Inclusion and exclusion in higher education: Paradoxes in distance education

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Abstract

Distance education has been identified as a tool for opening up access to education. In South Africa in particular, the model has been identified as being able to redress past inequities. In this article, the researcher investigates to what extent 'access' is being given to distance education students enrolled in the B.Ed. (Hons) Education Management, Law and Policy programme at a university, and what the quality of the access is in comparison to its conventional counterparts. The study uses a combination of surveys, interviews and administrative records. The findings reveal that enrolled distance education students on the programme enjoy open access in terms of the university's admission policies. However, paradoxes exist in relation to the use of media, non-instructional support services, the absence of bridging courses, the lack of financial assistance to prospective students without jobs, lack of access to library services, limited access to bursaries for enrolled students, and limited faculty–student contact. Recommendations include: introduction of counselling services, decentralised library facilities, toll-free telephone services, and the release of government funds for bursaries, as is the case for conventional students. It is encouraging that the newly reviewed programme, rolled out in October 2010, contains most of these recommended opportunities.

INTRODUCTION

The issue of access is not new to debates on higher education. The tiny colleges found in North America in the 1600s and 1700s reflected the fact that at medieval universities, women and black slaves were excluded, and relatively few of the poor were admitted (Shore 1991). But, in recent times, university education has moved from its former position of elitism to massification. Some writers have argued (Tonks and Farr 2003) that it appears that opening the doors to higher education is becoming problematic, due to some of the issues discussed in this article.

The term 'access' can generally be assumed to mean opening opportunities for people to attend college who were once excluded, or giving a second chance to its clients (Holmberg 2001). Exclusion from full-time education may be due

to a number of reasons, such as the inability to afford the costs involved or circumstances not permitting full-time study. In pursuing inclusion, scholars have advised that social inclusion should not only focus on neo-liberal ideas such as numbers and percentages, as those do not necessarily reflect student participation or success, nor do they reveal anything about the quality of the education that is accessed (Gidleya, Hampsona, Wheelera and Bereded-Samuel 2010). The same scholars advise that inclusion should be seen as embracing a broader concept of human rights, egalitarianism of opportunity, human dignity and fairness for all, which may or may not be linked to economic interests.

One of the methods of broadening access to education is distance education, which has a long history. Distance education established its roots as a form of instruction at least 150 years ago (Holmberg 2001). It is now a worldwide phenomenon, with enrolment in this mode of education increasing steadily each year. This mode is now in vogue among many African universities wanting to meet the escalating demand for higher education (Braimoh 2003). Due to its benefits, few political leaders fail to mention the need to increase opportunities for post-secondary education in their country, although the argument is that leaders are driven by economic liberalisation and competition for investment, rather than the desire for, or commitment to, greater social equity (Dhanarajan 1997). Nonetheless, it is a well-educated citizenry that is the foundation of social equity, cohesion and successful participation in the global knowledge economy (International Association of Universities [IAU] 2008).

Increasing access has more than numerical consequences, as making educational opportunities more accessible to those whom it excluded, does not ultimately make the system fair (Herman and Mandell 1999). Therefore, access debates show two faces: invitation and exclusion (Herman and Mandell 1999). One of the important questions is: At whose expense does access come? (Chambers 1997). There are many implications for widening access, one of which is that the student to educator ratio often increases immensely, without corresponding finances being invested. This situation invariably affects the performance of students who drop out of the system in large numbers, thus negating the essence of access (Singh 2001).

