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Chapter 8

The Challenges of *E-learning* in South Africa

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Additional information is available at the end of the chapter

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Abstract

The University of South Africa (UNISA) is the largest open distance *e-learning* (ODeL) university in the continent of Africa, with a student headcount more than 300,000. Over two decades after the transition from apartheid to democracy, vast inequalities across race, class, gender and socio-economic status persist in South Africa, with the majority of the African people being the most affected. Demographically, the African people constitute about 80.8% of the country's total population, compared to whites, who constitute a meagre 8.8%, yet African households carry the highest burden of poverty, living way below the official poverty line of $1.90/day as determined by the World Bank and other international agencies. This chapter explores these inequalities and ponders on the role of *e-learning* for this poorest section of society in a country where modern technological devises in the form of information and communication technologies (ICTs) and access to the Internet are perceived to be ubiquitous. South Africa's Department of Higher Education and Training (DHET) commits to "an expansion of open and distance education and the establishment of more 'satellite' premises where universities or colleges provide classes at places and times convenient to students (including in rural areas)". This chapter also explores the role of UNISA in the provision of distance learning through structured and sustainable *e-learning*.

Keywords: South Africa, inequalities, UNISA, open distance *e-learning*

1. Introduction

The University of South Africa (UNISA) is the largest open distance *e-learning* (ODeL) institution in the continent of Africa, with a massive student headcount more than 300,000 [1–4]. According to UNISA [5], in 2011, 91% of its students were South Africans, 6.6% came from the Southern African Development Community (SADC) region, 1.3% came from the other African countries, 0.5% came from the rest of the world, while there was no information about the

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outstanding 0.1%. UNISA has been described as a *mega* university, and the only dedicated distance education provider in the African continent [3, 6–10]. Van Broekhuizen [11] argued that UNISA is South Africa's foremost distance learning institution that accounts for roughly half of all enrolments in the initial teacher education programmes. He noted that, by 2013, UNISA accounted for 36% of South Africa's higher education enrolments. To that end, it is his contention that "trends in South African HE enrolments and graduations will, to a large extent, be a reflection of the underlying trends in enrolments and graduations at UNISA" ([11], p. 18).

In this chapter, we explore UNISA's provision of distance education through *e-learning* in a country that is marked by vast socio-economic inequalities and extreme levels of poverty. We shall differentiate between distance education and *e-learning* [12]. On the one hand, "distance education" is "a set of methods or processes for teaching a diverse range of students located at different places and physically separated from the learning institution, their tutors/teachers as well as other students" ([13], p. 1). On the other hand, *e-learning* "encompasses any form of telecommunications and computer-based learning" ([14], p. 8). We ponder on the potential empowering role of *e-learning*, especially for the poorest of the poor African people who were previously excluded from opportunities by apartheid policies and legislation. South Africa's Department of Higher Education and Training (DHET) [15] is committed to "an expansion of open and distance education and the establishment of more 'satellite' premises where universities or colleges provide classes at places and times convenient to students (including in rural areas)". The reason for this is that just over two decades after the transition from apartheid to democracy, South Africa remains a vastly unequal society, by race, class, gender and socio-economic status. The country's Gini coefficient[1] is estimated to be approximately 0.65 based on expenditure data (per capita excluding taxes) and 0.69 based on income data [17]. The previously privileged white minority populations continue to enjoy living standards comparable to those of the *First World*, while the previously marginalised majority of the African people continue to live in abject poverty, way below the official poverty line as determined by the World Bank and other international agencies. Drawing on Sir Benjamin Disraeli's 1845 novel *Sybil, or Two Nations*, Mbeki [18] described South Africa as "Two Nations".

> *We therefore make bold to say that South Africa is a country of two nations. One of these nations is white, relatively prosperous, regardless of gender or geographic dispersal. It has ready access to a developed economy, physical, educational, communication and other infrastructure. This enables it to argue that, except for the persistence of gender discrimination against women; all members of this nation have the possibility to exercise their right to equal opportunity, the development opportunities to which the constitution of 1993 committed our country.*
>
> *The second and larger nation of South Africa is black and poor, with the worst affected being women in the rural areas, the black rural population in general and the disabled. This nation lives under conditions of a grossly underdeveloped economic, physical, educational, communication and other infrastructure. It has virtually no possibility to exercise what in reality amounts to a theoretical right to equal opportunity, with that right being equal within this black nation only to the extent that it is equally incapable of realisation.*

[1]The Gini coefficient or index is a prominent measure of income inequality. It leverages a scale of 0–1 to derive deviation from perfect income equality. A Gini index of 0 would imply perfect income equality, while an index of 1 would imply complete income disparity (see [16]).

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This chapter is divided into four sections. First, we sketch South Africa's political landscape, which is marked by instability, uncertainty and unpredictability. These features are a causal effect of the country's ailing and shrinking economy. South Africa's economic growth rate is estimated at a dismal 0.7%, while unemployment is rising. Second, we touch on UNISA as a *mega* university given its size, and the aggregated resources and capacities at its disposal. During the period 2013–2016, UNISA's student headcount enrolments were more than 300,000, drawn from South Africa, the rest of the African continent and worldwide. Third, we explore UNISA's role in the delivery of distance learning through *e-learning*. We differentiate between distance learning and *e-learning*. While we take distance learning to refer to an aggregate of methods for teaching diverse students that are located at different places and therefore physically separated from the learning institution, lecturers and fellow students, we take *e-learning* to refer to "the delivery of content via all electronic media, including the Internet, intranets, extranets, satellite broadcast, audio/video tape, interactive TV and CD-ROM" [19]. In the fourth and final sections, we offer some concluding remarks.

