The concept of flexible learning holds much promise, especially when it comes to the redress of past educational inequalities. Definitions that include phrases such as “providing learning opportunities that can be accessed at any place and time,” “giving learners increased choice,” and “improving the learner’s learning experience” (Dhanarajan 2001) suggest that flexible learning could be a feasible way for a country such as South Africa to provide educational opportunities for all its citizens. For us, flexibility means the creation of conditions that enable increased access to a wider choice of fields of study, curricula, and delivery modes, as well as to meaningful learning experiences that advance national transformation.

In this chapter, we consider key attempts made by the South African establishment to put flexible mechanisms in place in order to allow greater access to tertiary education for all South Africans. We explore the forces that drove the open distance learning in pre-1994 South Africa: the political system, historical inequalities, and the professionalization of teaching. We then focus on the drivers of today: the key driver—social transformation—and four enabling drivers: post-apartheid education legislation, labour-market demands, the subsidization of higher education, and emerging technologies. Each of these new drivers brings with it certain constraining forces that must be considered. Throughout, the tensions that exist between distance education and the need for massification, which is imperative if the country is to meet its educational and national development goals, remain a challenge.
THE OLD DRIVERS OF OPEN DISTANCE LEARNING

As noted above, the old drivers of open distance learning in pre-1994 were the political system, historical inequalities, and professionalization of teaching.

Political System Before 1994
Before the first democratic elections of 1994, the education of different race groups was divided. In the pre-1994 political system, separate education departments existed and were not resourced equally. Funding was distributed unevenly on racial grounds. White education received much more revenue than the Indian and Coloured groups, while black education received the least. The teacher-learner ratio in black schools was 1:42, while classrooms in white schools enjoyed a ratio of 1:19. Moreover, only about 6 percent of teachers in black schools had university degrees and nearly 80 percent did not even have grade 12 (South African Foundation 1993). Universities were also segregated, although moves were made in the 1980s to make access to so-called white universities more possible for black students, especially in certain subject areas.

Historical Inequalities
In light of racial discrimination and inequalities of privilege, open distance learning (ODL) provided the ultimate opportunity for flexible learning for all citizens. For many decades, the University of South Africa (UNISA; www.unisa.ac.za) was the only dedicated distance-mode university. Enrolment was open to all races.

UNISA defines ODL as learning that bridges the time, geographic, economic, social, educational, and communication distances between the student and all aspects of the institution. It still focuses on removing barriers that hinder access to learning and on flexible provision of learning opportunities with the expectation that students can succeed (Pityana 2004; University of South Africa 2008).

UNISA has provided education as a second chance for many people, or “at the back door” (as Wedemeyer put it in 1981), since the late nineteenth century. While UNISA is the only university dedicated to ODL in South Africa, one could say that it and other correspondence institutions, such
as Lyceum and Careers Colleges, constituted South Africa’s first generation of flexible-learning opportunities.

**Professionalization of Teaching**

In pre-1994 South Africa, the second generation of flexible learning sought to provide flexible programs to address certain gaps in the provision of primary, secondary, and tertiary education, with a specific focus on teacher education. In the 1970s and early 1980s, many teachers in disadvantaged communities held one- or two-year teacher-training diplomas that were equivalent to a grade 12 qualification. Student teachers from these communities had been encouraged to move from grade 10 (called the Junior Certificate) to teacher colleges, where they received a two-year training that allowed them to teach in primary schools. While these certificates afforded a certain amount of flexibility, enabling students to “fast-track” into their chosen profession, the hidden agenda was to ensure that black children did not receive the best education. This was in keeping with the apartheid regime’s policy of underfunding and undervaluing education in certain sectors of the community. In the white community, this fast-tracking was not an option.

As the demand for better-trained teachers became evident, colleges that provided face-to-face in-service training were established. Vista University (en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Vista_University) was established in 1981, primarily to provide teacher upgrade programs via correspondence for underqualified black teachers. The program was more flexible, including not only correspondence but also annual discussion classes in which lecturers offered assignment feedback and examination preparation at centres across the country.

