PRIVATE HIGHER EDUCATIONAL INSTITUTIONS IN A CHANGING SOUTH AFRICAN ENVIRONMENT

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One of the problems experienced by potential learners is accessibility to education facilities, especially in rural areas and for people with time constraints. The objective of this research is to investigate the role for Private Higher Educational Institutions (PHEIs) in South Africa, sharing the task of providing education with government supported institutions. Although distance learning is not a panacea for all educational problems, it holds great promise for driving change in education. The research is based on questionnaires, interviews and literature.

Results indicated that traditional residential education couldn't reach all people. Distance learning can relieve the situation. However, both private and public providers of higher education (residential and distance) can co-exist in South Africa. Private Higher Distance Learning (PHDL) contributes in lowering present levels of unemployment by providing skills, as many prospective students stay in rural areas and townships.

This paper emphasizes some of the changes impacting on the future of PHDL and bringing education opportunities to masses by creating an environment of shared responsibility between government institutions and private initiatives, jointly servicing a greater part of the population.

Keywords: Association of Private Distance Education Colleges of South Africa (APDEC), Association of Private Colleges (APC), Distance Higher Education Institutions (DHEI), private higher education, private higher distance learning, Private Higher Educational Institutions (PHEI), Private Higher Education Providers (PHEP)

INTRODUCTION

Higher Education in South Africa is experience an unrelenting pressure to expand access opportunities to learners, but at the same time improving present educational quality without prospects of funding possibilities. This fundamental imbalance between funding, standards and enrolment for students is caused by multiple of reasons, for example overcrowded lecture rooms, unsatisfied and outdated curricula, poorly learning facilities. Due to the high population growth, the number of South African students seeking entrance to higher education will surge during the coming years. Unfortunately only a few of them can be accommodated under present circumstances. Consequently Higher Education appears to become a volatile issue in South Africa. In the words of Saint (1999:1) *"…it is time for governments to anticipate the rising chorus of such demands, and to take steps which will ease the pressures for access while upholding the national interest in good quality higher education and responsible stewardship of national resources."*

This paper emphasizes some of the changes impacting on the future of PHDL (Private Higher Distance Learning) and bringing education opportunities to the masses by creating an environment of shared responsibility between government institutions and private initiatives, jointly servicing a greater part of the population.

The Minister of Education in South Africa, Prof. Kadar Asmal, raised concerns regarding the impact of "…an unprecedented growth of private and foreign higher education institutions in the country" on the sustainability of the current higher education system in South Africa. However, the Director General of Education declared "… that the growth in private and foreign higher education institutions presented government with unfair competition" (Star 2000:22).

This paper takes the view that both private and public providers of higher distance education sectors can exist in South Africa. Higher education could contribute in decreasing the present high levels of unemployment. In the South African environment, residential education is not viable since the majority of prospective students stay in rural areas and townships. Distance Learning has the potential to reach this target group, but distance learning is very dependent on a technology-based infrastructure. Indeed, some students in South Africa experience inaccessible technology as a problem, especially with regard to electricity, transport, communication and residential circumstances.

In the search for a South African view on distance education by private education providers, the following issues need to be highlighted:
- purpose of higher education
- competitive nature of private higher education
- purpose of non-residential private higher education
- Africa's perspective towards the establishment of distance learning and the need for some considerations impacting in the future of PHEDL in the South African continent.

The renowned educationist Clark Kerr remarked in the beginning of the nineties that "… for the first time a really international world of learning, highly competitive, is emerging. Governments' expenditure on higher education has led to the government changing its direct control to a system of managing at a distance." (Outcomes 2000:8). Therefore institutions are given greater freedom for innovation and supplementation of government's subsidy from other sources. The result is the flourishing of Private Higher Education Providers (PHEPs) and the privatisation of Distance Higher Education Institutions (DHEIs). According to the Association of Private Colleges (APC), the following forces (Outcomes 2000:8) underlie the privatisation of PHEIs:

There is an increasing shift to borderless (non-residential) higher education. Digital revolution makes it possible to provide education and training to any person at any time or place in the world, in any course and at a tempo that suits the learners.

Mass education places increasing pressure on higher educational institutions. It is impossible to provide in the diverse learning needs of growing numbers of learners. Excess and differentiated demand for education and training are creating a void, which is being filled by private providers.

Government expenditure on higher education is being curbed the world over. Higher education is viewed as a "private good" and therefore those who benefit from it, should therefore pay for it. The notion that education is a "common good" and should be free, is losing ground. The Nixon administration began to fund students in the seventies with vouchers instead of subsidising institutions. It provided momentum for the privatisation of universities with a resulting mushrooming in the number of private providers.

