

IIE welcomes draft education policy for distance education

The Independent Institute of Education (IIE) has welcomed the draft framework document on distance higher education in South Africa, released for comment last month by the Department of Higher Education and Training.

"We welcome the proposed policy, as distance education provides some real solutions to challenges faced both in general access to higher education, as well as the specific learning needs and challenges faced by working adults," says Dr. Ngoato Takalo, deputy director of partnerships at the Independent Institute of Education.

However, Takalo warns that a healthy dose of caution is appropriate, as distance education is not a cure-all and could in fact lead to unintended, adverse outcomes for many, for different reasons. "Success rates in distance education remain far below those in contact education."

Better ways to improve standards

Takalo says that a lack of student support, or weak learning materials and support, could see an increase in failure rates, rather than the improved graduate outputs envisaged by the draft policy. "The goals of the draft policy are sound - ensuring the quality of offerings and the efficient and effective use of resources. However, the draft policy does not sufficiently explain why the creation of a 'mega-institution' - as is proposed - is the best way to achieve these goals. We would argue that there are better and economically sounder ways to improve standards in distance education."

Takalo says that the recommendations are correct in pointing out that distance education learning materials must be of a higher standard than those used in contact institutions, as distance learning students often do not have the benefit of lecturer mediation. However she says that the proposed method of ensuring such superior quality should be reconsidered.

"If traditional contact institutions managed to master distance learning methods and prepared 'distance ready' courses which are then also delivered to contact students, both groups would benefit. Distance learning students from having suitable, quality learning materials, but also contact learning students, whose improved success rates would become a valuable by-product of high quality distance offerings."

Policies must be brought together

Takalo suggests that existing expertise in both the public and private sectors must be leveraged.

"Collaborative efforts, similar to what UNISA achieved with its licenced tuition centres, could further improve the reach and effectiveness of distance education opportunities without the need to build full campuses in areas where the envisaged enrolment would make them financially unsustainable."

"What SA needs most is for these numerous related but not yet interconnected policies to be brought together in an action plan that delivers on the promises. This is especially necessary in an environment in which basic education is still struggling, and issues between the qualifications frameworks and the quality assurance councils remain unresolved."

"It is questionable whether the good intentions as articulated in the draft paper will result in real improved opportunities for students soon enough. That being said, any provider, public or private, that experiences resonance with the principles, is already in a position to proceed with improving its distance delivery offerings. Enabling conditions already exist and it could well transpire that the proposed policy will become further enabler rather than a necessary condition."

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