

Why off-campus (distance) learning will keep growing, and what trends to expect

By [Professor Patrick Bean](#)

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Post-schooling education remains a 'hot button' topic in South Africa. The high levels of unemployment and poverty are caused by numerous factors, but a struggling education system and barriers to entering higher education are certainly significant contributors. Alternatives to traditional face-to-face or contact learning (on-campus) are therefore seen as means of improving educational access for more South Africans, and offers various other benefits too



Image source: Getty Images

Stats SA defines contact learning as involving “personal interaction with lecturers, supervisors through: inter alia, seminars and practical at the premises of the institution.” In contrast, distance education “involves interaction with lecturers or supervisors through distance education techniques, such as written correspondence, telematics and/or the internet.”

Theoretically, the advantages of distance education include flexibility – students can study anytime, anywhere – as well as convenience. Distance learning combines well with the demands of work and changing personal circumstances, and is often more cost-effective for the student and the provider. It is also not bound by locale, so students are not limited to courses within their region. One can quite easily be sitting in one country or time zone, accessing a course developed in another.

It's important to note that higher education (both distance and contact learning) has evolved substantially over the past few years alongside rapid developments in technology and connectivity around the world. E-learning now forms part of most distance learning (and contact learning) options and offers a richer experience than previous distance-learning models, encompassing every imaginable format of web-based learning, from digital textbooks to video lectures and virtual reality experiences.

There are, however, challenges to the uptake of e-learning in South Africa. One is connectivity and high costs of data. The other is a persistent belief that distance learning is somehow second best to contact learning, despite research suggesting otherwise. For example, [a study by the US Department of Education](#) found that students who took all or part of their classes online performed better, on average, than those taking the same course through traditional face-to-face instruction.

E-learning, if designed well, can potentially create even greater engagement than traditional contact modes, using tools like video communication, online discussion forums and chat options, among others. The potential is even higher for blended learning models, which combine distance learning with elements of contact learning.

The term 'open and distance learning' is a name for this developing alternative to traditional (face-to-face) contact learning and traditional (correspondence) distance learning, since it reflects the core assumptions of the mode of learning: openness, accessibility, flexibility, massiveness, and quality learning opportunities to all.

Four trends in distance learning for 2020

1. At the Stadio Faculty of Education and Humanities' School of Education, we are investing heavily in **blended learning models**, as we see this as a movement that is going to continue to become more popular and necessary. We call our approach "a flexible hybrid learning experience" because it offers the student four different ways to participate in weekly learning events (traditionally called lectures):
 - i. face-to-face sessions with the lecturer on one of the campuses,
 - ii. attend the same session via video communication at one of 14 learning centres across South Africa,
 - iii. view and participate in this session via a smartphone or laptop from anywhere (internet access dependent), or watch the session afterwards - in your own time – via the YouTube channel.

Further, students are not bound to commit to any one of these modes at the beginning of the course – they can switch between the four modes on a weekly basis!

2. **Student success with academic quality** is already an important criterion at Stadio and it will become a critical requirement for the broader higher education domain. While e-learning means that anyone and everyone can deliver training, it does mean that quality assurance becomes an issue.

As e-learning continues to grow exponentially, I believe we will see commensurate development in external certification and public accreditation. We acknowledge the under-preparedness of students entering higher education and provide pro-active student success initiatives linked to student wellness (academic, financial and psychological) utilising technology and/or internet-based platforms that facilitate fast response and data analytics.

3. The practices of **virtual and augmented reality (VAR)** in teaching, learning and assessment are becoming more realistic. Current research in this area proves that VAR helps to better understand the structure or functioning of objects. For example: it allows one to see the smallest details, to bring closer, to reduce or enlarge an object, to interact with it.

This, of course, allows for the study of something small like a cell, to something enormous like an architectural structure. Students can participate without the worry of breaking or spoiling the item they are studying.

Further, it makes the “specimen to be studied” available to everyone, everywhere. Our School of Education is savouring the possibilities that VAR, combined with traditional school-based teaching practice “(Mixed Realities), may still bring to “learning to teach”.

4. Finally, as with every industry, distance learning will be disrupted and (in my view) improved by **Artificial Intelligence (AI) technologies**. As [eLearning Learning](#) notes, “Leveraging AI-powered Learning Platforms will spur an increased usage of personalisation approaches alongside the use of personal learning trainers.”

This means AI “coaches” or “teachers” will be able to prompt students to finish coursework, suggest new content, and answer questions. It’s a brave new world, and as an educator, I’m excited to see the benefits it will offer to students in 2020 and beyond!

The main goal of introducing technology into education must be to level the playing fields – making education accessible to everybody, beyond the geographical and/or wealth barriers. The aim of our flexible approach to off-campus/distance learning is to guarantee the same opportunities for learning and professional growth for everyone, using affordable learning management platforms and devices – that can serve all our people – in all the towns and cities in South Africa.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Professor Patrick Bean, Executive Dean of STADIO Faculty of Education and Humanities' School of Education (formerly Erbury)

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