Many other institutions generate knowledge and train people. Universities have lost their monopoly in respect of both teaching and research. Competition is increasing and higher education must therefore proceed to the most radical change and renewal for which it has ever been required to undertake.

In this paper the term Higher Education Institutions refers to all types of institutions that provide training of some sort at post school level. Public higher education institutions refer to institutions that fall under the control of and are subsidised by government, as opposed to private higher education institutions being those that fall under the control of private initiative and do not receive subsidies.

HIGHER EDUCATION

Higher Education is vitally important activity in any modern society. However, educational institutions in Africa are not expanding and accommodating enough for the increasing number of students. Alternative ways of providing South African students access to Higher Education, e.g. by distance education, need to be fully exploited. That will ask for creating a culture of distance learning in South Africa and improving technology availability for and use by students. The application and use of information technology in education in South Africa has been severely under-utilised for years, but there has been tremendous increase in the use of information technology during the past few years (Darkwa & Mazibuko 2000:2).

The following are the most important purposes related to higher education:
• It meets the learning needs and aspirations of individuals through the development of their intellectual abilities and aptitudes. It equips individuals to make the best use of their talents and of the opportunities offered by society for self-fulfilment. Higher education is thus a key element to facilitate change in people's lives and in the well being of a country.
• It provides the labour market, in a knowledge-driven and knowledge-dependent society, with the high-level competencies and expertise necessary for the growth and prosperity of a modern economy. It teaches and trains people to fulfil specialised social functions, enter the learned professions, or pursue vocations in administration, trade, industry and the arts.

- It is responsible for the socialisation of enlightened, responsible and constructively critical citizens. Citizenship of this nature presupposes a commitment to the common good, but it also implies a reflective capacity and a willingness to review and renew prevailing ideas, policies and procedures.
- It is directly engaged in the creation, transmission and education of knowledge. Its purpose is to ensure the continued pursuit of academic scholarship and intellectual inquiry in all fields of human understanding, through research and teaching. (Draft White Paper 1997:3).

In South Africa dramatic changes took place in the higher education sector. There are a number of new entrants that have established themselves in competition to traditional (public) institutions. This has led for a change in the demographics of student enrolment in higher education institutions. The South African Government has therefore introduced a process of quality control and regulations. Two important acts were introduced, namely the SAQA (South African Qualifications Authority Act of 1995), and the Higher Education Act of 1997. These acts require all institutions, private and public, to supply and undergo a specific process of quality control and registration.

The number of institutions operating in the field of higher education in SA is not clear. In forms of the legal requirements, all institutions must have been registered with the Department of Education (DOE) as of 1 January 2000.

PRIVATE HIGHER EDUCATION

At the end of the 20th century, the rise of the private higher education has been thrust into the limelight, largely because of the decline in the public higher education sector. Governments are reluctant to spend public funds on post-secondary education, while at the same time demand for skilled personnel remain high. The PHEIs are providing both access to and the skills needed for the economy of the 21st century. Public education institutions are being "privatised" as public funds shrink, and universities are forced to find alternative sources to support them (Altbach 1998:1). The logic exists in the market economy that an ideology of privatisation has contributed to the resurgence of private higher education and the establishment of private institutions where none existed before. The nature and scope of private providers of higher education vary worldwide. In South Africa only a few private providers of higher education and public institutions educate virtually all students. But the dispersion of private higher educational institutions worldwide is very impressive. In some countries it is most prestigious, while in other countries they occupy the lower tiers of the hierarchy. Private providers are the fastest-growing segment of higher education (Altbach 1998:1), but in Africa private institutions are relatively rare. Africa has not as yet experienced much expansion of private higher education.

Market forces have great influence on private higher education. The market for education is exceedingly imperfect and it is hard to predict trends in employment, and even harder to ensure that institutional programmes are relevant to these trends. Vocationally oriented private

providers are directly involved in predicting labour markets and the specific needs for specialists. Private providers that focus on the traditional arts and science fields are more insulated from the direct labour market, but they are competing with other academic institutions. The market for university graduates for the PHEIs faces special challenges and responsibilities to rapidly expand and to fulfil a more central role in the world's higher education systems.

Privatisation is hardly a new concept as theory and practice has proven that the private sector manages assets more aggressively than is done with assets under control of government. To the core of this process lies the motive of wealth creation. The same approach of Adam Smith's "Invisible Hand" applies to privatisation in higher education. (Malan & Lessing 2000:6).

The South African Communist Party (SACP) statement on higher education institutions in South Africa was as follows: "The biggest danger in an unregulated growth of private institutions for our country is that it draws those students who can afford to pay away from the public institutions, at a time when our public institutions are increasingly becoming dependent on student fees for their viability. This proliferation of private institutions also poses a big threat to quality higher education and human resource development as some of them provide very poor quality of higher education. The provision of higher education in South Africa will be reduced into a haven for profit-making, instead of being driven by broader developmental objectives" (SACP 2000:1).

