

ADDRESS BY THE DEPUTY MINISTER OF HIGHER EDUCATION AND TRAINING, MR BUTI MANAMELA, TO THE OPEN LEARNING SEMINAR: DEVELOPING EFFECTIVE OPEN LEARNING PRACTICES IN SOUTH AFRICAN POST-SCHOOL EDUCATION AND TRAINING

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Good morning to all. I am pleased to participate in this important seminar on Open Learning.

In the National Development Plan (NDP), Government made the commitment that by 2030, South Africans should have access to education and training of the highest quality. In line with this vision the Department introduced a White Paper for Post-School Education and Training in 2014, and is developing a National Implementation Plan which will be finalised by March 2019.

The 2014 White Paper presented the Department's vision and policy framework for achieving an expanded and integrated post-school system. Amongst other priorities, the White Paper expressly mandates the *expansion* of the post-school system's capacity in order to absorb the

growing demand for access, and the *improvement of the quality* of the learning opportunities provided by the system.

Over the past two decades, Government has achieved considerable success in expanding access to learning opportunities.

The participation rate in public higher education institutions (HEIs) increased from about 13% in 1997 to 18.4% in 2016, and by the same year the actual number of students enrolled in HEIs in South Africa had more than doubled since 1993, from 473 000 students to 975 837 students in 2016.

In addition, while the African population in the age group 20-24 is increasing from 6.3% from 2010 to 2016, the number of African students enrolled at public HEIs has increased at a rate that exceeds this population growth. African student's enrolment has increased from 595,783 students in 2010 to 701,482 students in 2016, representing an approximate 15% increase. We must note that the input subsidy for distance education is about half of what it is for contact universities. The cost of distance education is about half of the cost of face-to-face contact education.

In Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET) Colleges, enrolments have increased almost fivefold over the last two decades – from 154 688 in 1995 to 689 648 in 2017. At present there is no distinction or provision in the subsidy for TVET colleges in terms of distance and contact education. The fees are more or less the same in this regard.

On the other hand, the post-school system still needs significant further expansion. In 2016, almost 4.4 million persons aged 25-34 years were recorded as not employed or in education and training. The NDP target for student enrolment in public Universities is 1.62 million by 2030, for TVET Colleges 1.25 million and for CET colleges 1 million.

For this to be met, enrolment needs to *grow* at an average of approximately 50 000 students per sub-sector per annum. This suggests that Government needs to invest substantially in infrastructure development, as well as lecturer recruitment and education.

It also suggests that government must find new ways of delivering post-school education and training to increase access. Open learning provides a targeted avenue for this increased access.

The 2014 White Paper defines open learning as: “Open learning is an approach which combines the principles of learner centeredness, lifelong learning, flexibility of learning provision, the removal of barriers to access learning, the recognition for credit of prior learning experience, the provision of learner support, the construction of learning programmes in the expectation that learners can succeed, and the maintenance of rigorous quality assurance over the design of learning materials and support systems.”

It outlines that an important element in addressing the above challenges must be the expansion of opportunities for part-time study for those who are working.

This implies an expansion of open and distance education, and the establishment of more “satellite” premises and learning support centres, especially in rural areas.

The 2014 White Paper states that this approach draws on a variety of modes of delivery and methods of teaching and learning. These include distance education, on-line learning, and other forms such as blended learning that use new and emerging technologies in new ways, not only to improve access, but also to improve the *quality* of learning, and student success rates.

In this chapter the Department supports the development of *a post-school sector based on open learning principles*, where quality learning environments are constructed that take full account of student context and use the most appropriate and cost-effective methods and technologies.

This seminar provides us with a timely opportunity to take this mandate seriously – to explore how the Department is seeking to nudge *the post-school sector* towards open learning principles, and towards the sharpened focus on access, quality and cost-effectiveness.

The chapter on Open Learning in the White Paper highlights specifically the need for the post-school education and training system to cater for a wide variety of potential student needs, including those of mature adult learners who have to study and work at the same time, and younger people who may have dropped out of the schooling system due to financial, social, learning or other barriers.

This range of students requires access not only to a diverse range of programmes, but also to appropriate modes of distance education provision that cater for their varying life and/or work contexts, rather than requiring them to attend daily classes at fixed times and at central, possibly distant, venues.

The educational use of information and communication technology (ICT) and the internet in e-learning and online learning offer rapidly increasing ways of designing educational programmes to meet the varying needs and different contexts of learners.

This diversity of provision, when grounded in open learning principles of access, quality and success, can, in the words of the White Paper, be a strategic enabler to improve learning opportunities across all PSET sectors. While e-learning and fully online learning are *not* equivalent to open learning, they have enormously extended the scope of well-crafted open learning courses to help learners attain their goals.

Grounding PSET education and training in open learning principles means that while expanding *access* is the first principle and concern, *quality* is seen as being no less important.

Furthermore, for me the biggest concern is the low throughput rate of distance education provision in universities.

It is easy to fool ourselves that because we have larger enrolments. Increased *access* alone does not equate to Open Learning. Not if the throughput rates continue to be as poor as they are for distance education. According to 2008 figures, the throughput rate for distance education stood at 15.3%. I doubt that this figure has drastically changed in 2018. Therefore *success* and *quality* need to be foregrounded.