Teacher-upgrade programs were linked to incentives such as generous study and examination leave, as well as salary adjustments. It was in the interest of teachers to pursue these opportunities to advance their professional development, with rewards for successful completion of the qualifications and potential for career progression. While UNISA offered teacher-education courses, Vista University, funded by the Department of Education and Training, seemed to bridge the gap between school and university for underqualified but practising teachers.

Ostensibly, these students were able to teach in the mornings, thus keeping the schools operating while they studied in their spare time.
This should have been an ideal solution to the problem of underprepared teachers and the need to improve the quality of school teaching in the country. The programs offered by Vista University afforded thousands of teachers the opportunity to be upgraded and to receive the associated financial and career benefits. Sadly, the courses did little to upgrade their teaching skills for the positions they filled. Most of the teachers who qualified for the upgrading courses were primary school teachers, while the courses offered were aimed at high school teachers. Thus, the promise that the programs held for the improvement of education in the country did not materialize in practice as many of the teachers had no intention of moving from primary school to high school.

Later, Vista University diversified and established campuses in major cities in South Africa where graduate and postgraduate programs were offered. At a time of civil unrest, it provided a blended method of delivery, offering students face-to-face classes coupled with paper-based study materials. Students had the opportunity to attend classes when they could but to continue independently when they could not get to the campus. After the first democratic elections in the country in 1994, student access to mainstream universities became easier. Vista University subsequently experienced dwindling student numbers and finally closed in 2002.

NEW DRIVERS OF FLEXIBILITY IN HIGHER EDUCATION

In post-apartheid South Africa, the key driver of flexibility in higher education is social transformation with four enabling drivers: post-apartheid education legislation, labour-market demands, subsidization of higher education, and emerging technologies. Each of these new drivers has associated constraining forces.

Social Transformation: The Overarching Driver
As a developing country with its own history, South Africa has particular education needs. New policies since 1994 aim to undo the inequalities of education provision instituted during the apartheid regime. Given the wider implications of past racial discrimination and inequalities of
privileged, these policies had to create equal opportunities for all to access different types and levels of education. Flexible access, multiple entry routes, and varied modes of delivery at the tertiary level seemed to be the solution. Thus, the overarching driver of flexible learning in post-apartheid South Africa has been social transformation and the redress of past inequalities. New enabling drivers of flexibility in higher education emerged as part of the social transformation process. Key among these have been education-related legislation, including the National Qualifications Framework (NQF) and the recognition of prior learning (RPL); labour-market demands; subsidized higher education; and technology for flexible access to education. However, tensions related to unfinished business from earlier times exist between the promise and the reality.

**Education-Related Legislation**

*The National Qualifications Framework:* Foremost was the recognition that education had to attract and serve an increasingly diverse body of learners whose background was characterized by conditions of unequal opportunities. A unifying approach to education and training was required to replace previous separation by race, sex, and age; mental and manual demands of learning; theory and practice; and academic and vocational qualifications. The need to sustain quality was paramount.

A vehicle for ensuring such quality of education provision was the National Qualifications Framework (NQF). It was established in 1995 to promote the following principles relevant to our discussion here:

- **Flexibility**—allowing for multiple pathways to the same learning ends and recognizing non-formal provision or prior learning through life and work experience
- **Access**—providing ease of entry to appropriate levels of education and training for all prospective learners in a manner that facilitates progression
- **Progression**—ensuring that individuals can move through the levels of national qualifications through a clearly sequenced series of outcome requirements for higher levels on a learning pathway. (See South African Qualifications Authority 2000, 5–6.)
The NQF demands, guides, and monitors the flexibility of institutions and their program offerings. Flexibility has to be evident in institutional missions, program range, and teaching and learning strategies. Consistent with these ideals, new policy statements articulate the vision and aims of a single coordinated higher-education system. For example, among others, the policy statements outlined in *A Programme for Higher Education Transformation* (Republic of South Africa 1997) seek to accomplish the following:

- facilitate horizontal and vertical mobility by developing a framework for higher-education qualifications that incorporates adequate routes of articulation, as well as flexible entry and exit points
- promote the development of a flexible-learning system, including distance education and resource-based learning founded on open-learning principles
- promote human resource development through programs that are responsive to the social, political, economic, and cultural needs of the country and that meet the best standards of academic scholarship and professional training

Ambivalence toward this force for flexible higher education was inevitable. Institutions of education had to come to grips with and apply the standards and principles of the NQF as they related to outcomes-based, modularized, credit-based programs. Education managers and teachers at all levels had to catch up with the new concepts and question the implications for curriculum. The buzz of seminars and workshops and the shuffle of directives, forms, and templates were inescapable. Reactions vacillated from resentment of a hurried and mandatory series of reforms to embracing new ways of diversifying curricula and removing barriers to student entry and success. Endless debates and disagreements arose about the difference between an outcome and an objective, a course and a module, the relationship between program credits and estimated number of hours of learning, guidance required and autonomy expected, and to what extent quality and flexibility can coexist.

Amid this interplay of principle and policy, certain areas of practice remain contentious. Multiple constraining forces have emerged, including traditional disciplinary specialization and summative assessment to
Constrain flexibility in higher education. Curricula have been carefully insulated within the bounds of specific subject fields and disciplines rather than thematically organized across disciplines. Likewise, programs are generally designed with examinations and, to some extent, portfolios of evidence as endpoints rather than with recognition of prior learning as a starting point. It is not difficult to find reasons for these patterns of practice. The traditions of knowledge production and packaging, and the administrative design of access and exit points were structured to maintain the status quo associated with the privilege of higher education. At the same time, the capacity and resources required to implement reforms are constrained by a prescribed staffing and funding formula, parameters for program mix, rules of combination, and program duration.

Recognition of non-formal prior learning: Generally speaking, students can easily transfer their credits and formal qualifications from one institution to another, thus providing some flexibility of access. However, the recognition of non-formal prior learning (RPL) has been more problematic. The RPL initiative in South Africa has a unique and challenging agenda because it has to (1) remove the traditional barriers to education and support the transformation of society and (2) operate as an effective mechanism to encourage flexible lifelong learning.

Progress in the implementation of many policies has been very slow as a result of constraining forces, the most significant being the review process for RPL and its lack of credibility. Processes suggested in the RPL policies of many institutions require institutions to comply with external regulatory and statutory requirements. The implementation of RPL to enable adult students’ flexible access to higher education is particularly problematic. For example, the processes take an inordinate amount of time—up to two years between the RPL application and the final decision. Some institutions have made progress in this regard by developing and implementing clear RPL procedures and creating a dedicated RPL unit rather than leaving the management of requests to individual teaching departments. Although RPL is slowly gaining credibility, the perception remains in many circles that it is a second-class avenue of gaining entry or credit. Thus, flexible access to higher education is constrained by public perceptions as well as by processes that are too slow.
Labour-Market Demands
Flexibility in higher-education academic programs emerges as higher-education institutions strive to fulfill their role as contributors to both academic scholarship and economic growth. In order to remain relevant to the labour market, universities make available program mixes that offer an array of options to students, allowing them to choose subjects across disciplines. Also, as an alternative to whole qualifications of a longer duration, a range of short skills programs has grown over the years. These options bring much-needed income to the institution while facilitating greater mobility and career opportunities for students. Furthermore, non-formal programs that are not intended to align with any particular qualification provide escape from the NQF framework that “locks” learning into pre-determined level descriptors that state the essence of expected outcomes at each level of study.

