 
in individual circumstances of students. For them, remote students do not have uniform 
needs or requirements for support from the institution. The authors expect that the 
challenges faced by remote students may be the same for urban students. In general, 
student feedback did indicate that interaction with the personal tutor was a priority to 
them (MacIntyre and MacDonald, 2011: 11).

A single tutoring-and-support system may not be flexible enough to deal with the 
challenge. Different levels and types of support and tutoring may be sufficient for 
different types of DE students. The more variance there is in academic competence and 
maturity from the side of the students, the more guidance and assistance will be needed. 
Mass DE institutions in emerging contexts will struggle to address the levels and variants 
of support required to address the needs of all students successfully. The attempt to 
achieve a solution for all may make DE less desirable in terms of financial viability.

3.4 Throughput Rates

Mass DE environments have the challenge of addressing the needs of hundreds of 
thousands of students with very diverse needs – many of these students may not be ready
for HE at all. By assigning more and more students to DE, the problem of success and throughput is exacerbated.

According to Simpson (2012: 7), at a well-resourced DE institution like the UKOU, the graduation rate is just over 25% of full-time equivalents. This is just over half that of part-time students at conventional institutions. The University of South Africa (Unisa) reported to having more than 400 000 students from across South Africa and other parts of the world (Unisa, 2013). The university produces 34 000 graduates annually (DISA, 2014). There is general concern about throughput rates for students in DE – Subotzky and Prinsloo (2011: 178) report the research conducted by Scott, Yeld and Hendry (2007) who found that only 30% of students registered in the year 2000 completed their degrees. According to DHET (2013), the graduation rate among undergraduate students in South Africa’s 23 public universities is 15%. The rate for Master’s students is 20% and for doctoral students 12%. These figures evoke concern.

Perraton and Huelsmann (1998:20) confirm that DE appears to be ineffective because many programmes have high drop-out rates, leading to dissatisfied students and costs per graduate that are much higher than cost per student. The authors then state that “systems with high dropout rates can also make money – if many are called but few are taught, expenditure on tutors’ fees is minimized”. MOOCs are another more recent development – Prinsloo (2014a) is, however, concerned about the effect that drop-out rates in MOOCs will have on the future of ODL. The South African context demands wider and open access (to a degree) for students from under-resourced communities – thousands of these students have no other option in terms of location and monetary resources. It is indeed to be doubted if institutions with systems that are unable to differentiate between students in terms of their unique needs and circumstances, will be able to support hundreds of thousands of students in a targeted fashion. In this regard, Tait (2014:15) does recognise the need for the revision of support systems. Bird and Morgan (2003: 1) recommended that the focus shifts to pre-entry information provision, guidance and preparation, because it can prevent students that are unlikely to be successful from entering DE. Such an approach will be difficult to justify against the challenges that DE has to address in terms of access to HE in South Africa.

The predictive modeling of student success can be used to target the most vulnerable students with support, but there is limited evidence for the effectiveness of this approach (Simpson, 2006: 137). In this regard, the existence of various models, based on campus-based learning and Western contexts, does not contribute sufficiently to a solution – this has indeed contributed to the “pathologisation” of dropout in DE (Subotsky and Prinsloo, 2011: 179). There is a need for a socio-critical model that should aim to include all possible factors impacting on success with the specific purpose of avoiding the problems of partial attribution (Subotsky and Prinsloo, 2011: 187). Subotsky and Prinsloo (2011: 177) present a socio-critical model and framework for understanding, predicting and enhancing student success on DE in the SA context. For them, integrating socio-critical, anthropological and cultural theoretical perspectives in terms of situated agency, capital, habitus, attribution, locus of control and self-efficacy will ensure that students and the institution align towards success on the learning path. Even though the authors argue for an all-inclusive model, they agree that external factors, such as socio-economic
disadvantage, cannot be controlled, but can be actionable. Both parties, the host institution and the students, must accept the occurrence of unpredictable events and uncertainties affecting either party (Subotsky and Prinsloo, 2011: 189).

For Simpson (2012: 11), the high drop-out rates in DE are unsustainable for reputational, financial and ethical reasons. Only a limited percentage of students will be able to cope with the challenge of independent study. The more diverse the student population is, the more direct and supportive the system has to be to account for all students in an attempt to provide targeted support and address success and throughput rates (the research done by Subotsky and Prinsloo [2011] supports this conclusion). On the contrary, higher levels of maturity and readiness for independent study can assist with the implementation of a more generic support model.

