

# Distance learning the solution for tertiary education

For school leavers completing their final exams and hoping to study further next year, passing matric is only the first step in securing one of the highly sought after places at one of South Africa's 23 public universities. But desperately oversubscribed applications mean that candidates may have the odds stacked high against them as they face going up against tens of thousands of hopeful applicants vying for the limited number of places available at the public universities.

In the current tough economic climate, many believe that having a tertiary qualification makes it easier to secure a job. With an estimated one in four people in South Africa currently unemployed, many young South Africans feel that a university degree may be their only hope for securing employment which means that the demand for university degrees in this country outstrips supply a hundredfold.

The South African Institute of Race Relations' 2010/11 survey revealed that first-year enrolments increased by 16% between 2004 and 2010. This increase in enrolments represents the heightened desire of the country's youths to be further educated in the hope of being a more competitive candidate in the cut throat job market.

## Six new universities needed

In order for equilibrium between the demand and supply for higher education to be reached, it is estimated that at least six new public universities will be needed. The public colleges spread across South Africa that make up the Further Education and Training (FET) sector are too small and in some cases simply weak to absorb the overflow of students who cannot be accommodated in public universities. In some cases, the standard of education offered by these colleges is considered too low. These factors mean that the colleges often do not compete with the larger institutions in the provision of quality post-school education.

Another South African Institute of Race Relations study in 2010 showed that of the nearly five million South African youths aged between 20 and 24, only 892 936 were enrolled in public higher education, a participation rate of 18.6%. This is a far cry from the target participation rate set by government for 2030 of 23% in universities and 60% in other post-school institutions.

The answer to this problem may very well lie in extending distance learning offerings. Higher Education and Training Minister Blade Nzimande, has attempted to identify ways in which the provision of distance learning by established institutions can be encouraged in order to further develop distance learning as part of the greater higher education system in South Africa and target the unemployed youth of the country, enabling them to become financially productive and socially invested members of society.

## Traditional education becomes out-dated

Milpark's executive manager of Tuition and Research Dr. Japie Heydenrych, believes that distance learning is the way of the future, and with advances in technology and more South African youths having access to the web via mobile devices, it will be possible to make distance learning more accessible to an increased number of students all over South Africa.

Enrolments in distance education make up a significant proportion of the total higher education system. Distance learning has come a long way from the days of learning by postal correspondence and has secured a firm place in South African education. The number of students present online has grown rapidly in recent years and the demand for good quality, affordable, online learning is exploding. Distance learning is challenging our expectations about teaching and learning. Many aspects of traditional education are becoming out-dated, expensive and slow.

As the pressure on full-time undergraduate places at South Africa's public universities continues to increase, many first-time students will be turning to distance learning as admission requirements are traditionally more flexible, tuition fees are usually lower and students can avoid the costs of travel and living away from home. Quality, supported distance learning will provide students with an accessible and flexible way of completing their studies at an affordable price from any location around South Africa.

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