2. South Africa's political landscape

South Africa's political landscape is uncertain, unstable and unpredictable. The president of the country is embroiled in scandals and faces 783 charges of corruption [20]. As a result, the country's economy is in a state of disarray and shrinking. In his maiden mid-term budget speech, finance minister Malusi Gigaba proposed a downward revision of the country's economic growth from 1.3 to 0.7% for 2017. He estimated the deficit at 4.7%, and projected the country's economic growth "to increase slowly reaching 1.9 per cent in 2020" ([21], p. 15). It is therefore no wonder that South Africa's adult unemployment rates, especially among the African people, who were previously excluded from socio-economic opportunities and privileges, were at a record high of 27.7% in 2017 (see **Figure 1**).

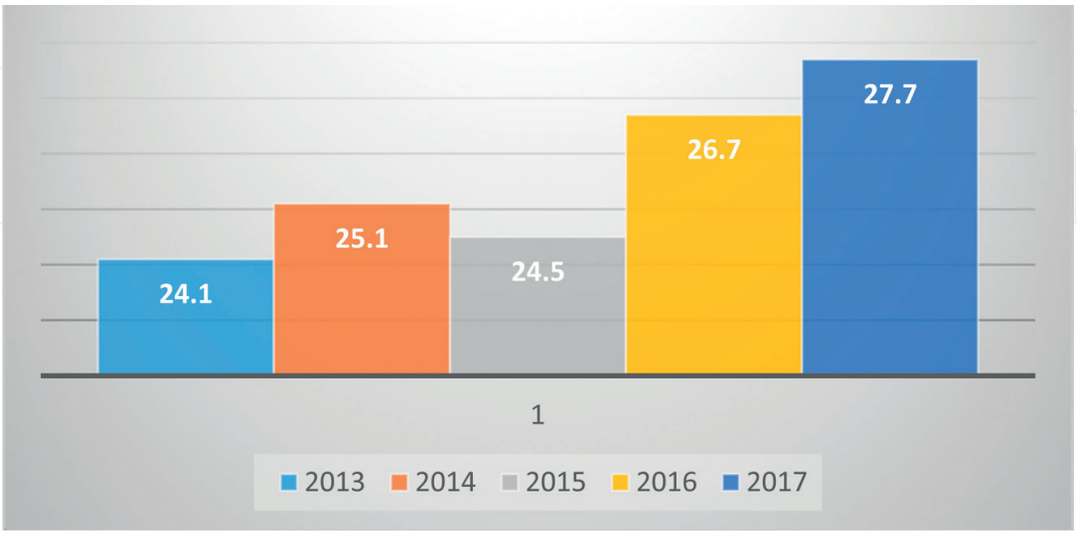


Figure 1. South Africa's unemployment rates. Source: Statistics South Africa [22, 23]. *Quarterly Labour Force Survey*.

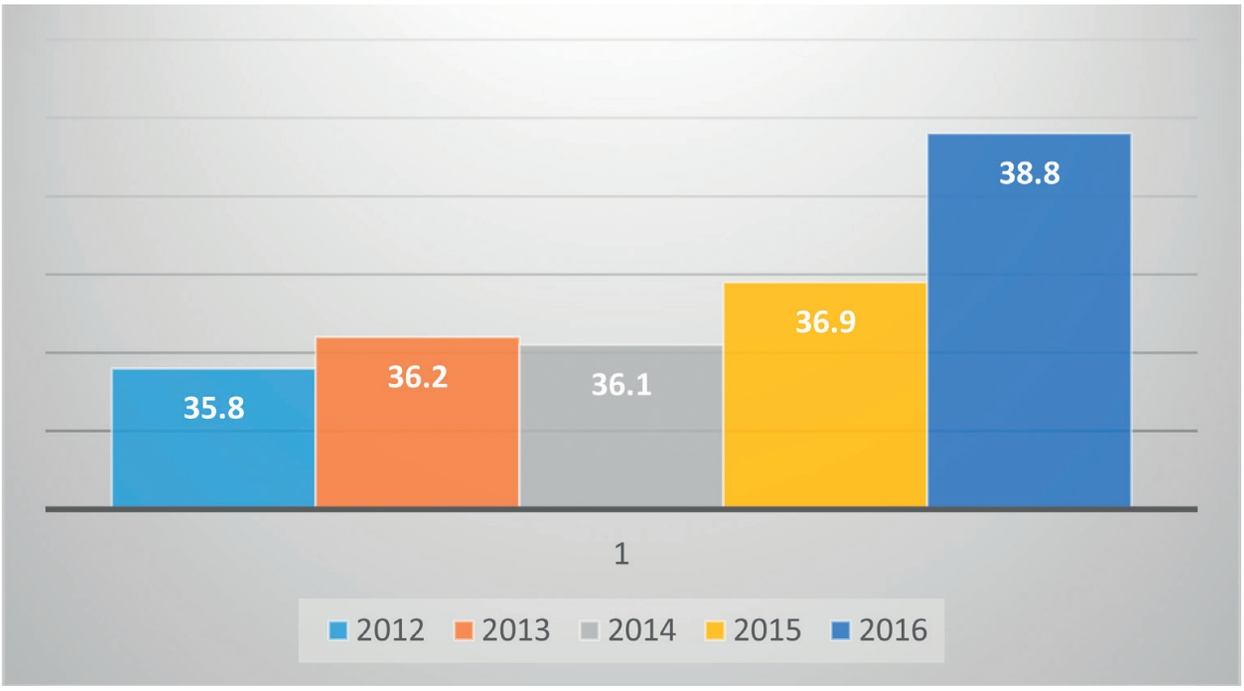


Figure 2. SA's youth unemployment rates (15–34 years). Sources: [24, 25].