Cele and Brandt (2005) assert that there are various forms of access to teaching and learning which include: 'access to space; access to resources; access to knowledge; access to skills and competency; access to dialogue; access to workplace education and access to feedback. These can be grouped into learner invitation (access, admission and placement) and learner hosting (academic provision, service and capacitation)'. Even though the concept of 'quality' is difficult to define, there is no gainsaying the fact that for any higher education

provider to pursue a relevant access policy, this term needs to be understood from the viewpoints of all stakeholders. Such an approach will enable the institution to maintain its integrity, while at the same time meeting the expected needs of the stakeholders involved in the educational process. Having perused available literature on the concept of quality, the researcher is of the opinion that each scholar should formulate a framework on what quality should mean. This should be governed by the purpose of their study – a view also supported by Green (1994). Hence, *quality* in relation to this study implies:

> The conformance of an institution's goals, process and input factors, and evaluation systems to the needs specified by their clients (the government, the students, the financiers and the employers of labour) in relation to what the institution too deems fit as relevant to the specified needs. (Aluko 2007)

BACKGROUND TO THE STUDY

One of the potentials already identified to redress the question of access in South Africa is distance education, since it provides for the enrolment of large numbers of students (Daves, Goh, Malcolm and Uhl 2004). Higher education is seen as pivotal to economic prosperity, assisting South Africans – personally and collectively – to escape the 'poverty trap' which characterises many communities (Department of Education [DoE] 2001). In view of this need, conventional education institutions in South Africa have, for the last ten years (and in some cases longer) turned their focus to admission strategies that widen access to higher education and facilitate the academic development of students from disadvantaged educational backgrounds (Council on Higher Education [CHE] 2004). However, Gelderbloem (1996) asserts that these initiatives are costly and limited in range, adding that solutions to the problems of access and equity do not lie solely at the door of the university.

Presently, the shape of the South Africa higher education landscape appears, to some extent, to begin satisfying governmental goals (DoE 2004; 2007). For instance, statistics suggest that African student enrolment increased from 40 to 61 per cent between 1993 and 2007. Nevertheless, the question of access and equity in South African higher education cannot be pursued without paying attention to the issue of quality. The former minister of education, Naledi Pandor (2005), stressed that the higher education sector is challenged to promote equity without compromising quality, because, indeed, quality is central to any redress or equity strategy. Though South Africa is one of the few African countries to steadily increase its education funding, often little or no attention is paid to the funding of distance education. Thus, there continues to be chronic tension between widening participation, quality and standards – something which forms a key

developmental dilemma (Scott 2003). Barnett (1992, 2) describes this tension as 'a possible conflict of interest between expansion and diminishing unit costs' (see Figure 1).

Procedures for assessing quality

Lower unit costs
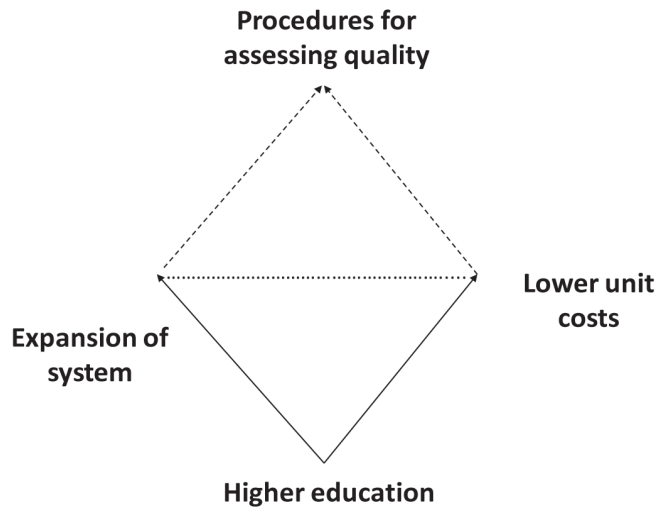
Expansion of system

Higher education

Figure 1: The quality gap in higher education
Source: Barnett 1992, 2.

In Figure 1, because education is being pulled in the directions of both expansion and the squeezing of resources (lower unit costs), doubts emerge about the quality of the system's products (Barnett 1992; Green 1994).