That said, quality-assurance regulations and requirements for providers of education and training also set rigid parameters for institutions regarding program mix, rules of combination, and program duration. This system offers negotiated flexibility, but the complicated administrative system of checks and balances is time consuming and can be debilitating, thus constraining flexibility.

Subsidized Higher Education
Despite some problems, South Africa is growing as a democracy. More students gain access to higher education than ever before. However, even though they are subsidized by the state, they still need to pay high fees. Traditionally, distance-education institutions catered to mature students, who studied to relieve boredom or to advance their careers, but today the student profile is changing rapidly. As distance learning offers a cheaper option to higher education, a growing number of school leavers enroll at UNISA.

Distance education offers some flexibility, but it brings challenges, especially for young school leavers. The most significant challenge is its foreignness as a concept, leading to both space and student-support needs. When deciding on a university, many potential distance-education students seem to look only at the fees rather than at the nature of the
education provision. The reality of independent study with the help of learning materials but without the face-to-face support of teacher and fellow students is not considered. The result is that UNISA’s study centres around the country are filled with students studying, chatting, and doing what students do. The challenge to the physical logistics of the campuses is huge, and the desire for tutorial support enormous. While the will is there to provide such support, finding the best way to meet the needs of students remains elusive.

Emerging Technology
By the early 1990s, many conventional universities in South Africa had introduced some component of distance learning in their programs. This was a significant leap. Without having progressed through the first two generations of distance education, it was possible for a traditional institution to offer a blend of print material, face-to-face sessions, and online learning. Such openness, though driven largely by the advantages yielded by technology, showed a readiness to adapt and respond to a new context and culture of education. Still, the use of technology for teaching and learning did not mean that a face-to-face university automatically assumed the identity of an ODL institution (Morrow and Nonyongo 2003).

Student access to computers and the Internet, however, has constrained the potential for openness and flexibility. Third-generation ODL usually suggests a greater reliance on electronic media, but in our context, it suggests once again the need for more student support, more contact, and more flexibility of access to technology than ever before. In the Western world, the accessibility to computers, the Internet, and other media is taken as ODL’s cornerstone. The promise, therefore, is that a student can access learning materials, fellow students, and lecturers at any time. The reality in developing countries is somewhat different: connectivity and bandwidth is limited and the costs of the technologies are high. In 2009, nearly 70 percent of UNISA students claimed to have access to a computer and the Internet, but further investigation revealed that only a fraction of them had home computers and that the Internet had to be accessed at their workplace, at study centres, or at Internet cafés.
CONCLUSION

The policies of redress and equalization of opportunities have created some improvements in infrastructure and access to education. The flexibility and affordability of ODL, along with improved Internet connectivity, will continue to attract many students to higher learning. However, the tensions that exist between ODL and the idea of massification remain a challenge. Even as existing constraints are receiving attention, new drivers for greater flexibility are emerging.

The growing problem of poorly educated, unskilled, and unemployed youth is a threat to the ideals of social transformation. Dramatic changes to school curricula have been mooted in order to ensure that university entrants have the competences required to succeed. There are also calls for higher education to be made free, but whether the state will be able to fund such an enterprise remains to be seen. Flexible-education practices do offer hope for school leavers and graduates but cannot be expected to erase all the vestiges of the past. Social transformation in South Africa can be achieved, provided the constraints are addressed in time.

REFERENCES


ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Milly Daweti started school at the age of four. Somehow, her parents had persuaded the principal that the young child was ready for school since she could read and count. That was a concession the school would never grant again. After obtaining a three-year teacher’s diploma, Milly’s teaching career was unavoidably linked to further studies by distance education through the University of South Africa (Unisa). This experience, coupled with involvement in various in-service teacher-development programs, intensified her interest in adult learning and quality learner support through curriculum and instructional design. An unfinished personal business agenda she must still tackle is the creation of a flexible work life. Milly is Head of the Quality Assurance Unit at PALAMA, the Public Administration Leadership and Management Academy of the Republic of South Africa. milly@mweb.co.za

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