**UNIVERSIDAD NACIONAL ABIERTA Y A DISTANCIA AUNAD, CONFERENCE**

**THIRD WORLD CONGRESS OF HIGHER DISTANCE EDUCATION**

**17 - 19 MAY 2017, BOGOTA, COLOMBIA**

**A few thoughts on: distance education and its implications in the formation of the new generation.**

1. Distance education, properly harnessed, can have profound implications for the current and future generations, as was the case with the past ones. In its traditional form, distance education entailed non-contact teaching. But there have been some adaptations over the years, with the distance between the institution or the academic staff on the one hand, and the student on the other, ever diminishing. This is not to suggest that distance education is on the wane, or that it stands the danger of being edged out of existence by traditional contact education. On the contrary, it is becoming more and more popular. In any event, there is an increasing element of contact between the student and the institution in the form of digital communication, as we will see later. In South Africa and indeed on the African continent - if not beyond - the University of South Africa (UNISA), now about 145 years old, has over decades stood out as the pioneer and champion of distance

education. UNISA is reputed to be one of the 10 mega universities in the world, with an enrollment of close on 400,000 this year; and, what is more, with students from not only Africa, but also from all over the world. What then, does this tell us about distance education? It tells us *inter alia* that distance education is necessary; that it can be both qualitative and competitive, and that it is a vehicle of great potential in the creation and distribution of knowledge and skills.

2. For a proper assessment of any possible implications which distance education can have on the new generation, it is imperative to briefly look at the impact it has had on past generations. Such a postmortem will settle any doubt about the quality and the importance of distance education. In this respect, please allow me to take as a study case, the role of UNISA. It was through UNISA that many of the country's political prisoners, incarcerated on Robben Island from which there was no possibility of an escape, received higher education. One of the former prisoners there, the late Nelson Rolihlahla Mandela, will readily come to the mind of many. Yet he was by no means the only one; there were many other political prisoners who benefitted from distance education. After their release, they all made important contribution towards the rebuilding of the nation. Therefore, in the case of

South Africa, it would not be an exaggeration to say that distance education has been a catalyst in changing the country's course of history. During my term as the Chancellor of the university, a deliberate decision was taken to recognize and celebrate this fact. Years after they had all been released, a decision was taken by the university that, as their degrees could not be conferred on them at the relevant times because they were in prison, special graduation ceremonies be held for them. I have no doubt that in other countries too, distance education has yielded the same fruits. The future must therefore be informed by, and learn from, the past. The lesson learnt is that, more than ever before, distance education has a role to play in the realization of social justice.

3. If history is anything to go by, the impact of distance education on the new generations will also be huge, for a number of reasons; just to mention a few: in comparison with contact or full time education, distance education is affordable. For this reason, it is accessible even to the less affluent; the poor, the very people who need education most.

4. Historically, distance education has been utilized by people in full time employment; but for it, the doors to higher education would have been firmly shut against them. Students can also pace their studies as it suites them. And, in the present times

when experience is often rated more than academic qualifications, students already in employment acquire these important qualifications at the same time. This is very important because they acquire relevant skills. Dibba-Wadda, O, (2016) has commented that *"….employers are still complaining that universities have failed to produce graduates with the right skills, leaving many graduates unemployable.*"[1] She is correct, except that that kind of bias is more directed at graduates from certain universities as opposed to those from the supposedly academically "hallowed" institutions in the Western World.

5. But for distance education, a large number of academically deserving students would be excluded for lack of space. Distance education institutions have, generally, a capacity for larger numbers of students, some challenges notwithstanding. As a result of limited space, contact institutions manipulate admission criteria as a way of controlling the number of admissions.  A few years ago in South Africa at one of such institutions, there was such a stamped in contestation for space, that a life was lost. Grant it, useful lessons were learnt from that, but at what cost?