The University of Pretoria (UP) is one higher education institution committed to redressing inequality in terms of admissions and access. The university was formerly a pure white Afrikaans institution, but it has purposefully striven towards serving the country and all its inhabitants, and to equip them for the future (Pistorius 2002). Although it is a comprehensive research and contact institution, in 2002 it initiated a distance education initiative in the Faculty of Education after discontinuing its partnership agreement with National Private Colleges. The aim was to support teachers in improving their qualifications, which is aligned with the national policy on teacher education (DoE 2006). Distance education is now a large-scale initiative in the faculty, with about 20 000 students. Through the Unit for Distance Education, the university offers three distance education programmes, one of which is the B.Ed. (Hons) in Education Management, Law and Policy, under investigation in this study.

The research question posed was: What is the extent of access being given to distance education students enrolled on the B.Ed. (Hons) in Education Management, Law and Policy programme at the University of Pretoria, and what

is the quality of access in comparison with their counterparts studying through conventional methods?

RESEARCH DESIGN

The focus of the study was the B.Ed. (Hons) in Education Management, Law and Policy programme, which is presented in both conventional and distance modes. To gain a better understanding of the phenomenon under investigation, the mixed-methods approach was adopted. The qualitative instruments included micro and macro administrative documents from the university, one-on-one semi-structured interviews with ten course presenters, four administrative staff members, one instructional designer (students from both modes of delivery use the same learning materials), and telephone interviews with ten students who had discontinued their studies with the university. Other qualitative methods included two focus-group interviews with four tutors (from another conventional education programme of the university) and six module coordinators. The tutors were involved in order to obtain their views on how they perceived their role in the programme they tutored. This enabled the researcher to understand what their possible value might have been to the programme under investigation.

The quantitative instrument was the questionnaire (with open- and closed-ended questions), copies of which were given to 127 distance education students and 45 conventional education students. The researcher included the instrument in order to involve more students. The purposive sampling was applied by the researcher, and the instruments were first piloted on a number of participants, which led to the correction of some of the questions that appeared to be ambiguous. The validity of the instruments was based on the selection of appropriate research methods and instruments, relevant reviewed literature which determined the formulation of questions posed, the choice of relevant participants, an in-depth description of the gathered data, and the distancing of the researcher's personal views. The study took place between 2005 and 2007. However, recent information has been included in order to update the data, where necessary.

DATA ANALYSIS

Due to the number of interviews, the researcher opted to use *Atlas ti 5.0* (a computer-assisted qualitative data analysis software package). Relevant quotations were extracted and codes were developed based on concepts and themes which were frequently mentioned by interviewees (Hardy and Bryman 2004). Codes were developed manually from the completed questionnaires as

they were few in number. The Statistics Department of the university calculated the cumulative frequencies and percentages.

MAJOR FINDINGS OF THE STUDY AND DISCUSSION

The extent of access offered to students

Part of the research question dealt with determining to what extent access is being offered through the programme under investigation, to students who had previously been denied places in higher education. The focus was on three areas: the choice of instructional technology by the university (in view of the demographics of students enrolled in distance education programmes), reasons for the choice, as well as the relevance which the choice of technology has for enrolled students. This discussion also includes related factors that emerged during the course of the study.

Based on the findings derived from both the quantitative and qualitative instruments, we may infer that the call (DoE 2001) to offer access to the majority of previously denied South Africans was gradually being acceded to (Sedgwick 2004). From the university documents which the researcher analysed, it became apparent that there have been many changes at the university, as regards the access offered to students. This becomes important in view of the fact that the university was formerly Afrikaans-only.
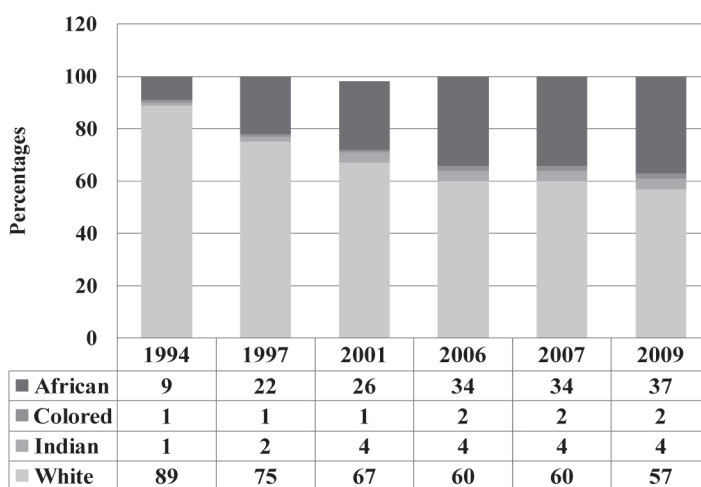