South Africa's youth (15–34 years) unemployment rates are even worse than adult (35–64 years) unemployment rates. For instance, during the period 2012–2016, youth unemployment was above 35%, peaking at 38.8% in 2016 (see **Figure 2**). These high unemployment rates are a manifestation of flawed economic policies that do not augur well for investor confidence in the country.

It therefore came as no surprise that in April 2017 international credit rating agencies Fitch, and Standard & Poors (S&P) decided to downgrade South Africa's economy to non-investment grade, commonly known as *junk* status. As Hlongoane [26] observes,

> *The real task for South Africa is to get its political house in order, which will be the foundation for an economic turnaround. The uncertainty around the country's ability to pay its debts stems in part from the perception that there is no political will to stem the ballooning debt problems, and no will to institute the kind of reforms that can drastically improve education and the management of public assets such as Eskom.*

What does the downgrade of the country's economy to *junk* status mean to ordinary South Africans? Our immediate response would be: mammoth socio-economic challenges and devastating hardships, especially for the majority of previously disadvantaged African people who are in the margins of the country's economic opportunities and live below the poverty line[2]. South Africa will not be able to attract foreign direct investments, which are essential for injecting the much needed capital to fund projects in agriculture, mining, manufacturing, utilities, construction, trade, transport and finance, which create jobs. Second, the country will fall into recession. The price of consumables such as food as well as basic necessities

[2]The World Bank's international poverty line of $1.90/day is based on a collection of national poverty lines, which were originally used to set the international poverty line of $1.25/day at 2005 purchasing power parity (see [27, 28]).

such as electricity, illuminating paraffin, and petrol and/or diesel will rise exponentially. The value of the local currency (the South Africa Rand) will diminish. People's buying power will be eroded. Interest rates will rise as the banking sector scampers to protect its lending practices with a view to ensuring return on investment. Ordinary people's eligibility for loans will be lost. Those that have mortgaged properties or own vehicles on higher purchase (HP) will be forced to consider downgrading or selling (see **Figure 3**).

Demographically, the African people constitute about 80.8% of the country's total population [22, 23], while whites constitute a meagre 8.8%, yet whites constitute over 80% of the university professoriate [30, 31]. During the period 2012–2016, whites dominated top management positions in the South Africa labour market (see **Figure 4**). Statistics South Africa [17] reported that "In terms of the poverty share, black African households made up the vast majority of poor households. In 2006, they accounted for 93. 2% of all poor households - a proportion that marginally grew to 93. 7% in 2009 and to 93.9% in 2011". Statistics South Africa ([22, 23], p. 81) stated that "Given the high incidence of poverty … black Africans continue to carry the highest burden of poverty in the country". For Statistics South Africa ([22, 23], p. 21), "South Africa would not likely achieve the target of reducing inequality to 0.6 by 2030".

In the following sections, we examine the different ways in which UNISA can intervene in the above-sketched scenario through its provision of distance learning through *e-learning*.