3.5 Financing Distance Education

Many of the promises of DE seem to be financial in nature (Valentine, 2002). DE may look attractive to both prospective DE providers and students, as there is a perception that it is cheaper for the provider (also in terms of state subsidy) and for the student. But it may again be part of the solution and part of the problem. Some elements may be provided more cheaply, based on economies of scale, whilst other important services may have to be reduced. In the end, the learning experience may be negatively assessed and described as inferior. This problem may be more pertinent in contexts where resources for the provision of HE are scarce and where the expectation is that all funding should be applied as effectively as possible.

When institutions focus too much on economies of scale, there is the temptation to cut down on less scalable but very much needed services, like tutoring and student support. Lentell (2005) addressed the concept of scale. She states that DE can take education and training to scale because scarce human resources are used to their optimum. In another study, Mays (2005) reported on the more general costing scenario in sub-Saharan Africa. Mays (2005: 215) is concerned that DE is often driven by economic rather than pedagogic concerns. He warns that the necessary investment may not be made in the design and development of quality materials, and the development and maintenance of appropriate student-support systems. The sample of courses involved in Mays’s study all offered opportunities for individual consultations and contact sessions (2005: 216). These were mostly voluntary and not accessible to all students (offered in main centres). A situation such as this may make tutoring appear more affordable than it really is, and many deserving students are probably being disadvantaged. In courses where there are low levels of contact and support, there are also correspondingly low pass rates. Mays (2005: 223) concludes that quality DE is not necessarily a cheap alternative to more traditional contact-based provision. Reporting from the South African context, Du Plessis (2011: 276-277) is of the opinion that properly designed materials with limited support can indeed be a cheaper form of DE. However, properly planned and supported DE can exceed the cost of traditional face-to-face education.

Financing education and, more specifically, DE is indeed a problem of great significance, especially in developing countries (Rashid and Rashid, 2011). The main issues concerning resources are how to get more from formal and unconventional sources and how best to deploy whatever resources are available to DE as a whole (Rashid and
Rashid, 2011). From the context of Lesotho, Lefoka and Panda (2012: 19) report on the struggle to make the Lesotho Distance Teaching Centre (LDTC) more viable. In South Africa, there is also a realisation that the subsidy and funding for DE will have to be revisited to implement the required technology infrastructure (John, 2012) – currently DE is subsidised at only 50% of the amount for contact students with master’s and doctoral degrees excluded (De Villiers, 2009). DHET (2012) is wary of simply increasing funding for DE: “Funding in the teaching input grant category for distance HE has in the past been at 50% of contact HE. Increasing this level of funding would take funds away from contact institutions without guaranteeing improvements in distance education. So it is not advisable to substantially increase the teaching input grant funding to distance education in a blanket manner.” Committing to a reconstitution of institutional economies may force a re-evaluation of current priorities. This task may require serious rethinking of how teaching is financed and where economies could be achieved.

Following on from Du Plessis’s (2011) argument, the ‘cheaper’ variant of DE (good instructional materials with limited support) may be the more suitable option for the South African context. Accommodating many underprepared students with extensive support needs may cause current DE economies to falter, as the costs would equal and even exceed that of residential education.

In spite of the many solutions that are presented in terms of technology and blends, DE may still not be able to respond effectively in the South African context due to access problems and the interpretation of distance by students. The implementation of new communication technologies may be hampered by expanding the mandate of institutions to include thousands more underprepared and under-resourced students. Applying the principles of open learning, or even carrying the label, may deepen the support problems that DE in South Africa has to address based on current expectations. The required parameters for successful DE are closely linked to the level of student support. However, the level and degree of student support are related to the level of student preparedness and maturity. This increase may affect economies of scale to the degree that there is no substantial difference in cost between DE and residential education (RE) or contact learning.

DE institutions are required to respond to two overarching needs: firstly, there are tens of thousands of underprepared students needing access and, secondly, there are rural communities that need involvement in the education system as a result of their geographical separation (most students needing higher levels of support may come from these communities). Is there a delivery model with a financial model for DE that can serve both limited student and government investment? Both types of investment may be more effective for a more specified and conservative DE-delivery model rather than a general model that is supposed to respond to all students, including a substantial number of underprepared students. From this point of view, a more diverse HE system, with different types of institutions responsible for preparing students may make a contribution in terms of affordability and financial viability.
4. DISCUSSION

4.1 Different Variants Needed

All the problems originating from the school system, and the personal circumstances of students, may have to be addressed in a far more diverse HE-education system to address the wide variety of student needs. On its own, higher DE cannot address the problems of South Africa as a developing country.