	1994	1997	2001	2006	2007	2009
■ African	9	22	26	34	34	37
■ Colored	1	1	1	2	2	2
■ Indian	1	2	4	4	4	4
■ White	89	75	67	60	60	57

Figure 2: Race profile at the University of Pretoria
Source: Adapted from University of Pretoria 2005, 2006 and 2009.

Figure 2 shows that the profile of white students at the University of Pretoria decreased from 89 per cent in 1994 to 57 per cent in 2009, while that of African students increased from nine per cent in 1994 to 37 per cent in 2009. The reflected information corroborates similar information in Figure 1, where nationally, the participation rates for white students decreased from 47 per cent in 1993 to 27 per cent in 2007. However, Cloete (2009) argues that the big equity issue for the university system is not trying to squeeze a few more black students into the institutions, but addressing the inequity in pass rates (success rates).

Furthermore, findings from the student questionnaire reflected that 98 per cent of the student participants from both modes of delivery were African, 95 per cent were teachers, 68 per cent were female, 70 per cent were over 40 years of age, and their access to the Internet was two per cent. With the exception of the last aspect of the demographics (access to the Internet, which had increased to 14% by April 2010), all the other demographic factors remained constant.

The quality of access given to students

Another focus of this study was to assess the quality of access given to students. The researcher considered factors such as the delivery mode used, instructional and non-instructional support systems, the student payment of fees, and library facilities. These are guided by the definition of quality adopted earlier.

- **The delivery mode**

As regards the delivery mode, the findings revealed that since the university decided to venture into deep rural areas, it has, in essence, limited its choice of technology (Bates 2005) to the print medium, in order to offer equal access to students entering the programme. Students from both modes used the same learning materials, which were first developed for use in the distance education programme. According to one of the interviewees, the main reasons for this decision on the part of management included the quality of the materials; the fact that the same module coordinators were responsible for both modes; and also that students would be sitting for the same examination and would be awarded the same certificates at the end of the process. In the researcher's opinion the decision by management proves the quality of the materials developed for the distance education programme.

Although the students could identify with the choice of media some gaps still exist, which Hellman (2003) refers to as the 'digital divide'. This despite the fact that the university, for its part and within the available means of bringing all students to the same level, included all information in the tutorial materials that it felt would be needed by the students to cope with the demands of the

programme. Nevertheless, module coordinators and many course presenters felt there was a difference between students from the two delivery modes: the contact students all had better exposure to modern facilities such as computer technology; some distance students were privileged to work in schools with certain of these facilities, while others were able to access university libraries located close to them. The distance students with access to aids made up one per cent, compared to the conventional education students who all had access to the campus library and the Internet.

• **Non-instructional support systems**

The researcher investigated both instructional and non-instructional support systems. 'Non-instructional support', in this context, refers to toll-free telephone support and counselling, and academic advisory services for enrolled students in any given programme. Researchers have continually stressed the importance of both types of support systems, since their absence can have terrible consequences for enrolled students (Raphael 2006).

The findings from this study revealed that only contact students had access to non-instructional support such as counselling, while the majority of distance students responded negatively to the presence of these services. Invariably, some of the distance education students identified areas in need of counselling, which were 'career counselling, studying, time management, and how to write examinations and complete assignments'. Regrettably, these areas have already been identified as challenges for distance education students (Mostert 2006). On the other hand, the majority of the contact students indicated that they had better access to academic advising services, which resulted in them being better motivated. A complicating factor was that the distance education students were expected to phone in to access such support, which meant additional expenses for them. As a result, they rarely phoned in with academic enquiries.

