

Internet access and the challenge of providing equitable education in South Africa

Despite the fact that 12.8 million South Africans still do not have internet access and mobile data expenses remain excessively high, these challenges should not impede learners from obtaining basic education online.



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This is according to Dr Corrin Varady, CEO at Idea, who says that insufficient internet access and connectivity have long been seen as barriers to digital education in South Africa, but this needn't be the case.

“Asynchronous learning provides a solution. Unlike synchronous learning, which requires learners to be connected to the internet to receive real-time instruction from a teacher, this enables them to engage with multimedia and data-driven content through an offline server.”

“While asynchronous learning also necessitates some degree of connectivity for learners to be able to download courseware content and sync completed work to the cloud for assessment, relying on continuous internet connectivity for up to six hours a day, every day, to deliver digital education is impractical. This is especially evident in South Africa due to factors such as costs, reach and reliability, as well as load shedding,” he points out.

“Considering that fintech or medtech apps don't need to be constantly connected to the internet for people to be able to use them, the same applies to asynchronous edtech solutions.”

Although internet connectivity in South Africa is improving, Varady does not believe that the country will have high-speed bandwidth and low-cost internet anytime soon, despite the goal of universal availability by 2030 outlined in the National Development Plan.

“However, with the government having connected 361,000 households in rural and township areas via 2,502 community Wi-Fi hotspots and planning to connect another 5.5 million in this way over the next three to four years, this could enable more learners to participate in asynchronous learning.”

He adds that there are also communities unwilling to wait for Government intervention in providing connectivity. “For example

the rural community of Mankosi in the Eastern Cape has established its own network – a model that has proven successful in other parts of the world like Spain, Zambia and Mexico. More hubs like these will be beneficial for the delivery of digital education solutions, particularly to learners in high-density peri-urban townships or remote rural communities.”

“Additionally, schools with existing computer labs could be used by learners from the broader community after hours as part of their asynchronous learning,” suggests Dr Varady.

“What this highlights is that connectivity challenges can be overcome by embracing asynchronous edtech solutions, even in regions where the necessary connectivity infrastructure is underdeveloped. Asynchronous learning can be a breakthrough solution for government to not only bring access to basic education to even more children nationwide, but to equip them with digital skills for the future’s tech-driven industries. Not possessing these is a form of illiteracy that can lead to unemployment – something which South Africa can ill afford given our already existing unemployment crisis,” concludes Dr Varady.

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