The challenges of supporting students at a distance seem to be insurmountable (Rossi and Sirna, 2008: 7) and DE is still facing criticism from many quarters; however, it is producing thousands of graduates annually who go on to make a successful contribution to their own subsistence and the economy. In this regard, Prinsloo (2014b) is convinced that DE still “has huge potential to contribute to economic growth, erase inter-generational poverty and address societal injustices and inequalities on the African continent.” However, there will have to be an integrated effort on the part of the government. It is possible that a great many variants of RE and DE will have to co-exist to address the need. Individually, these variants may all be criticised in terms of the absence or dominance of crucial components, but all of them may address the needs of particular categories of students rather than there being a single institution responsible for the impossible task of addressing the needs of all students nationally.

The suggested system of community, TVET and other public colleges for South Africa (DHET, 2014: 20–25), for example, can also make a significant contribution in not only addressing the need for HE in general, but also in preparing students to take responsibility for their own education and for independent learning at a distance. This can be similar to the community-college system in the USA that provides cheaper entry to HE and prepares students for the required level of academic English as well as degree studies (Gobel, 2012).

4.2 Unique Circumstances

It is no secret that DE goes a long way to addressing the problems of working mothers and rural people who do not live close to a residential university or who cannot accommodate the schedule required. Referring to rural communities in Alberta, Canada, Steel and Fahy (2011: 48-49) are of the opinion that DE reduces the many logistical problems related to residential education in rural communities; for example, day-care, family and employment commitments, transportation, costs of participation, conflicts with location and scheduling. The authors are also of the opinion that other resources may become available when fixed schedules and locations for study are not imposed.

From a historic and development perspective, it is not cost effective to establish residential universities in rural areas. In some parts of the world, some governments require that people be relocated closer to facilities – this means that they have to be removed from their ancestral land to benefit from education. DE may assist with the “destructive effects” of government policies designed to remove remote people from their lands (Simon, Burton, Lockhart and O’Donnell, 2014: 2–3).

DE in South Africa may not be able to easily accommodate the unique challenges of communities into delivery towards higher levels of HE. However, the proposed system of
community colleges (DHET, 2014: 20-25), and similar institutional types, may be able to make a much improved contribution to a relatively new democracy with cultural and access challenges.

4.3 Customization and Ownership

Simon et al (214: 12) also argue for local and rural communities to be able to have a choice of technologies that will work for them based on access, experience and preference. In such an accommodative scenario, the rural communities can influence the teaching and learning space, and influence the nature of the training received by teaching and support staff (customise the delivery mode) (Rossi and Sirna, 2008: 10) – this kind of management model for DE will, of course, be unconventional, but it is certainly possible. It can also be argued that that there are many existing experts (e.g. health and religious), seniors and elders in rural communities who can act as mentors to support first-time DE students until they gain the confidence and self-esteem to proceed successfully in meeting the requirements of independence and maturity in DE. In this way, experts and practitioners from the community can be included in the learning experience.

The community can claim ownership in the HE of young adults, and community values can become part of the experience of learning at a distance. However, this is only really possible in a more diverse HE system where there is entry-level input. The community can take ownership and assist students with progressing to higher levels of DE with the help of the providing institutions (e.g. community colleges). A reciprocal relationship between the community and the institution will also ensure the development of the community through staff and student engagement.

4.4 Degrees of Inclusion

The history of DE in South Africa is strongly represented by Unisa, with its history in providing independent learning opportunities to working adults. Recently, this scenario has seen challenges in terms of young people entering the university from school. Unisa, for example, may find itself unable to respond sufficiently to the needs of the changing student population. The current DE parameters may only be efficient for certain individuals due to the level of responsibility and independence required.

In line with the work done by Subotsky and Prinsloo (2011), MacIntyre and MacDonald (2011: 11) are of the opinion that the hype surrounding new technologies and e-learning, in terms of overcoming problems related to geographical distance, may be obscuring the individual circumstances of students. The researchers found it difficult to classify remote students into fixed categories in terms of needs: “Participants understood remoteness in relation to what they were trying to access, to how they accessed it, and to their personal circumstances.” (MacIntyre and MacDonald, 2011: 11).