A third imperative for open learning, and one that assumes particular significance in South Africa at this time, is *cost-effectiveness*. There is a widespread assumption that distance education equals cost savings and is therefore cheap. Often this is indeed the case: pushing up enrolment rates, and keeping operational costs down can help to balance an institution's books. But through this quality escapes through the door.

However, while this may make economic sense for institutions, if the throughput rate remains well below 20%, and the drop-out rate remains high, it can spell economic disaster for poor students and their families. And if it does, this also spells disillusionment, and the many social ills attendant on large numbers of young people failing to gain a stake in the national economy.

Many commentators have noted the dependent relation between access, quality and cost-effectiveness:

- It is possible to increase access and keep costs down, but this usually means sacrificing quality, and raises the spectre of frequent failure and disillusionment.
- It is possible to provide high quality education and training for the few, but obviously this comes at a high cost.
- It is possible to keep expenditure to the minimum, but this generally means either limiting enrolments or restricting the quality of the education and training provided to those who are enrolled.

The aims of wide access, high quality, and low cost are not achievable, even in principle, with traditional models of higher education based on classroom teaching in campus

communities. A perception of quality based on exclusivity of access and high expenditure per student is the precise opposite of what is required.

To increase access and quality, costs are increasing. But through using open approaches, such as distance education and eLearning as well as the sharing of resources and learning materials, the use of open education resources and sharing of student support services – the costs can be driven down.

It requires the PSET system to equally focus on access and quality, and a commitment to invest adequately in quality open learning. For it is the emphasis on well-designed, engaging, interactive, and supportive distance education which will allow larger numbers of learners not only to have *access* to education but also to *graduate* within a reasonable span of years, or to undertake studies in manageable units as and when they need them.

If this seminar is to boldly explore the implications of the 2014 White Paper's mandate to encourage *the post-school sector* towards adopting open learning principles, there are a number of issues that it would be wise not to neglect.

Firstly, the question of *cost-effectiveness*. This has been brought into sharp focus by the recent #Feesmustfall campaign, and the subsequent efforts by Government to address the needs of existing and aspirant university students. This in itself has raised the question of funding for the TVET sector, much expanded as it is but in desperate need of resources.

Cost-effective provision of education and training is not an automatic outcome of introducing open learning. International experience and research have clearly shown that the initial costs of and resources required for open learning provision are very likely to *exceed* those incurred in introducing courses through more traditional modalities. Such costs include the assembling of teams capable of producing quality courseware, the possible need to install ICT hardware and software, and the time taken to develop, pilot and quality assure appropriate materials. Cost-effectiveness tends to come into play only when programmes and courses go to scale, and large enrolments give rise to adequate economies of scale.

Of course, such resource costs need to be offset against the high costs of expanding physical infrastructure and appointing the large numbers of lecturers required for face-to-face tuition. However, this does not sanction institutions' decision-makers to ignore the need for very careful planning when embarking on the provision of distance education or online learning.

Secondly, there is the question of *lecturers' attitudes* towards making a shift from teaching face-to-face to teaching through a distance mode or e-learning. These are not always positive.

For many the latter may represent a major change in their professional role, a threat to their professional identities, a need to acquire completely new skills, an add-on to their workload without a fitting incentive in the prevailing reward structure, or a lowering of standards. Such attitudes and expectations can all too easily become self-fulfilling.

Addressing such attitudes, and the very real factors behind them, requires total commitment from top management. It requires the appointment of staff specifically and explicitly to work in the development and delivery of distance learning or e-learning. It requires the development of policies to institutionalise and enable open learning. It requires thorough training and professional development for lecturers and administrators involved in the design and delivery of open and distance courses. It requires a reward system that incentivises innovation in teaching as much as it does research. It requires commensurate workloads for academics and greater flexibility in institutional calendars and schedules.

Thirdly, we must not neglect the enabling, institutionalising and regulating role of *policy*. Following a comprehensive process of consultation, the Open Learning Policy Framework for PSET will soon be released, which will clarify the Department's strategic objectives and plans for implementing them.

The Department will then encourage and support universities and colleges that have not crafted their own Open Learning policies, to do so. It will also initiate an analysis of existing legislation and policies with a view to identifying any gaps, inconsistencies and duplication related to open learning. The aim of this analysis will be to enable the development of a fully coherent legislative and policy environment that will guide, normalise and standardise the provision of open learning across the entire PSET system.

Fourthly and finally, there is the need to disaggregate the challenges of open, distance and e-learning for the *different post-school sectors*, and for the different contexts of students, even in the same sector. Models of provision, course development, administration and student support developed in universities may not necessarily fit the purpose in TVET colleges or community colleges.

For that matter, models that work in one college may not succeed in another, nor may the practices that suit some students in a single institution provide the optimum support for students whose social circumstances are very different. Much has been written about the various dimensions of the so-called “digital divide”, and it would be remiss of the PSET system, in implementing principles of open learning and flexible access, to put in place barriers that inadvertently create new forms of inequality.

Open learning holds much promise for us in South Africa. Some institutions have a better track record in open learning and we need to learn from the successes and failures. I am hoping that this seminar will give us some guidance, including areas of emphasis as we roll out open learning within our PSET system. I trust that you will contribute in this regard.

I thank you.