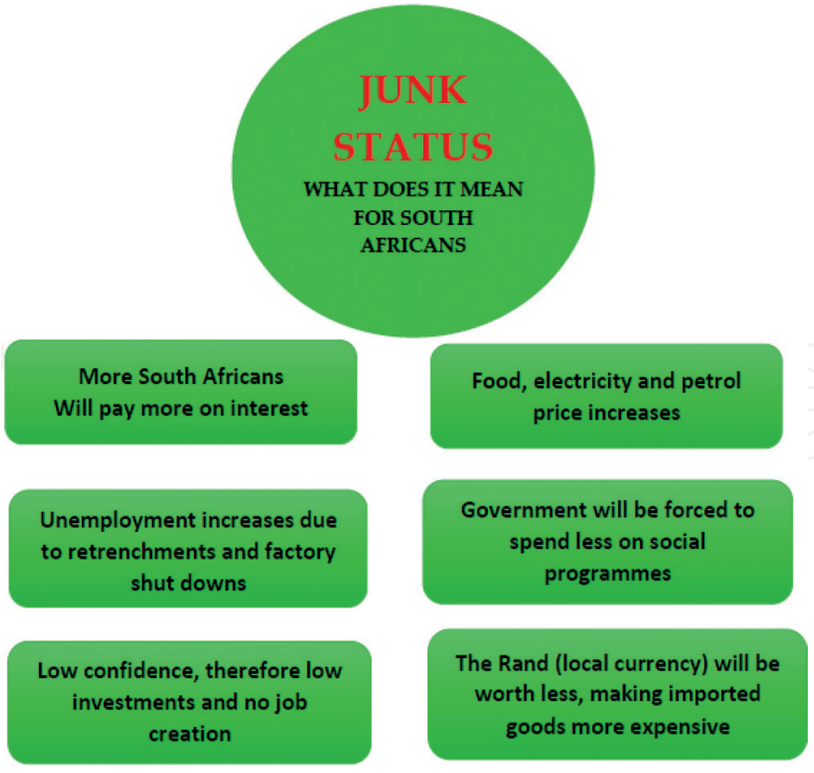
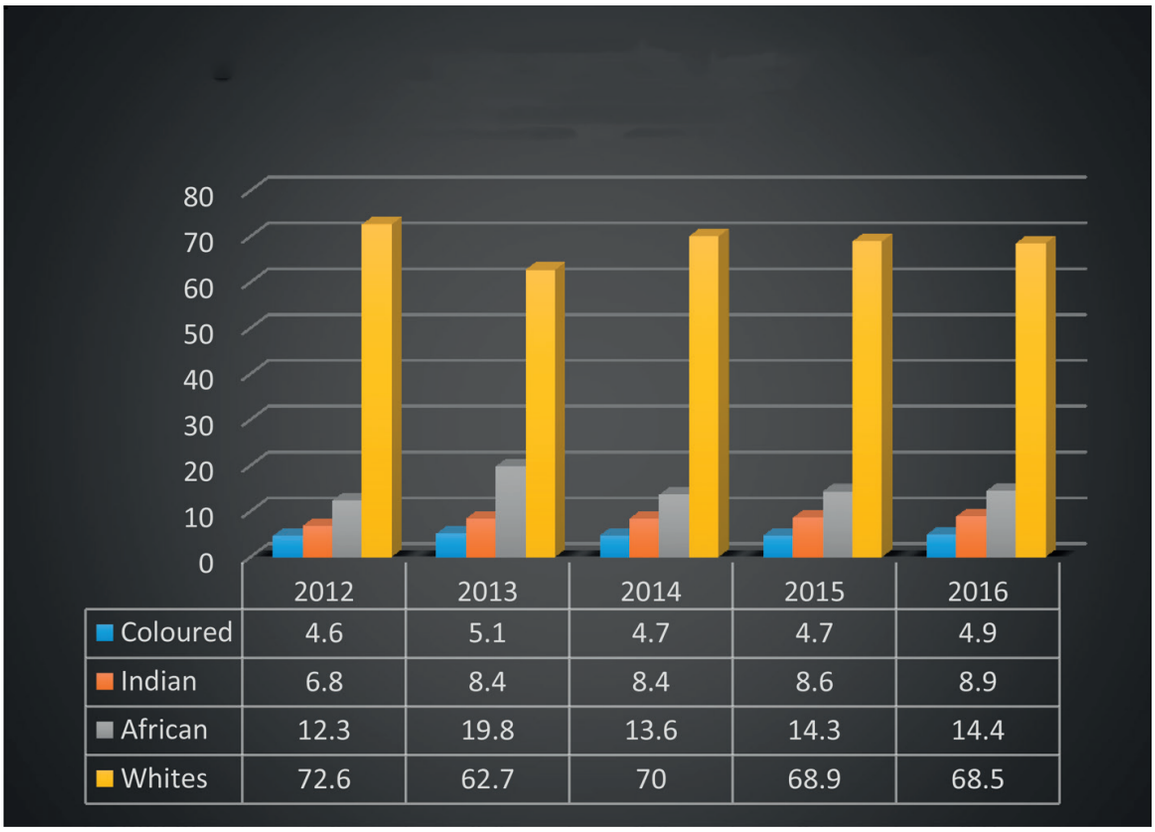


Figure 3. The meaning of South Africa's junk economy status. Source: Adapted from Republic of South Africa, National Treasury [29].



	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016
Coloured	4.6	5.1	4.7	4.7	4.9
Indian	6.8	8.4	8.4	8.6	8.9
African	12.3	19.8	13.6	14.3	14.4
Whites	72.6	62.7	70	68.9	68.5

Figure 4. SA population distribution for top management. Source: Commission employment equity reports [32–36].

3. UNISA as a mega university

UNISA has been described as a *mega* university, and the only dedicated distance education provider in the African continent [3, 6, 7, 9–11]. In his book, *Mega Universities & Knowledge Media: Technology Strategies for Higher Education*, Professor John S. Daniel [6] of the Open University, United Kingdom (OU UK) described UNISA as the oldest *mega university* which began as the University of the Cape of Good Hope in 1873 when it was an examining body for affiliated university colleges. In 2018, UNISA will celebrate 144 years of existence. Letseka and Pitsoe [4] described UNISA as "the largest university on the African continent". Daniel [6] noted that, by 2010, UNISA had a projected student headcount of 290,000. At the time of writing, in 2017, UNISA's student headcount enrolments stood at 350,641, confirming its status as one of the world's *mega universities* (see **Figure 4**).