Despite the best efforts to fit everybody who shows interest, or who is directed to it, into the mode, it may not work (Schmidt & Gallegos, 2001: 5). The mode requires a substantial amount of self-motivation and independence. Self-directed and well-prepared individuals may have higher chances of success on DE. Perhaps future scenarios may include the fact that DE, or independent learning, may not be for everyone.
4.5 Institutional Dimensions

In spite of the problems highlighted in the literature over the past 20 years, DHET (2012: 11) is optimistic that DE is a solution for the South African context. They are of the opinion that it can be done cost-effectively and efficiently, and that proper planning can address quality issues. However, DHET (2012: 11) proposes a national set of core programmes targeted at South Africa’s burgeoning unemployed. This may demand customisation as they propose for the DE programmes to be delivered by residential universities as well. It is possible that residential or campus-based institutions may be even less likely to be successful with the delivery of any form of DE, as it requires the creation and support of an entirely different space (facilities, processes and capacities may not be suitable for DE production and delivery by default).

The mass DE environment needs a very strong production, distribution and support system for it to function efficiently. For Fluegge (2010: 41–42), DE is indeed a mode that is influenced by a long tradition in the aforementioned. He relies on the work of Wedemeyer when stressing the institutional history and culture that contribute to ability and capacity. Unisa’s history regarding the industrialisation of content also weighs heavily on its ability to make a shift to focus on a more interactive learning experience. However, it has a strong instructional-design culture and a very strong subject-knowledge base that support the production of course packages. According to Fluegge (2010: 41–42), “a comparative analysis of the African educational situation reveals that these same forces do not exist to the same extent in developing countries of Africa.” Therefore, a cautionary approach is advisable when implementing DE in countries, regions and institutions where there are no strong foundations in producing a learning experience.

4.6 The Future of DE

It is expected that various learning experiences will be created and provided with the help of new ICTs (e.g. the continuation of MOOCs and MOOLOs). Conventional delivery modes will not go untouched in terms of their identity, structure and associated practice. The future of DE will also not be determined through an emphasis on technological development only as the hype around hardware, apps and connectivity continues (Heydenrych & Prinsloo, 2010: 10).

It will indeed be an injustice to make underprepared and poor students believe that DE is their salvation whilst at the same time forcing providers and institutions to accommodate the fallout from such an assignment. Such a step will increase issues related to student support, throughput and success, and will thereby increase the scale of the problems that DE has always been criticised for in SA. It cannot possibly cope with more intensive and dedicated tutoring based on an assumption that it will not cost more. Accommodating more underprepared students will make the mode less affordable and less effective at the same time. The focus has to be on the real contribution that DE can make in terms of accommodating well-prepared students. If not, DE will appear to be consistently struggling to accommodate struggling students that do not have a real chance of success. This scenario will be met with negative assessments and critique from the standards and quality watchdogs.
It will only make a difference in the South African context if it is accepted for the contribution that it has made for many decades – providing quality degree programmes to mature adults that can cope with the requirements of the mode. This imperfect mode will continue to constitute a space in which hundreds of thousands of graduates are produced in developing contexts, as it has done since the introduction of Sir Isaac Pitman’s shorthand course by mail in 1840 and Anna Ticknow’s home-study courses by correspondence for women in 1873 (Heydenrych & Prinsloo, 2010: 13). Current DE delivery, like these early examples, will continue to be a problem for some, but it will surely be an opportunity for many others.

5. CONCLUSION

Some assumptions are problematic in terms of taking DE into the future in the South African context. There is no indication that it will be able to cope with the added responsibilities.

DE is indeed currently challenged by the many “variants” made possible by new communication technologies. It is unclear if these solutions are able to successfully deal with the support challenges in all contexts. The current association with open learning also increases the assigned mandate for DE – underprepared students may be directed to it instead of mature, responsible and independent students. (One can also ask why this aspect of HE is not also assigned to residential institutions.)

The more diverse the student population, the more difficult and costly will be the support mechanisms that have to be sustained. Associated with this is the challenge of increasing success and throughput rates. Assigning to DE all the students who have not been able to get access to residential education, or who cannot afford it, may be a recipe for increased problems with regard to student support and affordable DE.

DE can only play a more productive role in SA if it has a more refined and targeted mandate – the mandate announced by the authorities in the recent past may not be viable. A more diverse HE system should feed into DE, thereby ensuring a greater chance of success for both students and institutions within acceptable support and financial parameters.

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