



A student attends a lesson online. File

# Distance learning changes lives but challenges exist

Several institutions offer opportunities for study to millions who would otherwise miss out on university education

ASHLEY GUNTER  
THE CONVERSATION

Across Africa, distance education has become one of the most powerful forces for expanding access to higher learning. Open and distance learning institutions such as the Open University of Tanzania, the Zimbabwe Open University and the National Open University of Nigeria have joined long-standing providers such as the University of South Africa in offering flexible study opportunities to millions of students who would otherwise be excluded from higher education. These institutions are re-imagining what it means to go to university in contexts where geography, cost and social responsibilities often keep young people out of the classroom.

The value of distance education is undeniable. It allows working adults to continue their studies without leaving employment, gives rural youth the chance to stay in their communities while earning qualifications, and provides people with opportunities to balance learning and family responsibilities. During crises such as the Covid-19 pandemic, distance education proved to be a lifeline when face-to-face teaching was impossible. Across Africa, it is not an alternative to traditional universities; for many, it is the only route into higher education.

The World Bank has reported that only 9 per cent of the African population in the five years after secondary school is enrolled in tertiary education – the lowest rate in the world. My own research takes the University of South Africa (Unisa) as a case study to dig deeper into how geography and inequality shape students' experiences of distance learning: their access, participation, and outcomes. With over

370,000 students in South Africa and other countries, Unisa is the largest provider. It's an ideal lens through which to understand the promise and challenges of this educational model.

I'm a geographer with an interest in international education and economic development. For the Unisa case study, I took a qualitative research approach, interviewing 28 Unisa postgraduate students from different regions of Africa. I chose them to reflect the diversity of students enrolled at Unisa and because they already had experience of studying. The study found that although distance education can meet educational needs where people can't access face-to-face learning, it's not a perfect solution.

There are still challenges which make it hard for some people to study, like inadequate infrastructure (poor internet connectivity and electricity supply), financial constraints, and language and cultural barriers. There's a need for interventions to improve the effectiveness and equity.

My interviews with postgraduate students across Africa showed a complex picture. For the 18 students based in cities, distance education can be genuinely empowering. Internet connections, though costly, are usually accessible in cities.

Electricity supply is more stable, and digital platforms are within reach. Students in urban areas spoke of the freedom and flexibility they gained, describing distance education as the only way to balance work, family life and study.

But geography matters. For students in rural or marginalised regions, participation in distance learning can become a daily struggle. Downloading a file may take hours. Travelling long distances to internet cafés eats into scarce time and resources.