Chapter 2
Perspectives on Blended Open Distance Education Learning and Teaching in a South African Context

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ABSTRACT

In this chapter, we will discuss the blended learning approach that has been adopted by the University of South Africa (an open and distance learning tertiary education institute). We will discuss our perspectives on using these blended learning approaches and tools in order to facilitate our teaching. We will then provide a comparison on the advantages and disadvantages of some of the blended approaches we have used. We will also discuss the future trends of the use of blended approaches in the context of open distance education and learning. Lastly, we will conclude this chapter by providing our perspectives on the blended learning and teaching approaches adopted by the University of South Africa.

INTRODUCTION

In this chapter, we will discuss the blended learning approaches that have been adopted by the University of South Africa (Unisa). Unisa combines distance education and open learning in order to form its unique open-distance-learning model. Open Distance Learning (ODL) is seen as a multi-dimensional system aimed at bridging the time, geographical and transactional distance between students, lecturers, tutors, courseware, and the university.

Various approaches and models exist to blended learning (Ginns & Ellis, 2007; Khine & Lourdusamy, 2003; Valiathan, 2002). Each has its own advantages and disadvantages. At this university being an ODL university, we use a blended approach taking into account the limited resources and students who have diverse needs and who are geographically spread around the world. We do not echo the technologies used in developed countries.

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First and foremost, we will provide the background and explain the nature of Unisa and its blended learning and teaching approaches. The purpose of this chapter is to provide other institutions of higher education, particularly those in developing countries, adequate knowledge and insights into the problems experienced by Unisa through our experiences and perspectives. We will discuss the challenges and issues of embarking on blended open distance education learning and teaching in a developing country, specifically South Africa. We write a personal account of our experiences using these blended learning approaches and tools in order to facilitate our teaching. We will then provide a comparison on the advantages and disadvantages of some of the blended approaches we have used. We will also discuss the future trends of the use of blended approaches in the context of open distance education and learning. Finally, we will conclude this chapter by providing our perspectives on the blended learning and teaching approaches adopted by Unisa.

**BACKGROUND**

**Unisa – a Mega University**

The vision of Unisa is to become Africa’s premier distance education provider, serving every country on the continent and around the world and transcending language, cultural and political barriers.

Unisa is an ODL university that offers degrees in agriculture and environmental sciences, economic and management sciences, human sciences, law, and science, engineering and technologies. The South African Department of Education has mandated Unisa to produce high quality gradu-

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**Table 1. Brief history of Unisa (University of South Africa, 2008)**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Key Events</th>
<th>Comments</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1873</td>
<td>Establishment of the University of the Cape of Good Hope in Cape Town.</td>
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<tr>
<td>1877</td>
<td>The University of the Cape of Good Hope received a Royal Charter from Queen Victoria.</td>
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<tr>
<td>1877 to 1916</td>
<td>The University of the Cape of Good Hope served as an examining body for Victoria College, Stellenbosch and the University of Cape Town.</td>
<td>The structure of the university was radically amended. Control was vested in a council and senate, upon which seven constituent colleges were represented. These colleges later became various independent universities.</td>
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<tr>
<td>1916</td>
<td>Act 12 of 1916 decreed that the University of the Cape of Good Hope is to be incorporated into the federal University of South Africa on 2 April 1918.</td>
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<tr>
<td>1918</td>
<td>The university moved to Pretoria.</td>
<td>The federal university did not teach private students; it merely examined them. Other correspondence colleges existed.</td>
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<tr>
<td>1945</td>
<td>More than 20 institutions were teaching private students and Unisa’s Council appointed a Director of External Studies.</td>
<td>The Higher Education Amendment Act of 1946 enables the university to undertake tuition and guidance of students for its examinations.</td>
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<td>1946</td>
<td>Unisa became the first public university in the world to teach exclusively by means of correspondence.</td>
<td>The university started progressing through different generations of distance education models: A correspondence institution, the incorporation of multimedia (radio, tapes, videos and videoconferencing), the use of tutors, and the use of the Internet.</td>
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<tr>
<td>2004</td>
<td>There was a merger of Unisa, Technikon South Africa and the distance education unit of Vista University.</td>
<td>This was a Department of Education initiative.</td>
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