Daniel noted that as far back as the mid-1990s, UNISA has been regarded as (**Figure 5**):

> *A vita academia which centres round the adult learner and creates an environment of lifelong learning through systems of adult basic education, student support and interactive means of teaching technologies. Furthermore, this vision of vita academia acknowledges the existence of all other institutions of higher learning and foresees a very broad co-operation with them to bring about living systems of dual-mode teaching.*

UNISA's ([37], p. 8) *Strategic Plan 2016–2030* articulates the university's vision as "*The* African University shaping futures in the service of humanity". In the same vein, UNISA [13] commits

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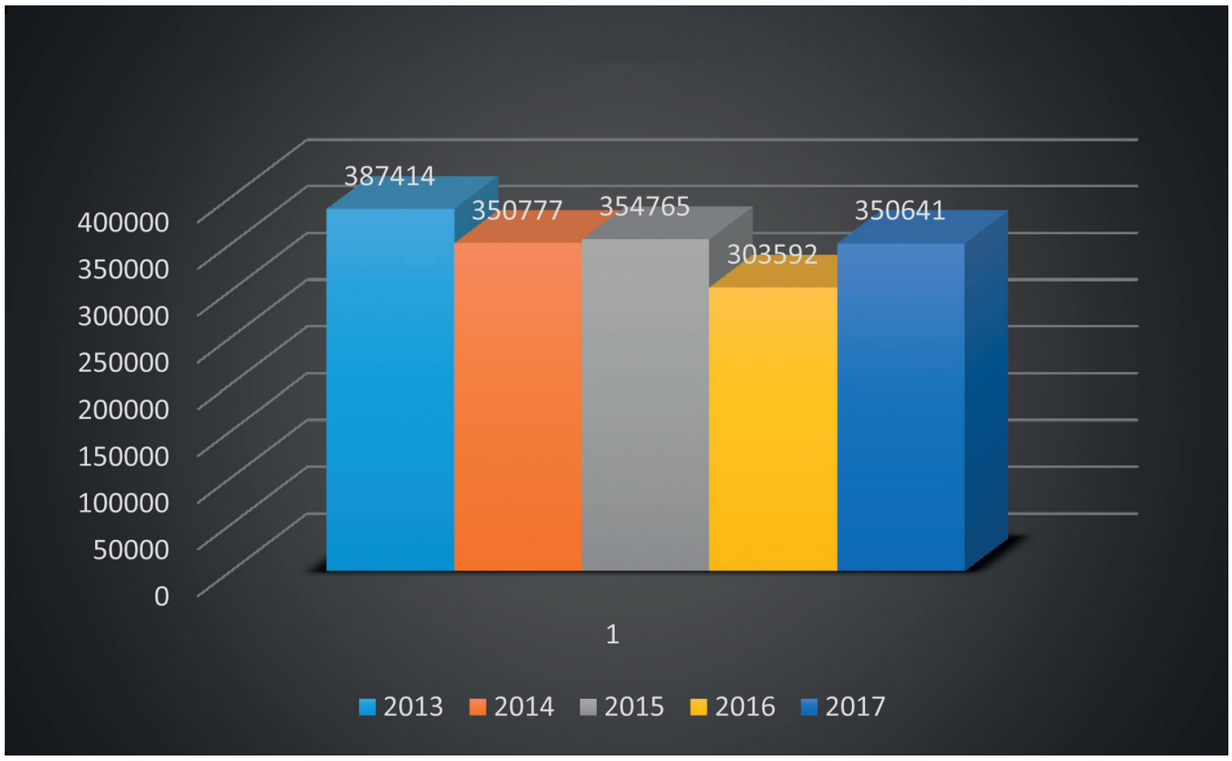


Figure 5. UNISA enrolments, 2013–2017. Source: UNISA's institutional information and analysis portal.

"to advancing social justice with an emphasis on redress, equity and empowerment of the previously disadvantaged groups in South Africa such as blacks, women, people with disabilities, the rural and urban poor and adults generally who have missed out on opportunities to access higher education". It seeks to position itself "as a leading provider of higher education opportunities through open distance learning (ODL) nationally, on the African continent and internationally". In its *Strategic Plan 2015*, UNISA [38] noted that the institution "is unique in the sense that it is the only dedicated distance education institution, and justly claims to be the only truly national university. Its size, and the aggregated resources and capacities at its disposal, place it in a position to make a vital contribution to development in Southern Africa". The *Strategic Plan* further stated that UNISA's "geographical reach enables it to support high-level capacity development beyond the borders of South Africa, especially on the continent".

The above-mentioned commitments are consistent with the commitments made by South Africa's Department of Higher Education and Training (DHET). For instance, the DHET ([15], p. 8) is committed to "an expansion of open and distance education and the establishment of more 'satellite' premises where universities or colleges provide classes at places and times convenient to students (including in rural areas)". The DHET ([15], p. 22) further committed to "establishing dedicated distance education capacity at one or more of the community colleges, with the requisite resources and capacity to provide education and training opportunities to eligible youth and adults who are unable to attend face-to-face institutions". In its *Draft Policy Framework for the Provision of Open Learning and Distance Education in South African Post-school Education and Training*, the DHET ([39], p. 1) adopted "open learning as a strategy to increase access to education and training opportunities for all and to construct quality learning environments which take account of learners' context and use the most appropriate

and cost-effective methods and technologies". It is the DHET's ([39], p. 55) stance that "like distance education, open learning focuses directly on making access to learning a primary goal, and may use the benefits of online and *e-learning* to achieve this end".

The DHET ([39], p. 34) advocated distance education and specifically *e-learning* to provide increased access to post-secondary education and training opportunities for those who cannot or choose not to enrol for traditional campus-based provision; and second, to lower costs per student by collaborating in curriculum design and materials development, by spreading some teaching and support costs across larger number of learners and by obviating the need for continuing investment in physical infrastructure. It envisions a new post-school education and training system (PSET), that is, responsive to the social, economic and transformative needs of the country, and that will increase "access to, and success in learning through open learning in PSET Institutions" ([39], p. 6).