From the above statement it is clear that private providers pose as a big threat and Prof. Prof. Kadar Asmal (Minister of Education in South Africa and also a member of SACP) has indicated in several speeches that he will "regulate" private education providers and foreign institutions to a greater extent than in the past. He said that "… public institutions should be protected against unfair competition" (Outcomes 2000:10).

Some factors that may create a shroud of uncertainty for the future of PHEIs and foreign institutions that show an interest in South Africa, are as follows (Outcomes 2000:10):
- To empower the minister to differentiate between foreign higher education institutions and local private higher education institutions, if it is deemed to be in the best interest of public higher education institutions.
- To provide that the minister must make regulations to give effect to the registration of private higher education institutions.
- To provide for matters connected therewith.

All private and foreign institutions that offer post-secondary education programmes were required by the DOE to submit programmes for registration purposes in terms of SAQA (South African Qualifications Authority) requirements by 30 June 1999. The registration process would be completed by 31 December 1999. But SAQA probably underestimated the extent of the programmes that would be submitted. More than 700 applications regarding registration as private higher education institution were received by SAQA. (Outcomes 2000:10)

The requirements that programmes for registration process must fulfil have been amended several times. As a result of this state of affairs, only four private institutions were registered provisionally at the beginning of 2000, 28 were granted registered, 75 were not registered and 95 were granted an extension to fulfil in the requirements made by SAQA (Outcomes 2000:10). Great dissatisfaction was caused and one private provider successfully instituted a court case, because the government did not grant provisional registration for programmes offered. (The DOE has placed a moratorium on the offering of new distance learning education programmes by residential universities and programmes that are presented in partnerships with public institutions.) This has been withdrawn in 2001.

The public sector cannot necessarily provide everything because the need for education and training is of such a magnitude. De Villiers, MD of National Private Colleges, said that "… private education is effective and innovative and fills the gaps which exist in public higher education; for example training in Internet skills." Referring to e-enabled learning he said: "Technology is not inhibited by borders and distance, it can take training to the remotest need. The advantage is that it may be utilized according to the learner's personal time schedule, enabling simultaneous ongoing monitoring of his or her progress. Private higher educational institutions have the ability to adapt expeditiously to market tendencies and needs can provide in particular in the demands of diversity in the country" (Outcomes 2000:11).

The answer to the imminent question which arises "Why Private Distance Education?" is "Because they can be more flexible than conventional systems, open learning arrangements can satisfy the education and training requirements of young people and adults when they want them and where they can undertake them in the course of a lifetime of learning. And well-functioning systems of distance education can provide education and training of uniformly high quality" (Outcome 2000:29).

The Association of Private Distance Education Colleges of South Africa (APDEC) operates in a focused and challenging market. This market has grown exponentially both locally and internationally, and is servicing the needs of a vast number of students of all ages, social groupings and economic levels. A variety of needs are catered for in a variety of delivery modes. Students (who are employed) can study for a variety of reasons, namely for self-enrichment purposes or to change their careers or to gain the skills they need to rise through the ranks and be promoted.

The distance education industry is characterised by accessibility, affordability, flexibility and personal choice of subjects. To answer the question of "Why Private Distance Education?" Noting these characteristics, private distance education is in the process of change: it gives students access to more and betters learning resources on a n ongoing basis; it opens new and stimulating learning opportunities; it is also self-monitoring. The programmes are generally open to public criticism because they can be easily accessed, and where they fail the test of quality, they will inevitably fall by the wayside. Private distance education is also about quality in both content and service.

PRIVATE HIGHER DISTANCE EDUCATION

Distance education provides supplementary opportunities for learners to continue their education or a means of helping people learn new skills for changing work. The purposes of distance learning systems are particularly appropriate for those who cannot attend a traditional school, college or university. Therefore it includes the following:

- Persons of school age who live in geographically remote areas in which it is difficult or impossible to provide face-to-face teaching;
- those who suffer from physical disability or long-term illness, which prevents them from attending a normal school;
- those who move frequently.

Distance education is well suited to the needs of adults who for social, economic or educational reasons missed out on the opportunities available through initial education, or who wish to retrain or update themselves, or study for personal interest and enjoyment. There can be a variety of reasons, such as:

- there are no opportunities for taking courses locally;
- or because they work or are tied to the home, adults may find it more convenient to study by distance means, rather than attend day-time or evening classes on a part-time basis.

For some indeed, there may be no viable alternative, as other may prefer to study by distance means. Whatever the reason, there is a large number of adults engaged in distance learning and take a mixture of subjects for a variety of reasons.