• **Instructional support systems**

One of the instructional support systems to encourage distance students to complete their programmes on time is the tutoring system – it provides students with individualised instruction and improves their completion rates and achievement, although these factors depend on the nature of the course, the tutors and the students (Moore and Kearsley 2005). But findings from the investigation showed that none of the six modules under investigation from both modes had the benefit of tutors, which signifies a gap between theory and practice.

It did, however, appear that the course presenters employed by the Distance Education Unit seemed to play the role of tutors. The researcher suggests that this

could not have been as effective, since the majority of them mainly had contact with the students during the contact sessions, which took place twice a year. Module coordinators expressed doubts about appointing capable hands due to the experience required at postgraduate level, but Moore and Kearsley (2005) suggest that institutions could put in place a process of training the required tutors.

- **Cost to students**

Prospective students who had no job, and could not pay tuition fees, were not admitted to the programme. This shows that access to the programme was restricted to those who could afford the fees. Commenting on this dilemma, Pityana (2006) praised the vast improvements made in the area of access, but nonetheless lamented the fact that many are still excluded from the higher education sector. Interestingly, the picture is not entirely different on the international scene. For instance, USA Funds (2007) expressed the fear that despite the enormous investment of public resources, financial barriers to higher learning persist for many academically qualified low-income students.

The need for financial support leads to a discussion of a loan scheme for which students enrolled at South African universities may apply. Findings from this study reveal that 85 out of 152 students (56%) from both delivery modes were on the loan scheme (interestingly enough, almost all other students who did not indicate financial difficulties were on it too). Only ten students had access to bursaries, while only two could afford to pay their fees. In a sense, the students were forced by circumstances to make use of the loan scheme. As could be expected, students responding to the questionnaire complained about the high fees involved in tertiary education. This constraint, amongst other factors, often signals a low probability of students completing their degrees, as well as low motivation (Qurashi, Morton and Antosz 2002). Some student-participants indicated that the situation was stressful, discriminatory and de-motivating – in particular, they knew of several students who had had to withdraw from their studies due to financial difficulties.

At the time of this investigation, the 2007 national budget reflected the fact that a major share was allocated to education, and according to the then Finance Minister (South Africa Information 2007), R700 million was set aside as bursaries to encourage young people to train as teachers. However, little or nothing was allocated to distance education students. Unfortunately, the same picture is reflected in the current budget (2011).

- **Library facilities**

The last of the support mechanisms mentioned here is the extent of the library facilities provided by the university. It is the responsibility of institutions of higher education to meet the needs of all their students, irrespective of their location (Association of College and Research Libraries [ACRL] 2004). This study revealed that the university made a concerted effort to meet this need by including in student packages all information that it regarded as necessary for their success. Nevertheless, one cannot ignore the fact that the contact students, and some of the distance students who had access to libraries, had an advantage. A particular instance noted was the inability of distance students to access a law library (not found in the rural areas), and most of them had no access to the Internet.

LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

First, one might need to be cautious in generalising the findings from this study to all aspects of programmes other than the one under investigation, or to other dual-mode institutions. This is because of the diverse contexts in which dual-mode institutions find themselves. Second, although telephone interviews are a good method of data gathering when interviewees are removed by space, it is not possible to interact fully with participants, as would be the case in a face-to-face interview, thus making it impossible to read people's emotions or body language.

Furthermore, part of the researcher's main reason for choosing a mixed-methods approach was to gain an in-depth understanding of the phenomenon under investigation. This would have enabled the researcher to further probe certain aspects. However, the majority of students avoided answering some of the open-ended questions, answering only the closed questions, which they probably considered to be easier.

Lastly, the number of enrolled students on the contact mode for the same programme was too small compared to that of its distance counterparts. However, the Statistics Department of the university used non-parametric tests to ascertain the reliability of the exact probabilities, and to strengthen the evidence of the statistically significant relationships between the two groups (Cohen, Manion and Morrison 2000).