4. UNISA's role in *e-learning* in South Africa

In this penultimate section, we broach UNISA's provision of *e-learning* in these challenging times. In our introductory remarks earlier, we highlighted the fact that South Africa's socio-economic and political landscape is marked by instability, uncertainty and unpredictability. In Section 2, we touched on South Africa's enduring and vast inequalities, which are by race, class and gender. We showed that while the African people constitute the vast majority of the country's population, the whites, who are a minority, continue to enjoy living standards comparable only to those of *First World* countries. The opposite is the case with the majority of the African people, who continue to live in abject poverty, way below the official poverty line of $1.90/day as determined by the World Bank and other international agencies. It therefore comes as no surprise that Statistics South Africa ([22, 23], p. 21) is convinced that "South Africa would not likely achieve the target of reducing inequality to 0.6 by 2030".

There has been a bourgeoning interest in *e-learning* among South African academics ([40–44]; Swanepoel, de Beer & Muller, 2009]). For instance, Venter et al. [41] explored "the antecedents of *e-learning* use among advanced business students at UNISA". Mbatha and Naidoo [42] examined "*e-learning* as a transformational educational tool in collapsing the transactional distance among communication science students at UNISA".

Meier [44] draws on the multi-institutional study between School-Net South Africa, the University of Jyväskylä in Finland and the University of South Africa's School of Education to inquire "whether intercultural understanding can be achieved through *e-learning*". It is her view that "terms such as '*e-learning*', 'online learning', 'virtual learning', 'web-based learning', 'internet-based learning' and 'resource-based learning', all refer to the use of Internet technologies to provide education" ([44], p. 661).

Swanepoel et al. ([60], p. 311) explored the use of "satellite classes to optimise access to and participation in first-year business management" at the neighbouring University of Pretoria, while Engelbrecht [43] explored "the reasons why universities are driven to implement *e-learning*". Her aim is "to identify the critical issues in the *e-learning* models that have to be addressed in a strategic planning process for the implementation of *e-learning* or the adjustment of existing

e-learning initiatives". The above-cited literature confirms our expressed view that there is "a bourgeoning interest in *e-learning* among South African academics".

It is our conviction that UNISA is "ideally placed to play a leading role in increasing access to higher education for marginalized communities", and "to support high-level capacity development beyond the borders of South Africa, especially on the continent" ([38], p. 2). As Africa's largest and the only dedicated distance learning institution, UNISA has the necessary capabilities to mount structured and sustainable *e-learning*, understood as "a wide set of applications and processes, including computer-based learning, Web-based learning, virtual classrooms, and digital collaboration" ([19], p. 15). Bates [14] noted that governments "see *e-learning* as a new knowledge-based industry, able to lever the advantage of advanced educational systems to create educational products and services that can be marketed internationally". In the same vein, South Africa's DHET ([39], p. 3) "views ICTs and *e-learning* as very significant aspects of open leaning approaches", and as "critically important tools in the struggle against poverty, underdevelopment and marginalisation" ([39], p. 26). The DHET ([39], p. 11) categorised *e-learning* as "digitally supported, digitally dependent, internet supported, internet dependent, and fully online" (see **Figure 6**).

There is, therefore, a sense that *e-learning* can potentially create the desired impact in efforts to widen access to higher education with success. For instance, the DHET ([39], p. 55) noted that while, "distance education is well-known for increasing the educational reach of institutions, and for providing learning opportunities to many who would otherwise be deprived of formal learning…open learning may use the benefits of online and *e-learning* to achieve this end". Boddy et al. ([19], p. 17) identified the following advantages of *e-learning*:

- Learning becomes more active and dynamic when compared to traditional in-class learning, allowing it to be cantered on the students and their learning, instead of focusing on the classroom activities.
- Access to a vast quantity of resources is possible and at lower cost.
- Learning can be differentiated pedagogically, it can accommodate different learning styles, allow students to work at their own pace and facilitate learning through a variety of activities.
- New tools and social media encourage collaboration between students and the community, without barrier to space and time.
- Those same tools allow for the development of virtual communities that can persist after the program/course is done.
- IT and the Internet can transform processes and institutions, transforming, in consequence, the ways of teaching and learning and opening the door to innovation and new pedagogical theories.

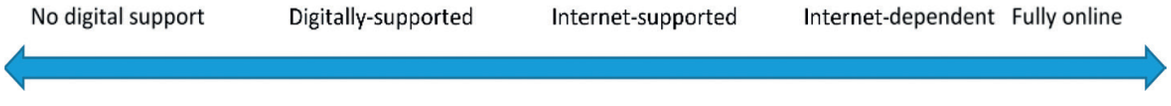


Figure 6. DHET's categorisation of *e-learning*.

In this section, we briefly sketch UNISA's capacity for *e-learning*. As Prinsloo [45] pointed out, "Through the years Unisa has always embraced a range of technologies to enhance teaching and learning such as audio cassettes, video cassettes, DVDs, satellite broadcasting and video conferencing and increasingly more effective use of *MyUnisa*". UNISA [46] stated that UNISA's "Students have access to a menu of support services ranging from face-to-face tutorials to video conferences, satellite broadcasts and e-tutors". What we shall attempt to do in this penultimate part of the chapter is to demarcate UNISA's *e-learning* initiatives and practices such as the institution's online learning management system (LMS) known as *MyUnisa*, the uses of video conferencing (VC) and Satellite Broadcast (SB) and the role of the UNISA Telecentre Community Outreach (TCO) initiative. We shall close with an exploration of UNISA's Integrated Tutor Model (ITM).