The advantages of distance learning, from an employer's view, are the following (Rumble 1992:19-42):

- participation does not require the employee to be absent from work;
- the employer reduced need incurs the cost of sending employees away on training courses;
- relatively few trainers can reach large numbers of trainees;

Using distance education methods enable educators and trainers to meet a wide variety of needs, many of which could not be met, or not easily met, through traditional methods of education and training. Distance educators provide a system, which will:

- satisfy the needs of a large demand for higher education;
- meet the needs of adults for educational opportunities;
- meet large-scale needs for training or retraining in professional, technical and vocational fields;
- provide a vehicle for the delivery of training to firms;
- achieve economies of scale.

The world is witnessing an expansion in distance education due to new communication revolution. The information revolution has enabled academic institutions to provide a flexible and more open learning environment for students. The convergence of new information technologies such as telecommunications, computers, satellites and fibre optic technologies is making it easier for institutions to implement distance education. We can expect that distance education in higher education will continue to grow. (Darkwa & Mazibuko 2000:1)

The media choices for distance educators have an increasingly wide range to draw upon, including print, distance tuition, radio, television, teletext, audio and video-cassettes, video-discs, telephone, video-conferencing, teaching aids, and computers. Technological development is increasing the range and combination possibilities of such media. For example, tutored video instruction systems use television to allow students to see and listen to their instructors, but combine this with a telephone link back to the instructor, so that the student can raise questions directly (Rumble 1992:19-42).

Many places in South Africa lack Internet, electricity, telephones and even a reliable postal service. Distance education can enable a limited number of teachers to reach very large numbers of students. One has to bear in mind that there is no evidence that indicates that distance students should be regarded as a homogeneous group. However, many distance students do share broad demographic and situational similarities that have often provided the basis for profiles of the 'typical' distance learner in higher education. Characteristics included in such a profile have varied, but generally have reflected some combination of demographic and situational variables such as age, gender ethnic background, disability, location and life roles (Thompson 1998:10-18).

THE FUTURE OF NON-RESIDENTIAL PRIVATE HIGHER EDUCATION IN SOUTH AFRICA

Lifelong learning will become the global norm as both countries and workers strive to build and maintain a competitive edge. Students of all ages will start interrupt and re-start studies at any time, pursue them on a full-time or part time basis and do so through a minimum of self study digital learning and face-to-face participation in learning abilities. The future for learning will be greatly individualised and self-managed by students. Therefore, resulting those highly professional student guidance systems will become a central element in higher education (Saint 1999:36).

The future of higher education will be based much less on academic disciplines and more on crosscutting topics. A greater emphasis will be placed on the following:
- to be able to learn independently
- to communicate effectively with others
- to collaborate productively in teams and groups

- to be culturally and socially sensitive
- to be flexible
- to accept social responsibilities.

Media competence will become a universally required skill. The goal will be to prepare students for the knowledge economy where they will work in 'virtual' companies, organisations, and committees and project teams (Peters 1999).

New technologies will make university campuses obsolete. Students will use the Internet and receive learning support through virtual libraries and on the video conferencing with tutors and other students. Education will be undertaken independently of time or place, when the student has time available for study. Courses will begin and end on a continuous basis. The Internet will be a student's main study tool. In this way higher education will become truly personal and truly portable, possibly within the next ten years (Downes 1998).

Distance students today might wish they could fast-forward a few frames into the future. Distance education is undergoing enormous changes and not all the pieces are in place yet. Brand-new and will-established institutions are figuring out how to provide distance learning to a growing population that wants higher education but not in a traditional classroom setting. Distance learning in South Africa might find that what they though was the model for distance education today will look very different in just a few years. Due to these fluctuating conditions it's difficult to know what's ahead. There are a few predictions (Thomas 2001:1) that education agree on, namely:
- distance education is becoming more accepted by academia and the public
- the number of distance education providers, both traditional and non-traditional, is growing
- the roles of teacher and student are undergoing sharp scrutiny.

Innovation has always been a part of distance education. Because distance education providers have had to search for new ways to make higher education accessible, they have had to depart from conventional methods of teaching. Distance education rocked the higher education boat in the past, and it's still doing so.

7.   CLOSURE

In South Africa the demand for post school training is increasing. Simultaneously, the capacity to meet this demand through traditional contact tuition through government-sponsored institutions remains unchanged.   It has also become impractical and in many cases the traditional method of education is inaccessible for prospective students.

The introduction of new technologies and private sector initiatives make it possible to meet the demand for higher education.   This will require an accommodation of the private higher education sector and its aggressive methods of utilising assets. By creating an environment

whereby the private sector can participate in higher education through its distance education technology and methods, an important need will be satisfied. Private higher distance education institutions have the potential to play a critical role in the African Renaissance.

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