RECOMMENDATIONS

The present decision of the government to introduce bursaries to teacher education because this has been identified as a crisis point is laudable, but a similar gesture should be extended to distance education provision. This need is

particularly relevant in view of the expenses involved, which in-service teachers who wish to study further have to bear, while claiming that their salaries are low. Ironically, most African students are enrolled in education courses (CHE 2009). The government should increase the subsidies provided to distance education programmes, and also make bursaries available to enrolled students, as is the case for their contact counterparts. Even though there is a loan scheme in place, the burden of repaying the loan should not be ignored.

Since the university participating in this study has begun making incursions into the rural areas, practical and workable approaches should be adopted in terms of a tutoring system. Tutors should be made available for all modules. Module coordinators should identify and train tutors for the distance education programmes. Such tutors do not have to be concentrated on the campus alone, but could be former students from both this university and other universities, who meet specified requirements and live in areas where the students reside. Such potential tutors will understand the terrain of the rural areas, and the demands of living there.

As a matter of urgency, attention should be paid to student counselling. Even though all necessary information on matters such as time management and writing assignments is contained in tutorial letters, there is no denying the fact that distance students require extra motivation in order to combat isolation. The present staff complement cannot cope with rendering this added service, without neglecting some aspect of their regular duties. Therefore, a separate department or call centre should be dedicated to counselling distance students, which would go beyond merely allocating some members of the administrative staff to take calls. In addition, the gesture of some counsellors being present at contact sessions for distance students should be practised. In order to cut costs, these counsellors could be employed on a contract basis.

Unfortunately, some of the recommendations mentioned above would be dependent on the availability of funds. For instance, money will be needed to extend library facilities to students in rural areas. One suggestion is that the university could collaborate with identified universities running similar programmes, to save on costs. Government organisations could be approached to open call centres for distance students, which would take care of both their academic and relational support needs. Telephone operators could be trained to serve as counsellors in addition to performing other roles.

In terms of further research, there is a need for a repeat of this study, but on a larger scale in order to make the findings more generalisable. A comparison could be conducted between two or more different universities running the same programme. However, this would require a team of researchers to work together,

as the workload would be too heavy for one individual. Such a comparative study would expose the researchers to quality assurance issues in different settings, which might contribute to the generalisability of the findings.

There is a need for research into the possibility of establishing an effective tutoring system for students in rural areas, as well as the extension of library services to those regions. Finally, further research is needed in the area of ensuring the quality of a programme, especially in a rural setting in an African context (Aluko, Fraser and Hendrikz 2008).

CONCLUSION

The findings of this study confirm those of other research studies, which indicate that South Africa has identified distance education as a tool for redressing past inequalities in higher education. Although equal access is currently a particular national focus, it appears that little is being said or done in terms of financially supporting distance education, to broaden access to higher education. Also due to the University of Pretoria's decision to make incursions into rural areas it has had to settle for the print medium, because so few distance education students have access to the Internet. Inevitably, there remained gaps in the provision of distance education programmes, such as varying contact exposure by some distance education students to information and communications technologies (ICTs) – in particular, as regards access to the Internet. Furthermore, some students were fortunate in that they lived in close proximity to the library facilities of the university.

In addition, the results of this investigation highlighted the importance of tutors (outside the course presenters) who are only available to distance education students during contact sessions (Aluko 2007).

In conclusion, it is important to note that since the time of this investigation, the university in question has reviewed the programme, and the upgraded B.Ed. (Hons) in Education Management, Law and Policy programme was rolled out in October 2010. Most of the recommendations and suggestions listed above have been incorporated into the new programme. In the South African educational landscape, thousands of teachers wish to enhance their qualifications, but cannot attend universities in urban areas as residential students, nor take leave to travel away from their homes and schools to attend lectures (Fresen and Hendrikz 2009). Thus, distance education is highly relevant to opening the doors of learning, which brings with it the concomitant need to monitor the quality of access to higher education which is provided in this mode.

NOTE

1. South Africa demographics are divided into four major racial categories: African (a term used for blacks), white, coloured and Indian. These terms are used throughout the article.

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