4.1. *MyUnisa*

UNISA's provision of *e-learning* is done through the Learning Management System (LMS) known as *MyUnisa* [41, 42, 47]. Mbatha and Naidoo [42] described *MyUnisa* as "the *e-learning* resource developed by the university to improve communication between lecturers and students, while also improving its services to students to ensure a seamless learning experience". They argued that *MyUnisa* "has been developed to supplement and enhance academic interactions and improve communication between UNISA and its students, as well as provide an opportunity for engagement among students". It is their view that *MyUnisa* is used "to bridge the transactional distance in order to ensure increased engagement among all stakeholders" ([42], p. 170). In the same vein, Venter et al. [41] posited that *MyUnisa* "uses the Sakai platform and offers tuition and administrative functions to develop and enhance academic interaction and improve communication between UNISA and its students". *MyUnisa* features a wide range of *e-learning* enabling functions among which we want to mention the *course administration* and *my students*.

The *course administration* section is a platform for staff to manage course assessment plans; assign and manage assignments, course readings, examination question papers and examination statistics; F1 concessions—supplementary concessions that are granted to students who have one outstanding module to complete a qualification, and to manage Tutor Student Grouping.

The *my student* section provides staff with facilities for storing information on students' admissions; students' assignments, assignment status reports and marking statistics; academic records, examination results and financial details; students' lists and students' mailing lists; capturing and recording of masters and doctoral students' activities, that is, submission of research proposals and progress being made in the research.

Each course portal provides space for announcements, uploading of official study material and additional resources and prescribed books. It also features the *Discussion Forum Portal*, where staff can post important announcements and notices for students; reply to student queries and initiate exchanges among students on course-related issues, or intervene where there is an *impasse* and give direction in ongoing discussions among students. The *Discussion Forum Portal* provides a user-friendly and enabling space for staff-to-students and student-to-student sharing of ideas and experiences online.

Additionally, each course portal features a *Course Site Tools* section, which provides a wide variety of *e-learning* tools from which the lecturers can choose. These include, among others:

- *Welcome Message*: for generating a welcome message to students at the start of the course.
- *Announcements*: for posting current, time-critical information.
- *Blog*: an online collaborative writing tool allowing posts and comments.
- *Calendar*: for showing a summary of scheduled events for the course.
- *Course Contact*: which stores students' e-mails for communicating with the students.
- *SMS Messages*: for sending bulk SMS text messages to students.
- *Discussion Forum*: which enables the students to discuss study-related matters, and for lecturers to mediate and give direction to the discussion.
- *Drop Box*: which provide a private file sharing between the lecturers and the students.
- *Wiki*: for collaborative editing of pages and content.
- *Meetings*: this is a Sakai conferencing tool.
- *Podcast*: for the management of individual podcasts and podcast feed information.
- *Polls*: for initiating and managing anonymous polls or voting.
- *Syllabus*: for staff to post summary outlines and requirements.

In a study of access and usage of *MyUnisa* that involved 22,216 UNISA online students, Liebenberg et al. ([48], p. 257) found that 91% of students who participated online had regular access to the Internet, which meant that 9% of online students did not have regular access to the Internet. Their study found that online students who had access to the Internet mostly accessed it from home (57%) and work (51%). The vast majority (82%) of online respondents owned a mobile device that is capable of accessing the Internet.

4.2. Video conferencing and satellite broadcasting

UNISA makes use of "videoconference technology for the purpose of discussion classes, meetings and tutorials" ([49], p. 2), and "as a way of bridging the time, geographical, economic, social, educational and communication distance between students and the institution, students and academics, students and courseware and students and peers" ([50], p. 4). UNISA ([61], p. 11) defined video conferencing "as an interactive means of communication between two or more locations. The interactivity is accomplished by various means, but the most common include live video and audio feed in both directions". Video conferencing allows lecturers to use computers to display PowerPoint presentations or play music clips for the purpose of promoting discussion and interaction.

On 2 June 2010, the Senate of UNISA approved the use of video conferencing (VC) and Satellite Broadcast (SB) sessions free of charge to all registered students ([51], p. 3). As Prinsloo [45] pointed out, "Although *Adobe Connect* is a licensed software in the same league as *Elluminate* and *Wimba*, there is Open Source Software available such as *BigBlueButton* which is already available in the Unisa context". Swanepoel et al. ([60], pp. 311–312) argued that.

> *One method of increasing student teacher (two way) communication is through interactive satellite classes (real time verbal communication), which have the capacity to re-humanize distance education and are more accessible to the majority of UNISA students who are far removed from the major cities.*

UNISA ([61], p. 8) defined satellite broadcast (SB) as "the distribution of visual images by means of a satellite link. It is less interactive than video conferencing, but more cost-effective. Students can see their lecturer, but their lecturer can't see them". One of the disadvantages of satellite broadcasts is that they encourage passive viewing instead of active participation. Students do not have control over the medium and are unable to stop the flow of information to ask questions and request clarification.

