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Editorial

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It is more than a year since COVID-19 was declared a pandemic. In that time, we have unfortunately grown accustomed to lockdowns with all that they entail, including stay-at-home education. Schools and tertiary institutions alike have scrambled to provide some form of online learning with varying degrees of success. It need hardly be said that worldwide the most privileged in a society have benefitted from online learning and the virtual classroom; the poorest in society have once again been further disadvantaged. The socioeconomic and digital divide have never been more obvious.

It has also, however, been a time for innovation in the delivery of education, particularly in higher education. Before the pandemic, higher education institutions (HEIs) in South Africa were offering some form of online learning, whether it be in courses within contact programmes or fully online certificated programmes. Indeed, on-time, anywhere learning has increasingly been gaining traction over the past decade in the academy. The pandemic has given it further impetus. But this is not without challenges.

Throughput rates in contact programmes are suboptimal for disadvantaged students and are even lower in online and distance programmes. This is despite the attempts by government and education leaders to improve the student learning experience and fostering access with success. Of course, there is no easy solution.

South Africa is a divided country in terms of access to resources, with infrastructure and technology being particularly poor in rural areas. Nevertheless, efforts continue to be made to address the inequalities in education outcomes. It is to be hoped that any innovations in delivery are translated into meeting the needs of disadvantaged children and the youth. This is more so given the fact that these are in the majority.

In this 16th volume of the *Journal of Independent Teaching and Learning* (IJTL), the introduction of *From the pen of…*, whereby a leading expert is invited to write on a topical education issue, further serves our mission to extend our reach in the education community.

It is timely that the first two articles of this volume deal with Online Distance Education (ODL) with both using Unisa as their lens. The first reports on a case study in which student perceptions and needs for success in their programme were explored. While students were found to be keen to engage in online learning, the importance of taking into account different students' access to ICT and capabilities were highlighted. These aspects need to be included in the design of a theoretical framework for ODL.

Course design at Unisa is carried out through a team approach with quality checks conducted throughout the development phase. The authors in the second article use a mixed methods research approach to

explore the extent to which the quality assurance mechanisms are fit for purpose from the often-forgotten user experience; the lecturer. The authors put forward a more inclusive model in course design.

The second cluster of articles deals with teacher education. The first explores the reception of a new hybrid teacher education programme using Affordances Theory; the extent to which students used the technology affordances available. Like the first article, the authors found that there were a number of factors that lead to poor student online participation. These range from a lack of access to technology through to insufficient academic support. A number of recommendations are made.

How pre-service teachers in Iran acquire professional identity is the topic of the next article. The authors, using a longitudinal qualitative method within the framework of social constructivism, identified that engagement in the classroom is a significant contributor to this process. Such activities could be used in the design of teacher education programmes.

The next three articles deal with different aspect of schooling. The first was a pilot to determine the feasibility of a full study on the challenges of equipping students with critical thinking and other skills so that they become Advanced Performers. Suggestions are made to enhance the questionnaire design. In the following article, using invitational educational theory, the challenges of learners from rural and township schools transitioning to Ex-Model C schools were investigated. Findings were that, while there are a number of positives (inviting), there were also disadvantages (uninviting) typically around culture and language. This can be addressed through the application of invitational educational theory. In the next article, the lack of status of art education in South African primary schools is explored through the lens of power, race and social justice in a low-income area in the Western Cape. Through deconstructing the assumptions that underpin the school experience, the authors suggest ways that schools could become spaces for transformation.

The article in the Practitioners' Corner presents a case whereby the curriculum in Performing Arts in an HEI has been reviewed to make it fit for current market needs. This includes students gaining competences and skills in business and entrepreneurship as well as artistic creativity.

The Doctoral Corner comprises abstracts of recently awarded doctoral degrees. These are concerned with leadership approaches of school principals, formative assessment in primary schools, developing students' critical thinking skills, as well as masculinity in the subculture of *ukukhothana*. The publication of abstracts alerts researchers and practitioners to new research in their areas of interest.