6. What then is the significance of the impact of distance education on the formation of the new generations?  Firstly, we

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[1] Dibba-Wadda, O. (2015). *In Producing unemployable graduates wastes time and money*. Wachira Kigotho, Issue No:359

must understand what education is, and what it is about. It is a peaceful instrument for social change. As Mandela once said, "*Education is the most powerful weapon which you can use to change the world.*" Wim de Villiers: "*How does education enable us to change the world? Universities can make a contribution in two ways: through the empowerment of individuals and through the generation of knowledge.*"[2] To realize its mission and mandate, distance education must be of good quality and be sustainable. It must be relevant to the needs of societies it seeks to serve. Distance education must contest that space, if not seek to be at the forefront of social change. The fundamental premise is that education is just as much an instrument of social change as it is an integral part of social justice, the essence of which is, according to Bell (2016, p3) *"…both a goal and a process that strives for full and equitable participation of people from all social identity groups in a society that is mutually shaped to meet their needs, by means of a democratic and participatory process that is respectful of human diversity and group differences, and inclusive and affirming of human agency and capacity for working collaboratively with others to create change. Domination cannot be ended through coercive tactics that*

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[2] De Villiers, Wim, *The Conversation,* July 17 2015

*create domination in new forms*."[3] If education is indeed that much central to the realization of social justice, Mandela would be vindicated when he says that it is through education that the child of a peasant can become a head of state.

7. There are issues though which, as champions of distance education, we must confront for, for the benefit of new generations. We have, in recent times, been noticing an ever-increasing direct connection between the provisioning of distance education on the one hand, and Information Communication Technologies on the other hand. Indeed, the digital revolution, often referred to as the fourth industrial revolution, is upon us. If you were to combine that with digital access, you would have two very potent instruments for the advancement of quality distance education. The distance between the student and the lecturers becomes bridged, to a larger extent. The developing nations are, however, faced with challenges in this regard, such as infrastructural constraints, limited resources, paucity of technical skills to design programmes, including programmes for quality assurance. In some countries, infrastructures such as internet connectivity speed are rudimentary, when available. Yet, understandably

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[3] Bell, L. (2016). *Theoretical Foundations for Social Justice Education. In Teaching for Diversity and Social Justice.* Eds. Adam, M., Bell, LA., Goodman, D.J., and Joshi, K.Y. Routledge, Taylor and Francis, New York

so, students are clamouring for digital equity, an increasingly important tool: "*Digital equity in education means ensuring that every student, regardless of socio-economic status, language, race, geography, physical restrictions, cultural background, gender, or other attribute historically associated with inequities, has equitable access to advanced technologies, communication and information resources, and the learning experiences they provide…. Digital equity also means that all learners have opportunities to develop the means and capacity to be full participants in the digital age, including being designers and producers (not only users) of current and future technologies and communication and information resources*." (Solomon, Allen, & Resta, 2003).[4]

8. Jeanette Botha identifies some of the challenges in the harnessing of digital equity as a tool for quality education -- a catalyst for social justice. She sees as serious obstacles lack of access to up-to-date hardware, software and connectivity, to name a few. She reminds us that there is a direct connection between the quality of education and access to these facilities: "*An incontestable correlation between poor quality education and low learning levels and learning deficits or inequalities, has*

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[4] Solomon, G., Allen, N. J., & Resta, P. (Eds.). (2003). *Towards digital equity: Bridging the divide in education*. Boston, MA: Pearson Education Group, Inc

*ensured that the provision of quality education remains at the forefront of the global education agenda. This concern has been bolstered by an increasingly fragmented global higher education environment and various new conceptualizations of 'education' stemming from the affordances of technology, globalization and marketization, as well as an appreciation of the fact that equitable access to quality education is an indisputable prerequisite for social justice*".[5]

9. There is hardly any need for the justification of distance education. We therefore call on the governments of the world, and the private sector, to provide adequate resources for it. This should be done with no strings attached, especially conditions which may compromise academic independence and freedom. This kind of danger, though usually eminent from government, may also be posed by the private sector in attaching to their grants conditions which may compromise the objectivity, quality of research and intellectual freedom.

## References

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[5] Botha, Jeanette: Show Me The Learning Adelaide, Nov 27-30, 2016, *Digital equity and social justice: Whose reality? Reflections from South Africa*.

2. Botha, Jeanette. Show Me The Learning, Adelaide, Nov 27-30, 2016, Digital equity and social justice: Whose reality? Reflections from South Africa.
3. De Villiers, Wim: The Conversation, July 27 2016
4. Dibba-Wadda, O. (2015). In Producing unemployable graduates wastes time and money. Wachira Kigotho, Issue No:359. Retrieved from http://www.universityworldnews.com/article.php?story=201503 19130200274.
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