4.3. The Telecentre community outreach (TCO)

In its *Strategic Plan 2016–2030*, UNISA [37] provided for the university to "Upgrade ICT platforms at all student centres and regions to promote ICT accessibility" and to "Sign agreements with, at least, 2 Multi-Purpose Centres in each province to serve as sites for the uploading and downloading of students' assignments" ([37], p. 72). UNISA [52] stated that

> *The identification and contracting of Telecentres across the country is an effort to contribute to a positive student experience by providing tools for students to access ICTs with ease. Telecentres are located within communities (mostly rural) and are usually public organizations that are funded by the government, such as public schools; non-profit organizations (NPOs); agencies.*

UNISA has established collaborative agreements with Telecentres throughout the country under the auspices of the Telecentre Community Outreach (TCO). In its submission to the Council on Higher Education (CHE) with reference to Quality Enhanced Project (QEP), UNISA [53] stated that

- "The institution has video conferencing facilities at the Muckleneuk and Florida campuses and across all regional learning centres to enhance the learning experiences of students".
- "The institution has an initiative wherein it identifies centres with functioning computers (Telecentres), particularly in areas where the regional learning centres are not within easy reach for our students, to facilitate student access to computers".
- "The regional learning centres have well-resourced computer laboratories to enable students to download and upload their study material as well as engage in other teaching and learning activities".

The main objective of the TCO is to reach out to the rural and remote students nationally by providing them with access to the Internet/computer facilities, for academic purposes.

4.4. The integrated tutor model (ITM)

According to the UNISA Tutor Model, tutorials emphasise collaborative learning (group work) among students. They promote social integration particularly at the first-year level. Students who enter higher education are provided with a tutor who will guide them as they grapple with the many challenges that often confront students entering university directly from a school environment ([54], p. 5). Tutorials therefore offer "a facilitative space". Concomitantly, the tutor's

role is facilitative. It entails encouraging dialogue between tutors and students, among students, and between the student and the academic and administrative structures of UNISA [54].

The notion of dialogue was made prominent by, among others, Greek philosopher Plato in his dialogues such as *The Republic, Crito*, *Euthyphro*, *Protagoras,* and the *Meno*, which feature Socrates as the central character. Gonzales [55] described dialogue "as a face-to-face conversation that can answer questions, choose whom it addresses and when". During the interview by Donaldo Macedo, Brazilian philosopher of education Paulo Freire ([56], p. 379) argued that "dialogue characterizes an epistemological relationship…I engage in dialogue because I recognize the social and not merely the individualistic character of the process of knowing. In this sense, dialogue presents itself as an indispensable component of the process of both learning and knowing". In his seminal book, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, Freire [57] argued that "problem-posing education sets itself the task of demythologizing. Banking education resists dialogue; problem-posing education regards dialogue as indispensable to the act of cognition which unveils reality".

Commeyras [58] makes a case for the promotion of 'critical thinking through dialogical thinking. Her take on critical thinking draws of Robert Ennis [59], who defined critical thinking as "reasonable reflective thinking that is focused on deciding what to believe or do…Critical thinking involves both dispositions (e.g., open-mindedness, reason seeking, and sensitivity towards other's feelings and knowledge) and abilities (e.g., engagement in argument analysis, question identification, credibility assessment, and inference)". It is Commeyras [58], p. 487) contention that "In a dialogical approach to teaching, students learn to argue for and against each and every important point of view and each basic belief or conclusion that they are to take seriously". Our view is that in an open distance *e-learning* environment such as UNISA where tutoring is offered online, hence *e-tutoring*, an e-tutor is a person who undertakes the role to support and enable students to engage in the above-mentioned forms of dialogical conversations online, thus providing personalised student support.

5. Conclusion

In this chapter, we outlined the way by which UNISA, which is the oldest *mega university* in the continent of Africa with a student enrolment more than 300,000, is ideally placed to play a leading role in the delivery of distance learning through structured and sustainable *e-learning*. We sketched South Africa's socio-economic and political landscape, which we argued, is marked by instability, uncertainty and unpredictability. We showed that because of this landscape, South Africa is the most unequal society. We broached the country's demographics, showing that Africans constitute about 80.8% of the country's total population, while whites constitute a meagre 8.8%, yet in terms of top management positions in the labour market whites dominate, and they also constitute over 80% of the entire university professoriate.

We sketched the country's high rates of youth unemployment, which peaked at 38.8% in 2016 as well as adult unemployment rates, which peaked at 27.7% in 2016. We showed that in terms of the poverty share, black African households accounted for over 90% of all poor

households, and that this proportion grew to 93.9% in 2011, making black Africans to carry the highest burden of poverty in the country. We argued that this constitutes the imperative for UNISA to intervene through its expanded provision of distance learning through *e-learning.* We demarcated numerous ways by which UNISA can potentially achieve this imperative. We sketched UNISA's online learning management system (LMS) known as *MyUnisa,* the uses of video conferencing (VC) and Satellite Broadcast (SB) and the role of the UNISA Telecentre Community Outreach (TCO) initiative and the Integrated Tutor Model (ITM). We argued that collectively, these initiatives place UNISA in an ideal position to play a leading role in increasing access to higher education for marginalised communities in South Africa and in the African continent through its provision of *e-learning*. We should point out that because UNISA offers opportunities and access to mature adult working students to further their studies, the students are not required to be at institution in person in order to study. UNISA's e-learning systems are ideally suited to offer essential support to such students to further their studies and acquire higher education qualifications.

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